

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

EPISODE 126: A NEW TURN OF PHRASE

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 126: A New Turn of Phrase. In this episode, we’re going to turn our attention back to Geoffrey Chaucer as we explore the middle part of his career leading up to the Canterbury Tales. Chaucer was a prolific writer, but he also continued to be a civil servant, so he had to balance his literary career with his actual day job. His writings during this period also reveal several new developments that were taking place within the English language, specifically within the grammar and syntax of the language. As we’ll see, many new grammatical phrases were coming into existence in the late 1300s, and Chaucer’s writings reflect those changes. That’s part of reason why his poetry seems so accessible to modern readers. So this time, we’ll examine the man who is sometimes called the ‘Father of English literature,’ and we’ll see how that literature anticipated the transition from Middle English to Modern English.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes and transcripts at Patreon.com/historyofenglish.

Now this time, we’re going to turn our attention back to Geoffrey Chaucer. He is probably the most well-known English writer before the time of Shakespeare, and for many people, he may be the only English writer they know from this earlier period. There is no doubt that Chaucer was an incredibly gifted poet and writer, but there’s also another reason why so many people still read the Canterbury Tales. It’s because the language is accessible to modern readers. It isn’t Modern English, but it’s close enough that we can read it with little more than a glossary of the forgotten words in the margin.

Chaucer wrote in a London dialect of Middle English, and that dialect would soon evolve into the standard form of Modern English. So his language is much closer to Modern English than some of the other important poems of this period. Had he written in a northern dialect or a far southwestern dialect, his legacy probably would not have been the same.

His language is also accessible to us because his grammar and syntax was starting to resemble that of Modern English. The English language as a whole was changing, and people were not only using a lot of new words, they were also putting those words together in new ways. In a sense, English was becoming more ‘wordy.’ It was starting to use more words to express ideas.

In Old English, most of the grammatical information in a sentence was conveyed with those various inflectional endings that were attached to the end of words. Those endings did most of the work, and they tended to keep the language short and efficient, but when most of those endings eroded and disappeared, speakers had to come up with new ways express all of that lost information. As we’ve seen before, they did that in part by relying on a fixed word order – subject first, then the verb, then the object. That way, they didn’t need specific word endings to tell them which noun was the subject and which was the object. The position of the words in the sentence told them that.

But a fixed word order only solved part of the problem. Speakers had to find other ways to convey the rest of the information that was lost when those endings disappeared. They did that in part by using more words to express those same ideas. English started to rely more and more on grammatical phrases – noun phrases, prepositional phrases, and verb phrases. It took a lot of new words and phrases to replace those endings. Linguists would say that English became more periphrastic. That's a fancy way of saying it was using phrases to express ideas that were previously represented with a single word or a small number of words. And that's what I mean when I say the language was becoming more 'wordy.'

These changes took place throughout the 1200s and 1300s, and by the end of that period, we had a grammar that was starting to resemble that of Modern English. And the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer capture and reflect the state of the language at that time, especially the language of London that was about to become standard English. So this time, I want to explore how Chaucer's writings in the middle part of his career reflect some of those changes.

Now the last time we looked at Chaucer's career in any detail, it was around the time of his first major poem called the Book of the Duchess. You might remember that the poem was written in the early 1370s to commemorate the death of John of Gaunt's wife who was the Duchess Blanche. We've come across John of Gaunt a lot during this period because he was a central figure in the English government. He was the leading noble because everyone else in the royal family was either too old, too young or too sick to run the government. He had also inherited the massive Lancastrian lands in the north of England through Blanche and her deceased father. So he was rich and powerful. The peasants hated him, but he was a strong advocate for the English language, and he was close to Geoffrey Chaucer.

I noted in a prior episode that Chaucer's wife Phillipa and her sister Kathryn both worked in Gaunt's household, and the sister Kathryn began an affair with Gaunt shortly after Blanche died. The affair was open and well-known, despite the fact that Gaunt entered into another political marriage a short time later. When Gaunt's second wife died several years later, he actually married Kathryn. So these two sisters – Phillipa and Kathryn – provided a direct connection between Geoffrey Chaucer and John of Gaunt. The two men eventually became brothers-in-law through that connection.

That personal connection allowed Chaucer to maintain a good government job throughout most of his career. It's often said that Gaunt was Chaucer's patron, but in reality, there's no evidence that Chaucer was actually paid for his writings. Instead, he was given lucrative government jobs which allowed him to support himself and his family, and he wrote in his spare time.

Even though he wrote in English, Chaucer's early poetry shows a heavy French influence, which is not surprising given that French was the dominant literary language at the time. But in the early 1370s, Chaucer was sent on a diplomatic mission to Italy, and after that, his influences shifted from French to Italian.

As we've seen before, Chaucer was a diplomat who was often sent on diplomatic missions. In the year 1372, he was sent on a well-recorded mission to Italy. He visited Florence, Pisa and Genoa. The Genoese merchants were trying to establish a trading base in England, and Chaucer was sent to work out a financial arrangement with them. He also met with the Florence banking families because the elderly King Edward was still alive, and he wanted to borrow money from them. Most scholars think Chaucer was selected for the mission because he spoke some Italian, and he had a good command of the language.

After he returned from that mission, Chaucer's writings started to show a noticeable Italian influence. Dante had composed his Divine Comedy earlier in the century. It was the first major work of literature to be composed in Italian rather than the traditional Latin. And it proved that great literary works could be composed in a local vernacular. It is widely believed that Dante's success served as an example for Chaucer who ultimately decided to compose his writings in his own native vernacular – English.

During the time of Chaucer's visit to Italy, the two leading Italian writers were Francesco Petrarch and Giovanni Boccaccio. Chaucer was exposed to their writings, and he probably obtained copies of their works for his own personal book collection. As we'll see, from this point forward, Chaucer routinely re-worked those Italian poems into his own English versions. He also used the meter and rhyme scheme of those earlier poems. Two years after that initial visit to Italy, Chaucer was sent on a second mission there, and that initial infatuation with Italian poetry was reinforced.

