

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

EPISODE 127: THE ROAD TO CANTERBURY

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 127: The Road to Canterbury. In this episode, we’re going to begin our look at the most well-known piece of Middle English literature – the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer. It’s taken a long time to get here, but we are finally at a point where we can discuss an English text that a lot of people have actually heard of. And since this book is sometimes assigned to school students, some of you may have actually read part of this book – probably via a Modern English translation. In this episode, we’re going to explore the background of the poem, and the circumstances that led Geoffrey Chaucer to compose it in the late 1300s. We’ll also explore the opening passages of the General Prologue of the poem. This Prologue is probably the most well-known part of the book, and it provides a fascinating insight into the nature of the English language in the 14th century. So this time, we’ll take the road the Canterbury, and we’ll begin our look at the Canterbury Tales.

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.

[AUDIO CLIP]

The clip I just played for you is part of a reading from the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales read in the original Middle English. Now you might assume that it was from some university lecture on Medieval English, or perhaps it was from a poetry reading at some local book store. But it wasn’t. It’s actually a clip from the Martin Scorsese concert film called *The Last Waltz*. In 1976, Scorsese filmed the final concert of the classic rock group known as *The Band*. Well, it was the final performance of the original line-up of the band. It was huge event, and it included some of the biggest bands and performers of the day like Bob Dylan, Neil Young, Joni Mitchell, Eric Clapton, and many others. But there’s also this interesting performance right in the middle of the film. A poet and writer named Michael McClure appeared on stage, and he read the opening lines of the Canterbury Tales in Chaucer’s original Middle English.

And I mention this somewhat out-of-place performance because it points to the enduring legacy of the Canterbury Tales. It’s really the first work of Middle English literature that we’ve encountered so far in the podcast that is widely known in popular culture today. So even though the Canterbury Tales was composed over six centuries ago, many people still feel a connection to it.

In this episode, I want to explore the background of the poem. I’ll discuss the political and personal events which led Chaucer to move to Kent and to travel the same roads that were traveled by the pilgrims who he described in the poem. And then we’ll explore that opening passage of the Canterbury Tales in some detail. It may be the most well-known passage of English literature before the time of Shakespeare, so it deserves some attention.

Let's begin this story where we left off last time. In the last episode, we looked at the middle period of Chaucer's career from the mid-1370s through the mid-1380s. During that period, he composed several major poems. He also continued to live in London where he was born and raised and where he maintained a steady job as the Controller of the Customs at the Port of London. He also maintained a close connection to the royal court, including the young king Richard II and his powerful uncle John of Gaunt. All in all, it appears to have been a comfortable and prosperous period in Chaucer's life.

Chaucer was a prolific writer during this period, but we also saw in the last episode that he was concerned about the copying and distribution of his poetry. One of his last poems during this period was *Troilus and Criseyde*, and at the end of the poem, he wrote an appeal to the scribes who would copy the poem in the future. He prayed that they would not 'miswrite' it or get the meter wrong when transcribing it. He acknowledged that there were many different ways of speaking English at the time, and he hoped that his words would not be twisted or misrepresented by others. It was an acknowledgment that scribes routinely made minor changes to a text when they were copying and transcribing it, and it bothered Chaucer so much that he apparently felt the need to put that plea in writing at the end of the poem.

Along these same lines, we have another fascinating fragment from this same time period. Chaucer had recently completed *Troilus and Criseyde*, as well as a translation of the text known as "Consolation of Philosophy" by the Roman statesman Boethius. Chaucer had those works copied by his personal scribe named Adam, but apparently he was not happy with Adam's work. So he composed a short poem to Adam chastising him for his sloppiness. Here is the short poem, first in Modern English:

Adam scrivener, it if continues to fall upon you
to mis-write Boethius or Troilus
Then may you acquire scabs or scales under your long locks of hair.
After I complete my works, you must copy them more truly,
Because after a day I have to renew your work
To correct it and also to rub and scrape,
And all of that is through your negligence

Here's the passage in Chaucer's original Middle English:

Adam scriveyn, if ever it thee bifalle
Boece or Troylus for to wryten newe,
Under thy long lokkes thou most have the scalle,
But after my making thow wryte more trewe;
So ofte adaye I mot thy werk renewe,
It to correcte and eke to rubbe and scrape,
And al is thorough thy negligence and rape.

So here we see Chaucer begging Adam to be more careful. It seems to be playful ribbing, and it also appears that he and Adam routinely worked together. So who was this scribe named Adam? Well, modern scholars have tried to solve that mystery. They've examined the handwriting in many of Chaucer's surviving manuscripts. And they have compared that handwriting to the handwriting in other documents, including the surviving records of the scribes' guild at the time. And many of those scholars agree that the full name of the 'Adam' referenced in this poem was Adam Pynkhurst. As I noted in an earlier episode, the private book-making industry really emerged in the 1300s, and there were lots of professional scribes who were hired to copy books and manuscripts. Many people often used the same scribe over and over, and it appears that Chaucer usually worked with Adam Pynkhurst, even if he was sometimes unhappy with Adam's work. And the reason why Adam is so important to this story is because it appears that he played a crucial role in the organization of the Canterbury Tales as we know it today. And I'll explain that connection a little later in the episode.

Now around the time that this little poem was composed to Adam the scribe, Chaucer found himself at a personal and professional crossroads. The political winds were changing in England. As I noted, Chaucer was a supporter of the young king Richard II. In the year 1385, Richard was still a teenager – about 18 years old. But there was a growing unease with his rule.

Richard had many of the same problems as his predecessors. He surrounded himself with a small group of exclusive advisors, and he enriched them with lands and titles. He also spent money in lots of other places. He maintained a lavish court, and he incurred significant debts.

Meanwhile, his foreign policy was a disaster. First and foremost, Richard's forces couldn't manage a victory in France. This was a low-point for England during the Hundred Years War.

Then, Richard embarked on a failed invasion of Scotland. As we know, Scotland and France were allied against England. And through that alliance, France maintained garrisons in Scotland, so Richard marched his forces into Scotland to get rid of those garrisons. But the Scots avoided a direct battle. And over time, the English forces ran out of supplies, so Richard retreated back to England. With each of these events, the opposition to Richard's rule grew stronger, and the status of Richard's supporters became more precarious. That included Geoffrey Chaucer who was Controller of the Customs at the Port of London thanks to his connections to the royal court.

Around the same time that Richard retreated from Scotland, Chaucer got a new gig. In August of 1385, he was appointed as a Justice of the Peace for the county of Kent. Now this was an interesting development because Kent was the County where Canterbury was located, and up until this point, Chaucer had no clear connections to Kent or Canterbury. He had spent most of his life in and around London. So it's interesting that he was suddenly made a Justice of the Peace for Kent which was located to the southeast of London.

Now being a Justice of the Peace was not a full-time job. He was one of nine justices for Kent, and the justices only met four times a year. Each session usually lasted about three days. So for the time being, Chaucer kept his job as the Controller of the Customs at the London port. But his appointment as a justice shows that he was starting to spend some time in Kent and was probably

traveling down to Canterbury on the same roads that took pilgrims to Canterbury Cathedral. The Cathedral was a popular destination for pilgrims because it contained the shrine of Thomas Becket.

We looked at the life and death of Thomas Becket way back in Episode 84. As you may recall, he was the Archbishop of Canterbury, and he was murdered at Canterbury Cathedral by knights acting on behalf of the king – Henry II. Henry denied involvement claiming that his criticism of Becket had been misinterpreted by the knights. At any rate, Becket immediately became a martyr, and he was soon elevated to sainthood. His shrine at Canterbury became the most popular pilgrimage site in England, and two centuries later, pilgrims were still making that trek to Canterbury. And again, Geoffrey Chaucer probably made the same trek while serving as Justice of the Peace in the county where Canterbury was located.

As I noted, Chaucer initially kept his house and his main job in London, so he was splitting time between London and Kent. But the situation in London was starting to become more precarious. Opposition to King Richard's rule was growing, and his advisors and supporters were starting to come under attack.