Around the same time as that second visit to Italy, Chaucer was appointed as Controller of the Customs and Subsidies at the port of London. The Controller was the person in charge of collecting the taxes on wool, leather and other products that were shipped out of the port. It was a big responsibility, and it required very detailed records. If the numbers came up short, he could be fired or even imprisoned for embezzlement. Fortunately, it appears that Chaucer was a good record keeper, and he kept that position for many years throughout this middle part of his career.

Despite his job as the head of the customs at the port, he continued to serve as a diplomat, and in the year 1378, he was once again sent on a diplomatic mission to the north of Italy. He was looking to secure allies in England's on-going war with France. Shortly after returning from that trip, Chaucer completed his next great poem called the House of Fame. It's a dream poem in which he makes a journey to a massive building in the sky called the House of Fame. The goddess named Fame lives there, and she hands out fame and infamy to the many people who are gathered there. Like many of Chaucer's poems, it was never finished, but it is a good example of his poetry during this period.

In the poem, Chaucer serves as the narrator. He falls asleep, and while sleeping, he has a dream vision. He awakes from the dream in a temple made of glass and soon realizes that he is in the Temple of Venus. On a wall, he finds writings and portraits that tell the mythological story of Aeneas – the Trojan hero who survived the fall of Troy and traveled to Italy to become the first hero of Rome.

In mythology, Aeneas is the son of Venus, so that may account for the story on the wall. As Chaucer recounts the story of Aeneas, he states that Aeneas's wife "Bad hym to flee the Grekes host" – she 'pleaded to him to flee the Greeks' host.' But on his journey to Italy, the goddess Juno sent a fierce storm against the Trojan ships because she hated the Trojans. The passage identifies her as "Jupiteres wif" – 'Jupiter's wife.'

Now those two passages contain very traditional possessives – the "Grekes host" (the Greeks' host) and "Jupiteres wif" (Jupiter's wife). That's the way the Anglo-Saxons usually handled possessives, and that's the way we often do it today. Today, we use ['s], but the apostrophe is a more recent innovation. Chaucer simply used [-es] to mark the possessive. And that [-es] is a lingering inflectional ending that survived from similar endings used in Old English.

But shortly after Chaucer refers to the 'Greek's host' and 'Jupiter's wife,' he includes a passage in which Venus prays to Jupiter to save Aeneas and the Trojan ships. Venus prays "to save and kepe that navye of the Troian Eneas" – 'to save and keep the navy of the Trojan Aeneas.'

So in this passage, we see the other way to show possession in English. Chaucer refers to the 'navy of the Trojan Aeneas.' He uses the word *of* as part of a prepositional phrase. He could have said 'the Trojan Aeneas's navy' using the ['s] ending, but he chose to use 'the navy of Aeneas' instead. This reflects a general trend within Middle English to use *of* rather than the more traditional ['s] ending. So whereas an Anglo-Saxon would have referred to the 'king's law' with two words, a Middle English speaker would have been more likely to refer to the 'law of the king' with four words. So twice as many words, but the same general idea. Again, this was part of that general trend away from inflectional endings toward longer phrases – especially prepositional phrases.

Now the Anglo-Saxons did sometimes use the word *of* to show possession like we do today, but it was very rare. In late Old English, it was used less than 1% of the time. By the mid-1200s, it was used about one-third of the time versus the ['s] ending which was used the other two-thirds. Then, by the early 1300s, the use of the word *of* spiked. It's been estimated that it was used about 85% of the time which was a massive jump in use. The traditional ['s] ending was only being used about 15% of the time. By the way, those statistics come from Hans Frede Nielsen's book titled "From Dialect to Standard English 1154-1776" (p. 78-79).

So for some reason, Middle English speakers fully embraced the idea of showing possession by using *of* and a prepositional phrase. 'The population of the world' rather than 'the world's population.' 'The color of the house' rather than 'the house's color.' It isn't entirely clear why this shift occurred so rapidly, but it appears to be related to the overall increase in the use of prepositional phrases at the time. Another theory is that it reflects the influence of French during this period. French shows possession with a prepositional phrase using *de*, which is the French equivalent of *of*. So when we use *of* to show possession, it mirrors the way French does it. That doesn't necessarily mean that French caused the change within English, but it may have encouraged it and reinforced it.

Interestingly, the [‘s] ending made a comeback in early Modern English. Today, we use a mixture of both the [‘s] ending and the *of* phrase. We actually saw an example of that change in the last episode about Wycliffe’s Bible. Wycliffe has used the phrase ‘the keeper of my brother’ in his Middle English Bible. So he used a prepositional phrase with *of*, which as we now know was the common way to do it in Middle English. But in the King James Version in the early 1600s, the phrase was changed from ‘keeper of my brother’ to ‘my brother’s keeper.’ So the *of* was dropped in favor of the [‘s.] And again, that was part of the comeback of that older way to show possession.

Now as we know, Old English word order was very loose and flexible. The word order didn’t matter as much because the inflectional endings did so much of the work. So during that time, the [‘s] ending to show possession could be used on either side of the noun. You could refer to the ‘king’s law’ or the ‘law king’s.’ In fact, it was about 50/50 in Old English. But in the Middle English period, the [‘s] ending became fixed before the noun and the *of* prepositional phrase became fixed after the noun. And that gave us the modern distinction between the ‘king’s law’ and the ‘law of the king.’

So again, these changes reveal the three basic grammatical themes of this period – a more fixed word order, the decline of inflectional endings, and the increased use of phrases to replace those lost endings.

Modern English was taking shape, but it still had a way to go. Even in the time of Chaucer, speakers hadn’t figured out how to handle a situation where two possessives were combined. For example, England had a king, and the king had a son. So how do we combine those elements into a single phrase to refer to that son in reference to the king and in reference to the country he ruled. Today, we can refer to the ‘son of the King of England.’ So we can use *of* twice. Or we can refer to the ‘King of England’s son’ with an [‘s]. But in either case, we treat the ‘King of England’ as a collective unit. Again, ‘son of the King of England’ or ‘the King of England’s son.’ Well, Middle English hadn’t evolved to that point yet. It was still thought that the word with the [‘s] ending should come immediately before the noun it was describing. So you referred to the ‘king’s son’ even when the king was the ‘King of England.’ So you said ‘the King’s son of England’ rather than the ‘King of England’s son.’ And you said the ‘Duke’s army of Normandy’ rather than the ‘Duke of Normandy’s army.’ And Chaucer even reflects this common syntax a few lines later in this particular poem when he refers to the daughter of the King of Thrace. He includes the line “That kynges doghtre was of Trace” – ‘that was the king’s daughter of Thrace.’ Now today, we would say ‘the king of Thrace’s daughter.’ We would treat ‘king of Thrace’ as a collective noun and just put the [‘s] at the end of that phrase.

Well, apparently Chaucer also realized that it made more sense to treat the entire phrase ‘king of Thrace’ as a collective noun because a little later in the poem, he changed the syntax and did just that. He phrased it just like we do today. He referred to the classical Roman poet Ovid who had written about Venus – the goddess of love. He wrote of Ovid “that hath ysowen wonder wide the grete god of Loves name,” or in Modern English, he “who has wondrously spread the great god of Love’s name.” So here, he doesn’t say the ‘god’s name of love’ as would have normally been the case at the time. Instead, he treats ‘god of Love’ as a collective noun and refers to the ‘god of

Love's name' just like we would today. Many scholars actually consider this to be the first known example of an English writer using that type of modern phrasing – putting the 's' ending on the noun phrase as a whole. So this example shows how Modern English syntax or word order was starting to emerge during this period. But despite Chaucer's early example, it would take over another century for that type of phrasing to become common within English. Even Shakespeare used the old phrasing from time to time. For example, in Henry IV, Shakespeare refers to 'The Archbishop's Grace of York' rather than the 'Archbishop of York's grace.' So these changes took time to filter through the language.

Now returning to the poem, Chaucer the narrator goes through the story of Aeneas as depicted on the wall of the temple, but he still doesn't know where he is, so he decides to go outside to see if there is anyone who might know. When he walks outside, he sees a massive eagle flying above. The eagle is as bright as the sun. It swoops down and picks up Chaucer and takes him away. This may very well be an allusion to Dante's Divine Comedy. The second part of the Divine Comedy called Purgatorio features an eagle who takes Dante to purgatory.

At any rate, Chaucer says that the eagle had "grymme pawes stronge" (grim paws strong) and "sharpe nayles longe" (sharp nails long) and "clawes starke" (claws stark). So instead of 'strong paws,' he used 'paws strong.' And instead of 'long nails,' he used 'nails long.' And instead of 'stark claws,' he used 'claws stark.' So he routinely put the adjective after the noun. That was another common feature of the language at the time. Once again, French influence may have been a factor. In early Old English, adjectives could occur on either side of the noun they were describing. You can refer to the 'black dog' or the 'dog black.' Again, word order was looser. By the late Old English period, there was a general tendency to put the adjective first, but it was still variable. Then in Middle English, the trend went in the other direction and it became common to put the adjective after the noun. Again, French also tended to do that, so that may have been why English speakers started doing it. But over time, the trend was once again reversed and went in the other direction. English speakers gradually reverted back to putting the adjective before the noun, and that's generally where we put it today.

Now returning to Chaucer's House of Fame, the poet is whisked away by the eagle. The eagle speaks to Chaucer in a human voice and tells him not to be afraid. He is taking Chaucer to the House of Fame to be amused and entertained. The eagle explains that all words uttered by people ultimately reach the House of Fame in the sky. In the same way that a stone causes ever-widening ripples and waves when it falls into the water, so do the sound waves created by the human voice. They ripple through the sky and ultimately reach the House of Fame. We later find out that when a person's voice reaches the House of Fame, the person who spoke those words actually appears in the House.

Now again, in making this analogy between water and sound waves, the eagle refers to the ripples caused by a stone falling into water. He says that the ripples begin with a small circle, which causes another larger circle, and then another and another, spreading outwards from the source. Chaucer writes, "Every sercle causynge other, Wydder than hymself was" ('Every circle causing another, wider than itself was'). So Chaucer uses the word *wydder* – or *wider* – to compare the size of the circles or ripples in the water. That was the traditional Old English way

to compare two things. You used an inflection on the end of the word. So the [-er] ending in a word like *wider* or *longer* or *taller* is ultimately derived from Old English. It's one of those lingering inflections that we still use today.

Of course, we do the same thing when we compare several different things and we want to highlight just one. We put an [-est] ending on the word – *widest*, *longest*, *tallest*. Again, that ending came from Old English. So we have *wide*, *wider* and *widest*. That's a good example of how Old English used a variety of endings to express specific meanings.

But as you probably know, we have a completely different way of expressing the same concepts using a phrase rather than a specific word ending. Instead of putting an [-er] on the end of the adjective, we can put the word *more* in front of it. So instead of *spicier*, we can say that one dish is 'more spicy' than the other. And instead of the [-est] ending, we can use the word *most*. So you might eat the 'spiciest' dish, or the dish that was the 'most spicy.' Now today, most adjectives require one or the other. We would refer to the 'wider' circle, not the 'more wide' circle, but at one time, the two options were more interchangeable.

Old English didn't actually use the words *more* and *most* when comparing things. It did have a similar construction using the Old English words *swiþor* or *bet* instead of *more*, and using the words *swiþost* or *betst* instead of *most*. But again, those types of phrases were very rare. Old English mainly relied on those inflectional endings. It was during the Middle English period that people switched away from the endings and began to use phrases with *more* and *most*.

Again, French may have been an influence here. French grammar also uses a phrase to compare things. It typically uses a form of the word *plus* (P-L-U-S) in the way that we might use *more* or *most*.

Again, within Middle English, the old and new ways were interchangeable at first. You could say 'clearer' the old way or 'more clear' the new way. You could say 'largest' the old way or 'most large' the new way. You could even combine them for added emphasis. You could have a 'more sweeter' dessert or the 'most largest' house.