During the following year – 1386 – the political situation became even more tenuous for Richard. The French king had gathered a fleet of ships on the northern coast of France with plans to launch a massive invasion of England. The invasion was hampered by weather, and it was ultimately stymied by the English navy, but when Parliament met late in that year, it still looked like the invasion was imminent, and the members of Parliament was not at all happy with the young English king.

The Parliament that met in that year is known as the Wonderful Parliament, and it was really an opportunity for Richard's political opponents to lash out at him. Of course, the Parliament included both nobles and prominent commoners. And among that group of commoners, there was one very peculiar figure. His name was Geoffrey Chaucer.

Again, the circumstances here are a bit of a mystery, but Chaucer was actually a member of the Commons in that year representing the County of Kent. He was still officially the Controller of the Customs in London, and as far we know, he was still officially a resident of London. He continued to maintain his house there. So why was he suddenly a member of Parliament from Kent? Well, most scholars think that Chaucer's attendance was part of an attempt by the king's allies to pack the Parliament with supporters – at least enough supporters to water-down some of the strong opposition. The local county sheriffs had a lot of influence over the selection of the representatives to the Commons, and the sheriff of Kent was a strong supporter of the king. So it is believed that he oversaw the selection of Chaucer to this particular Parliament since Chaucer was close to the royal court.

But what about the fact that Chaucer still lived in London? Well, as I noted earlier, he was a Justice of the Peace in Kent, and it is possible that he also had a home there even though the property records don't list him as an owner anywhere in Kent. Maybe he rented a home there, or maybe he lived with family members there. There is some evidence that his mother's family was

from Kent. But technically, it didn't really matter anyway because a representative didn't have to live in the county they represented. Whatever the circumstances, Chaucer was designated as a so-called 'knight of the shire' from Kent, and he represented the county in Parliament in 1386.

If Chaucer was chosen as part of an attempt to pack the Parliament, it was unsuccessful. The young king's opponents outnumbered his supporters, and Chaucer found himself in the minority. King Richard wanted to levy a large tax, but the proposal was immediately rejected. Richard then came under attack for his frivolous spending and the lack of revenues generated by the government. His opponents scrutinized every expenditure and every source of income, and several of Chaucer's friends and allies came under attack. There is no evidence that Chaucer himself was a target, but he probably felt some pressure as the Controller of the Customs since he was responsible for the revenues coming in from the port. At one point, the young king walked out the Parliament for several days effectively bringing the Parliament's business to a halt, but he eventually returned. In the end, the Parliament gave him a much smaller tax than he wanted, and in return, the Parliament established a council to audit his finances and to oversee and regulate future spending. It was intended as a check on Richard's spending habits.

As soon as the Parliament came to an end, Chaucer gave up his position as Controller of the Customs, and he also gave up his residence in London which was apparently tied to that job. The timing and circumstances have led many scholars to conclude that Chaucer was forced out of his job due to the political pressure. And maybe that was the case. Or maybe Chaucer had good instincts, and he saw the writing on the wall. And I say that because the situation was about to get even worse for King Richard and his closest advisors.

Richard eventually declared that the men who imposed that council upon him had committed treason. In return, his opponents declared that his advisors were traitors. The two sides nearly went to war, but Richard's opponents got the upper hand. They then launched what became known as the Merciless Parliament. Many of the king's close advisors and supporters were convicted of treason and were executed. In many cases, the men were convicted with little or no evidence of any actual wrong-doing. The only crime they committed was being a close advisor and ally of the king. That's why it was called the Merciless Parliament. And had Chaucer still been the Controller of the Customs, we may never have gotten the Canterbury Tales because Chaucer may have found himself in the same cross-hairs as many of his friends and colleagues. In fact, several of his close friends were caught up in the hysteria and were executed.