English has never really adopted a formal rule to distinguish the old way with the endings from the new way with *more* and *most*. Today, the very general rule is that you use the [-er] or [-est] ending with a short one-syllable word – *bigger*, *taller*, *fastest*, *slowest*. If the word is three or more syllables, we typically use *more* or *most* and turn it into a phrase – 'more beautiful,' 'most outrageous.' But two syllable words can be tricky. Some go one way, some go the other, and some can go either way. You could say 'cloudier' or 'more cloudy.' Sometimes, you just have to go with what sounds right. But either way, it is important to note that English has these alternatives today largely thanks to Middle English. Again, Middle English grammar moved away from inflectional endings like [-er] and [-est] in favor of phrases with multiple words.

Now returning to the poem, the eagle takes Chaucer higher and higher in the sky toward the House of Fame. At first, Chaucer sees hills and valleys, then entire cities, then he is so high that

the earth itself appears to be no bigger than a point. So they are now in space. Then the eagle speaks. In Modern English, the passage reads:

Now, said he then, cast up thine eye.
See yonder, lo, the galaxy,
Which men call the Milky Way.

Now in the original Middle English:

“Now," quod he thoo, "cast up thyn ye.
Se yonder, lo, the Galaxie,
Which men clepeth the Milky Wey

Now this is a fascinating passage because it is the first time that the term *Milky Way* appears in an English document. And it is also one of the first times – and perhaps the very first time – that the word *galaxy* was used in an English text. You might be surprised that Chaucer helped to introduce those terms to English. And here’s something else that is interesting. The terms *Milky Way* and *galaxy* are actually related in terms of their etymology. *Milky Way* is a partial English translation of the word *galaxy*. The word *galaxy* passed from Greek, to Latin, to French, to English. The connection between *Milky Way* and *galaxy* is a lot more apparent when you realize that the ‘lax’ part of *galaxy* comes from the same root as *lactose*. When the Greeks observed the night sky, they noticed a light band that stretched across the sky. It was milky white in appearance, so the Greeks called it *galaxias kyklos* – literally the ‘milky circle.’ Latin speakers then borrowed the term, but they modified it from ‘milky circle’ to ‘milky way.’ It was ‘via lactea’ in Latin. And English speakers simply took that Latin term ‘via lactea,’ and they did a direct translation into English as *Milky Way*. And again, Geoffrey Chaucer was the first known writer to use that term *Milky Way* in the House of Fame.

Now Chaucer as the narrator of the poem finally reaches the House of Fame. It is built on a mountain of ice. The names of many famous people are engraved on the ice, even though some of the letters have melted away over time. At the top of the mountain is a beautiful structure. Chaucer says that it was larger and more elaborate than he can describe. The building is the House of Fame. It is filled with poets and minstrels and singers and musicians and other people – more than the number of stars in the sky. Many of the people are famous and well-known people from throughout history. Chaucer also encounters the central figure of the castle – Lady Fame. She grants her favors to the various people in attendance, giving some fame and others infamy and denying others any recognition at all. She does this without regard to fairness or justice or merit. Dispensing fame is a random process. Chaucer says that he has long realized that many people seek fame and notoriety, but he didn’t realize how fame was actually acquired until now.

He is then led out of the House of Fame to another remarkable structure, again indescribably large, made of cage-like material, spinning around, with a sound emanating from the building that resembled the whisking sound of a flying stone launched by a siege engine. The roof has thousands of holes to let out the sounds coming from inside. The house is full of rumors and stories – some true and some complete lies.

The eagle reappears and takes Chaucer inside where he sees more people than he knew possibly existed. They are all whispering in each other's ears, spreading news and gossip and rumors – both true and false. These utterings rise toward the windows and escape the building. Chaucer sees a lie and truth meet each other at a window. Each wants to escape before the other, but they agree to exit together, thereby merging into one and flying out as a single tidings.

Suddenly Chaucer hears a great noise in the corner of the hall. Everyone inside rushes to see what is happening, crawling over each other to get a better view. At that point, Chaucer sees a man he has no business seeing, a man who commands great respect, aaaaaand . . . the end. That's where Chaucer ends the poem.

It's isn't clear if he did that on purpose or if he just never finished it. Some scholars have suggested that the man he saw was Chaucer himself – the narrator. But this is actually the way many of Chaucer's poems from this period end. It appears that he never got around to finishing most of his poetry, and that includes the Canterbury Tales.

Now shortly after completing this particular poem called the House of Fame, Chaucer went to work on his next major work – which became known as the Parliament of Fowls. This next poem is about three male eagles who are trying to win the affection of a female eagle before a parliament or collection of lesser birds. It continued Chaucer's infatuation with Italian poetry. It is composed in a specific poetic meter or rhyming pattern called rime royal which was famously used by the Italian poet Boccaccio. Like the beginning of the House of Fame, this next poem is also set in the Temple of Venus, and Chaucer pulls much of his description of that temple directly from one of Boccaccio's poems called 'Il Teseida.'

Ultimately, Parliament of Fowls is a love poem, and it is probably most notable to us today because it was set on Valentine's Day. That was the day when the birds gathered to select their mates. Well, up until this poem, St. Valentine's Day was a relatively minor religious holiday – one of many that celebrated the lives of various saints. But in Parliament of Fowls, it was given a specific association with courtly romance and attempts to win the affections of others. And in fact, this poem contains the very first reference to Valentine's Day in the English language. Now, in the poem, Chaucer seems to suggest that there was an existing tradition that associated the day with romance, but there is no reference to that connection in any surviving document before this poem. So as a result, Geoffrey Chaucer is generally credited with popularizing the holiday as we know it today – as the day when we celebrate love and romance. So this relatively obscure poem by Geoffrey Chaucer was destined to have a significant impact on our culture for centuries to come.

Now shortly after completing the Parliament of Fowls, Chaucer began work on his next major poem called Troilus and Criseyde. This is widely considered to be his greatest work outside of the Canterbury Tales, and many scholars actually consider it to be superior to the Canterbury Tales even though it isn't as widely known. One of the things it has going for it is the fact that it was actually completed. Unlike many of his other poems, Chaucer finished this one with a proper ending. So it is a complete work. It's also quite long – much longer than the House of Fame and Parliament of Fowls. Some scholars have even called it the first English novel.

The poem continues to reflect Chaucer's Italian influences during this period. The story of Troilus and Criseyde had been told several times over the prior centuries, but Chaucer's version is really a re-working of the version told by Boccaccio in his earlier poem called 'Il Filostrato.' In fact, in certain places, Chaucer follows Boccaccio's version almost line by line – suggesting that he was working from a copy which he had in his possession. But Chaucer ultimately departs from the earlier versions and ends up telling his own version of the story in the end. The story itself comes from the Greek legends about the Trojan War, and is based around Troilus who was a minor character in The Illiad. His love affair with Criseyde was a separate story that developed in the Middle Ages, and Chaucer gives us the definitive version of the story in English even though Shakespeare also produced a version of the story a couple of centuries later.

Now I don't have time in this episode to take you through the whole poem, but I do want to use the poem to illustrate an interesting development in the language, and that's the evolution of the Modern English verb phrase.

As we've seen, English speakers were shifting away from a grammar and syntax that relied on word endings, and they were moving toward a grammar that relied more and more on phrases. And we see that trend in the way English handled verbs during this period. Basic Old English statements like 'I speak' and 'I spoke' evolved into more expansive phrases like 'I am speaking,' and 'I have spoken,' and 'I have been speaking.' These new types of verb phrases contributed to subtlety and nuance and allowed for different shades of meaning. They also allowed speakers to express more subtle notions of time and action.

So let's take a quick look at Troilus and Criseyde and see how Chaucer used these types of phrases. The poem is divided into five books or chapters, and I'm mostly going to focus on the first book here. It begins with a short introduction warning the reader of the sorrow to come. Here's the passage in Modern English:

The double sorrow of Troilus to tell,
That was the son of Priam, king of Troy,
Of his adventures when he fell in love
From woe to well-being, and back again from joy,

The double sorwe of Troilus to tellen,
That was the kyng Priamus sone of Troye,
In lovyng how his aventures fellen
fro wo to wele, and after out of ioie,

So we're introduced to Troilus who was the son of the Trojan king Priam. Notice again the way the prepositional phrase 'of Troy' is rendered in the original Middle English version. It's rendered the old way that I described earlier. Rather than 'King Priam of Troy's son,' it appears as 'King Priam's son of Troy.' And we're told that this is story of Troilus falling in love and the sorrow of a love lost.

We're then told that the story takes place during the siege of Troy by the Greeks during the Trojan War. A soothsayer named Calchas foresees that the Greeks will capture and destroy the city of Troy, so in order to save himself, he becomes a traitor. He flees Troy and goes over to the Greeks who happily accept him since he can provide inside information about the Trojans. But in fleeing Troy, he leaves behind his daughter Criseyde.

Criseyde is described as the most beautiful woman in Troy, but since she is the daughter of a traitor, she is ridiculed and hated by her fellow Trojans. She is unmarried and a widow with no one to turn to for support. So she goes to Hector, who is the eldest son of the Trojan king Priam, and she pleads for mercy. Hector feels sorry for her, and he guarantees her protection. He says that she can continue to live in Troy, and no one will punish her for her father's treachery.

She thanks him and returns to her home. Chaucer then includes the following passage – first in Modern English:

And in her house she abided with such servants
as her high honor entitled her to hold;
And while she was dwelling in that city
she kept her estate, and by both young and old,
she was beloved, and men spoke well of her.

Now the original Middle English version:

And in hire hous she abood with swich meyne
As til hire honour nede was to holde;
And whil she was dwellynge in that cite
Kepte hir estat, and both of yonge and olde
ful wel biloued, and wel men of hir tolde.

Now this passage shows a very interesting grammatical development which was still pretty rare at the time. Chaucer wrote the line "And whil she was dwellynge in that cite" ('And while she was dwelling in that city'). Now that seems very normal to us today, but the verb phrase 'was dwelling' was relatively new at the time.

This is what modern linguists call the progressive tense. It's formed when we combine a version of the verb 'to be' with the main verb plus an [-ing] ending. You can have a present progressive or a past progressive depending on what form of *be* you use. So 'He is singing' or 'I am running' is the present progressive. And 'She was dancing' or "We were playing" is the past progressive. But either way, this type of verb phrase allows us to express that an action was continuous or ongoing. If I say, "The horse jumped the fence," that implies that he jumped it one time. But if I say, "The horse was jumping the fence," that indicates that the horse did it over and over again. Modern English allows us to use this type of phrase to make that distinction clear. Otherwise, I would have to be more specific. I would have to say something like "The horse jumped the fence several times." But when I use the phrase 'was jumping,' that conveys that idea by itself. I don't have to add any other information. So when Chaucer says that Criseyde 'was dwelling' in Troy,

we know that was an on-going process that continued for some time. And that type of progressive verb phrase didn't really become common until the Middle English period.

Now English scholars will point out that Old English did have a similar construction, but it was very, very rare in Old English. And it may have represented a type of informal slang that didn't usually appear in formal writing. However, by the time we get to Middle English – when people were using fewer inflections and more phrases – we can clearly identify this type of progressive verb phrase.

So by this point, we have our modern progressive verb phrase. The key elements were a form of the verb 'to be' plus the main verb plus [ing] – 'am singing' – 'was dwelling.' When you put those three elements together, you could now express a continuous action, and Chaucer used that type of verb phrase here at the beginning of *Troilus and Criseyde*.

So as we return to the poem, we are introduced to Troilus. He attends a Trojan religious festival with many of the people of Troy. Criseyde is also there. Several of his knights hit on ladies in attendance. Troilus mocks them and mocks lovers in general, but the God of Love strikes Troilus in retaliation, and he immediately falls head over heels in love when he sees Criseyde. He is immediately racked with pain and longing.