Chaucer avoided much of that conflict because he had retired from his old government job and he had moved out of London. It appears that he moved to the town of Greenwich. Today, Greenwich is actually part of southeastern London, but in the late 1300s, it was a separate town outside of the city, and it was part of County of Kent. It was also located on that pilgrimage route from London to Canterbury.

For Chaucer, it was a time of transition and perhaps a period of semi-retirement. It may have also been a very grim period for him. Around the time of his move to Kent, his wife Phillipa. So within a few months, he lost his wife, his main job, and his house in London. Records also show

that his regular annuities were terminated, and he was sued for several outstanding debts during this period, so he was apparently experiencing financial difficulties as well.

It was during this time that Chaucer began work on the Canterbury Tales, and interestingly, it was his first major poem that didn't have a courtly setting. Being somewhat removed from the royal court for the first time in his adult life, he chose to take a different and unique approach. He chose to write about the common people who traveled the roads as pilgrims.

As I noted, pilgrimages were a big deal in the Middle Ages. Going back to the Crusades, one of the factors contributing to that conflict was the desire of the Western Church to ensure that European pilgrims could get safe access to the Holy Land. Some pilgrims who made their way to Rome or Jerusalem in the Mediterranean would bring back sprigs of palm trees as souvenirs, and that led to the word *palmer* as another term for a pilgrim. That word mainly survives today as a surname.

The word *palmer* first appeared in English documents in the early 1300s, but the word *pilgrim* can be traced back to the late Anglo-Saxon period. Though there is some evidence of the word *pilgrim* in Old English, it didn't really become common in English until the 1200s. It is actually a Latin term borrowed from French. I gave the etymology of *pilgrim* in one of the first few episodes of the podcast, but since that was a long time ago, let me give you a quick reminder. It is derived from a combination of two Latin root words. The first is *per* meaning 'through or beyond' and the second is *ager* meaning 'land or a field.' Those words were combined to form the word *peregrinus* which literally meant one who comes from beyond the field or one who comes from another land. But over time, the word came to refer to someone who traveled to other lands, and the pronunciation evolved from *peregrinus* to *peregrin* to *pelerin* to *pilgrim*. But the main point is that the words *pilgrim* and *palmer* were both in common use in the late 1300s when Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales.

Another word which may have a connection to those early pilgrims is the word *roam* (R-O-A-M). And I say 'may' because this etymology is disputed. But one theory is that the verb '*to roam*' is actually derived from the name of the city of Rome. The idea is that many early pilgrims traveled to Rome, and the process of traveling the winding roads and taking the roundabout way to Rome was called 'to roam.' Some scholars deny this etymology, and they suggest that the verb '*to roam*' was derived from an earlier Old English or Germanic word – perhaps related to the word *ramble*. But the word *roam* (R-O-A-M) isn't found in Old English. It didn't appear in English until the 1300s at a time when French words were pouring in. And the Romance languages have similar words related to pilgrims which are definitely derived from the name of the city. For example, the Old French word *romier* meant a pilgrim, and that word originally referred to someone who traveled to Rome on a pilgrimage. And in fact, if you're a fan of Romeo and Juliet, the name *Romeo* is an Italian name derived from the same Latin root. It originally meant a pilgrim or wanderer within Italian. So it is possible – and the Oxford English Dictionary says 'probable' – that the verb '*to roam*' was derived from the name of the city of Rome, and originally referred to the travels of pilgrims.

Now in the years after leaving London, Chaucer apparently found himself on the same roads as all of those pilgrims or palmers ‘roaming’ down to Canterbury. And he decided to use the idea of a pilgrimage for his next major work.

The idea was simple. A group of pilgrims would come together at an inn in Southwark which is usually pronounced today as /suth-erk/. It was located on the south bank of the Thames across the river from the main part of London. That was a common meeting place for pilgrims as they traveled through London on their way to Canterbury. The group of pilgrims would represent a cross-section of society from a knight all the way down to a plowman. A host would recommend that the group ride together to Canterbury and that they entertain themselves by telling stories on the way there and on the way back. The pilgrim who told the best story would receive a free meal at the host’s tavern upon their return. This scenario would set the stage not only for the collection of stories, but also for the various interactions between pilgrims. In fact, many scholars consider the actual stories to be a bit ‘hit and miss.’ Some are better than others. But what tends to fascinate most readers is the description of the pilgrims and the way in which they interact with other.