We're told that Troilus soon left the Temple where he saw Criseyde, and he regretted how he had mocked the other knights – "repenting him that he hadde ever y-japed" ('repenting him that he had ever japed'). *Japed* meant 'mocked or made fun of.' So he regretted that he had mocked or made fun of the others. Later, we're told that Troilus experienced further woe when he realized that Criseyde may already love someone else and "that never of him she wolde have taken heed" ('that never of him she would have taken heed') – so she would never be interested in him.

Now the two lines I just read to you show another important grammatical development. In the first line, we have 'that he had ever japed – or mocked.' Then we have the line 'never she would have taken heed.' So 'had japed or mocked' and 'have taken heed.' These types of verb phrases use the word *have* or *had* before the past tense version of the verb. Again, 'had mocked' or 'have taken.' Again, this was a new way to express past tense in Middle English.

It was used to make a subtle distinction in time when talking about things in the past. It allowed speakers to put past events in some type of order. The normal past tense didn't allow that type of subtlety without additional explanation. Let's say that I run into you, and I say "Yesterday I went to the store where I saw Mary." Now that uses the normal past tense. 'I went to the store' where 'I saw Mary.' But does that mean I went to the store and Mary was there at the same time? Or does it mean I went to a store yesterday, and it happened to be the same store where I had seen Mary at some earlier date? Again, "I went to the store where I saw Mary." The timing is vague. Well, with this new type of verb phrase, I can fix that ambiguity. Now I can say, "I went to the store where I had seen Mary." Now it's clear. The store was the one where I had seen Mary at some earlier time. The verb phrase 'had seen' with the word *had* clears up that confusion.

This type of verb phrase is called the ‘perfect tense’ by linguists because it expresses an action that has been perfected or completed. Again, it allows us to express order and sequence when talking about the past. It allows us to refer to an action that preceded any given point in the narrative. And in English, it is expressed by putting a version of the word *have* before the verb in past tense. ‘I have seen,’ ‘He has jumped,’ ‘They had finished.’ It’s as simple as that, but it wasn’t really common in English until the Middle English period.

There’s some evidence for these types of verb phrases in Old English, but again they were extremely rare. Old English just used the regular past tense in most cases. But in Middle English, this perfect tense emerged as a standard way of describing actions in the past. Sometimes, speakers would use a version of ‘to be’ rather than ‘to have.’ Even Shakespeare used phrases like ‘He is come’ rather than ‘he has come.’ But the verb ‘to be’ was dropped in this particular tense in the 1800s. And today, we just use *have*, *has* or *had*.

So we’ve looked at two relatively new types of verb phrases. The first was the progressive form using ‘to be’ plus the main verb plus [-ing]. ‘I am speaking.’ ‘She was dancing.’ Then we have the perfect tense using ‘to have’ plus the verb in past tense. ‘I have spoken.’ ‘She had danced.’ Again, both of those became common in Middle English. Chaucer didn’t invent them, but he often used them. However, Chaucer is the first known writer to do something very interesting with these two types of verb phrases. He is the first known writer to put them together.

We can put them together by using the verb ‘to have,’ and then adding the verb ‘to be,’ and then adding the main verb. That gives us a brand new way of expressing an action. So we have the progressive phrase ‘I am speaking’ for a continuous action. And we have the perfect tense phrase ‘I have spoken’ for a recently completed action. When we put them together, we get a new phrase – ‘I have been speaking.’ We use that for a continuous action that was recently completed. Again, ‘I have been speaking.’ ‘She has been working.’ That type of combination isn’t really found until the time of Chaucer in the 1380s.

In fact, according to some sources, the first recorded use of this combination was in the Knight’s Tale which is the first of the Canterbury Tales. In the story, the Athenian ruler named Theseus encounters several women dressed in black on a road. One of them says to Theseus, “We han ben waitynge al this fourtennyght” (‘We have been waiting all this fortnight’). Again, this is certainly one of the first times that combination is found in an English document, and it may indeed be the first time.

This type of phrase shows how the word *have* was being extended well beyond its original meaning of ‘possession.’ Here, it is simply being used as a grammatical marker to indicate a completed action.

So with these new verb phrases in tow, let’s return to Troilus and Criseyde. Troilus is now hopelessly in love with Criseyde. He soon admits his love to his uncle Pandarus. Pandarus encourages him to confess his love to Criseyde, and then Pandarus begins work on a plan to unite the two.

Now this character of Pandarus is a central figure in the poem since he acts as a go-between for the two lovers. And his name is the ultimate source of the word *pander* in Modern English. If you *pander* to someone, you indulge them. Perhaps you encourage their worst instincts. Well, the word actually began as a noun. A *pander* was someone like Pandarus who acted as a go-between to facilitate love. It even has a sense as a pimp. Over time, the meaning evolved to refer to someone who encouraged another person's immoral or illicit behavior. And then it evolved into a verb meaning 'to encourage that type of behavior,' and then 'to encourage any of the whims or desires of another person.' So the meaning of this word has evolved over time, but it begins with Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde*.

Now this concludes Book 1 of the story. Book 2 begins with another short introduction – a poem to Clio the Muse of History. Chaucer prays for her help in telling the story and in making it rhyme. He also asks for help in translating part of the story from its original Latin sources.

Now when Chaucer returns to the main narrative of the story, he sets the stage by telling us that the events take place in May when fresh flowers grow and balmy breezes blow over the meadows – and “Whan Phebus doth his brighte bemes sprede” (‘When Phoebus does his bright beams spread’ or when ‘Phoebus does spread his bright beams’). Phoebus was another name for Apollo. And here, Chaucer tells us that he ‘does spread’ his bright beams. He could have simply said that Phoebus ‘spreads’ his bright beams, but he uses the phrase ‘does spread’ instead. This is what some linguists call the ‘meaningless do’ – or ‘empty do.’ It’s called that because the word *do* isn’t really doing anything other than marking the tense. Instead of ‘spreads,’ you can say ‘does spread.’ And instead of ‘jumped,’ you can say ‘did jump.’ This particular usage has largely disappeared from Modern English outside of poetry or some other situation where the writer is intentionally using an older form of the language, but it is important because it points to a change that was taking place in Middle English. The word *do* was starting to be used as an auxiliary separate and apart from its original meaning.

Now, the history of the word *do* within English is very complicated, and one could write an entire book on its evolution over time. But let me give you a very quick overview. In Old English, it was used in its original sense as a distinct verb meaning ‘to perform, or execute or carry out.’ So you might ‘do’ your work, or you might ‘do’ the laundry. That was the original sense which we still use today. It could also be used as a substitute verb. So we might use it in a sentence like, “I work hard, and you do too.” In that type of sentence, the word *do* is just taking the place of *work* so as not to sound repetitive. Again, this type of ‘substitute do’ can be found as far back as Old English.

The word *do* also had one other usage in Old English. It could be used to indicate that the subject caused something to occur. Now this seems a bit odd today, but if I said “She did him die,” it meant ‘She caused him to die.’ In *Piers Plowman*, we have the line “And Gyle dooth hym to go” which literally meant ‘And Gyle made him go or ordered him to go.’ This use of the word *do* can be found from time to time in Old English, but it really became common in Middle English. However, it eventually died out. It was largely gone by the 1700s. Again, it isn’t really clear why the word *do* acquired this particular meaning, but it is worth noting that French uses the verb

faire in a lot of verb phrases, and it means ‘to make or to do.’ So that French construction may have reinforced the popularity of this usage within English.

At any rate, by the 1200s, the word *do* was being used in another new way. That was the ‘meaningless do’ that we saw earlier. In this new usage, it no longer had any independent meaning within the sentence. It was simply being used as a grammatical marker – as an auxiliary. Again, this usage also died out over time, but it actually enjoyed a period of popularity in early Modern English around the time of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. And that’s why we tend to associate it with an older form of the language today.

Again, the so-called ‘meaningless do’ was used to indicate the specific tense of the verb without actually changing the verb. So if I have the verb *speak*, I would normally say ‘he speaks’ or ‘She spoke.’ I have to alter the verb a little bit to indicate present or past tense. But with ‘meaningless do,’ the word *do* does all the work. ‘He does speak.’ ‘She did speak.’ ‘They do speak.’ We hear this type of phrasing in a poetic sentence like ‘The sun doth shine.’ Or as Longfellow once wrote, “The flowers she most did love” rather than ‘The flowers she loved most.’

So again, this development is important because it shows that *do* was no longer being used in its original sense as a distinct verb. It was just serving as a grammatical marker. It isn’t clear why that happened. It may have been a natural evolution from the use of *do* to express causation. So a sentence like ‘I did pay him’ – meaning ‘I caused him to be paid’ – may have been interpreted more literally as ‘I paid him.’ So ‘I did pay him’ just became another way of saying ‘I paid him.’ That’s one theory. Other scholars point to the fact that the Celtic language of Wales used its word meaning ‘do’ as an auxiliary in similar way, and that may have been an influence. Another theory suggests that French influence played a role. Maybe it was some combination of all of those theories. At any rate, this type of ‘meaningless do’ became popular in English for a while, but it gradually disappeared from normal everyday speech.

Then around the time of Chaucer, we see the final developments in the evolution of the word *do*. Around that time, the word *do* started to be used for emphasis. And at first glance, this appears to be almost identical to the ‘meaningless do,’ but it was being used in a different way to show emphasis. So if your boss accuses you of not finishing your work, you might say ‘No, I DID finish my work.’ It sounds like the more poetic ‘I did finish my work’ to express past tense, but you’re not using the word *did* poetically. You’re using it to emphasize the fact that you DID finish your work. Since the two versions are written down the same way, it isn’t always clear how a writer in an old text was using the word. Some scholars see evidence of this so-called ‘emphatic do’ in *Piers Plowman* in the 1370s, but other scholars suggest that it isn’t clearly evident in English until the 1600s.

So by the time of Chaucer, we have *do* in its original sense as a primary verb as in ‘I do my homework every day.’ And we have it as a substitute verb as in ‘Bob wears a tie to work everyday, and so do I.’ And it may have also been used for emphasis during that period as in ‘Despite the pain, I DO want to finish the race.’ And then there was the ‘meaningless do’ where it was just used to mark the tense of the main verb. ‘The wind does blow.’ ‘The sun did shine.’

And that was the way Chaucer used it in that phrase which launched this discussion. He wrote, ‘Phoebus does his bright beams spread.’

Well, around this same time, that purely grammatical use of *do* as an auxiliary was extended to two new uses which still exist today. First, it started to be used to form questions. Previously, people just reversed the subject and the verb. So a sentence like ‘You see the dog’ became ‘See you the dog?’ But around the time of Chaucer, people started to extend the use of *do* as a grammatical marker, and they simply put it in front of the sentence to form a question.

So with that sentence ‘You see the dog,’ they could put the word *do* in the front and get ‘Do you see the dog?’ So that gave English two different ways to pose that question – the inverted version ‘See you the dog?’ and the ‘*do*’ version ‘Do you see the dog?’ The formal name for this ‘do’ version is the ‘interrogative do’.

I said that this use of *do* to ask a question developed around the time of Chaucer. Well, it appears that the first recorded instance of this development was actually by Chaucer himself. In the Monk’s Tale as part of the Canterbury Tales, he wrote, “Fader why do ye wepe” (‘father why do you weep’). He used that wording instead of ‘father why weep you?’ So this is another innovation first found in Chaucer’s writings.

Over time, this way of forming a question with the word *do* became standard within English, and it largely replaced the older inverted form. Again, it isn’t entirely clear why the ‘*do*’ version won out, but one theory is that it had to do with the emphasis on fixed word order in Middle English. As we’ve seen, speakers began to rely on the fixed order of Subject-Verb-Object. But when you used the traditional inverted format, the subject and verb were reversed. And it’s possible that speakers were uncomfortable with that mixed up word order. But by putting the word *do* at the front, you could maintain the fixed order of Subject-Verb-Object. The statement ‘You see the dog’ became the question ‘Do you see the dog?’ So the basic word order was retained. Again, that’s just a theory, but there is no question that the ‘*do*’ form became standard in Modern English.

So now, in the time of Chaucer, we have the very beginnings of *do* as a marker to ask a question. And a short time later, we got another development in the use of the word *do*, and that was the use of *do* to express a negative statement as in ‘I do not care’ instead of the more traditional ‘I care not.’ I’ve discussed this evolution before, but generally speaking, Old English made a negative statement by putting the word *ne* before the verb. So ‘Ic ne cume’ was literally ‘I not come.’ Then in early Middle English, the verb was often book-ended with *ne* at the front and *not* at the end. So you might have said something more like ‘I ne come not.’ Then by the later Middle English period, the *ne* disappeared at the front. And you had something more like ‘I come not.’ And then shortly after the time of Chaucer, we got the modern wording with *do*. The word *not* was shifted forward before the verb, and the word *do* was added to the phrase. So we end up with ‘I do not come.’

This modern phrasing is found for the first time around the year 1400 which was the year that Chaucer died. So it was apparently in use while Chaucer was living. Over time, it has mostly replaced the older form with *not* after the verb, though we do still encounter that older form from time to time. Think about John F. Kennedy's famous line, 'Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country.' 'Ask not' was the older style used instead of the more modern 'Do not ask.'

So at this point, around the time of Chaucer, we have most of the modern uses of *do* within English. The original action verb 'do,' the 'substitute do,' the 'emphatic do,' the 'interrogative or question do,' and the 'negative do.'

The 'meaningless do' as in 'The sun doth shine' was also being used, even though it has mostly disappeared over time. Outside of the occasional poetic use, we don't hear it much anymore. As I noted earlier, Chaucer used it when he said that 'Phoebus doth spread his bright beams,' but it's mostly gone today.

So with that, let's pick back up with Troilus and Criseyde. Unfortunately, I don't have time for a detailed account of the rest of the poem, but let me give you a quick summary. In the second book, Pandarus tells Criseyde that Troilus is in love with her, and he arranges for them to write letters to each other. They continue to exchange letters and a relationship is soon formed. Pandarus eventually arranges a meeting where the two potential lovers finally meet face to face. In Book Three, Pandarus invites Criseyde to his home and secretly has Troilus arrive through a hidden door. The two lovers finally consummate their relationship. In Book Four, Criseyde's father arranges a treaty between Greece and Troy in which the Greek camp agrees to return a captured Trojan girl in exchange for Criseyde. So Criseyde will be forced to join her father in the Greek camp and leave Troilus behind. The lovers meet and Troilus is so distraught that he threatens to kill himself, but Criseyde assures him that she will deceive her father and return from the Greek camp in ten days. The final book – Book Five – begins with the exchange. Criseyde is offered protection by the Greek warrior Diomedes. Diomedes woos her with love songs, and Criseyde soon realizes that she needs his protection, and the two begin an affair. After ten days, Criseyde does not return to Troy, and Troilus suspects that she has fallen in love with someone else. He writes her letters, but her replies are short and vague. Eventually, the Trojans capture one of Diomedes' boats, and Troilus finds a broach which he had given to Criseyde. He realizes that his suspicions were correct and that Criseyde has taken another lover. Troilus is heart-broken and soon dies in battle.

This basically concludes the poem, but Chaucer ends the poem by apologizing to his readers for having presented women in such a bad light. He says that he was merely recounting a story with an ending that had already been written by others. If he had his choice, he would have written of Penelope or Alceste who were legendary Greek women known for their fidelity and loyalty to their husbands.

He then writes:

Go, little book, my little tragedy!
God grant that thy maker, before his ending day,
May write some tale of comedy.

Go, litel boke, go, litel myn tragedye,
Ther god thi makere yet, er that he dye,
So sende myght to make in some comedye;

And then Chaucer nears his conclusion with these telling words:

And since there is such great diversity
in English and the writing of our tongue,
So I pray to god that no man mis-write thee,
Nor get the meter wrong through mistake of tongue.

Here's the passage in the original Middle English:

And for ther is so gret diuersite
In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,
So prey I god that non myswrite the,
Ne themysmetre for defaute of tonge.

These words are revealing because they point to Chaucer's recognition that his London dialect was only one dialect of English and that in other parts of the country people spoke very differently. He knew that scribes in other parts of the country would have to modify his poetry to be fully understood, and he hoped that the translators would honor the original and not make a mockery of his writings.

Now before I conclude, I should note that Chaucer did redeem himself a bit for any negative impression of women which may have resulted from *Troilus and Criseyde*. He wrote one more significant poem before starting work on the *Canterbury Tales*. This other poem was called the *Legend of Good Women*, and it is another dream vision and it was dedicated to Queen Anne – formerly known as Anne of Bohemia. It is a celebration of famous women who have died or have been betrayed by lovers. It's a series of short biographies, and many scholars think that Queen Anne actually asked Chaucer to compose the poem, perhaps in response to *Troilus and Criseyde*. Again the poem was dedicated to Anne. A further piece of evidence for this theory is that Chaucer's good friend and fellow poet John Gower composed his most well-known poem around this same time. That poem is called 'Confessio Amantis,' and it is also a series of love tales. There are some strong similarities between the themes of the two poems, and it seems that both poets may have composed their respective poems with similar themes at the same time because they were each commissioned to do so. However, Chaucer's poem is another uncompleted work. It seems that he never got around to writing a proper conclusion.

That may have been because he was consumed with a new project – a project that was similar in some respects to the Legend of Good Women. It was also a collection of stories, but these were stories of a very different nature – some elevated, some bawdy – all told by a variety of people who represented a cross section of English society. Of course, this massive work was the Canterbury Tales. And next time, we'll turn our attention to that important piece of literature – the most well-known work of literature composed in Middle English.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.