This idea of having a variety of common people tell stories was really unique to Chaucer, even though other types of story collections were common. For example, there were many collections containing poems about the lives of various saints. Collections of beast fables were also popular. And as I noted in an earlier episode, the Italian poet Boccaccio had composed a well-known poem called Decameron which featured several people telling stories in the countryside as they tried to escape the ravages of the Black Death. But all of those collections featured the same types of stories or the same types of story-tellers. They tended to be variations on a common theme.

For the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer decided to do something different. He assembled a collection of story-tellers who were vastly different from each other and who told a wide variety of stories from different genres and in different styles. Nothing quite like it had ever been written before – and certainly not in English.

Now we know that Chaucer had already composed a couple of the stories used in the Canterbury Tales long before he moved to Kent. So these stories apparently pre-dated the concept of the poem. Presumably, these early stories were originally intended as separate stand-alone works. One of those stories was an abbreviated version of a tale told by Boccaccio about two Greek cousins who are captured in war and are held as prisoners. They both fall in love with the same woman who they see from their prison cell. One of them is later released and the other escapes, and they both return to compete for the love of the woman. It a classic bit of medieval romance, and we know from Chaucer’s writings that he had composed his version of the story several years earlier. But now, it became the first tale of the new Canterbury Tales. It became the tale told by the Knight which made sense because it was the type of courtly poem that one might associate with knights.

Some of the other tales were also influenced by other poets which wasn't unusual in the Middle Ages. Other tales were original to Chaucer. Some were left unfinished. And others were revised and rewritten as Chaucer proceeded with the project. It appears that he worked on the Canterbury Tales for the next decade or so, and he never really finished it.

About twelve years after leaving London for Kent, Chaucer finally decided to return home. In the year 1398, he moved to Westminster which was still a separate town just west of the main city of London. He lived there until his death a couple of years later in the year 1400. He was originally buried by the entrance to St. Benedict's Chapel, but a few years later, his body was moved to Westminster Abbey. And today, his body lies in a part of the abbey known as Poet's Corner.

Now as I noted, Chaucer never really completed the Canterbury Tales. When he died, he left several fragments or groupings of tales. For example, the General Prologue which begins the poem is immediately followed by the Knight's Tale which I just mentioned. That tale is immediately followed by the tale of the drunken Miller. It's a bawdy and somewhat obscene story that plays on the idea of romance introduced by the knight – only the Miller provides a very different type of romance. So the Miller's Tale is specifically told in response to the Knight's Tale. Then the Reeve steps in, and he tells a story that is a direct response to the Miller's Tale. The point is that some of these tales are clearly linked together, and they were intended to go in a certain order. But Chaucer never put all the tales together into a final version with a fixed running order. The tales I just mentioned clearly go first. And there is a specific tale that concludes the poem and goes at the end. But otherwise, the various remaining tales in the middle could have gone in just about any order.

So when Chaucer died, it was left to others to put all of these various fragments together. There were ten fragments or groupings in all. The details here are not known for certain, but it is possible that Chaucer's son or some other close associates decided to turn the fragments into a proper manuscript. And it also appears that that responsibility was given to Chaucer's personal scribe Adam Pinkhurst. He was the scribe who Chaucer had chastised in that poem several years earlier. Adam was apparently enlisted to put the various tales together.

The reason why Adam is credited with this project by many modern scholars is because two of the earliest surviving copies of the manuscript appear to be in his handwriting. These manuscripts were compiled shortly after Chaucer's death. The first is known as the Hengwrt manuscript. The second manuscript is called the Ellesmere manuscript, and it puts the tales in a slightly different and more logical order. It is also a beautiful manuscript with many illustrations – including color illustrations of Chaucer and the various pilgrims. This version of the manuscript was considered to be of such high quality that it became the basis for most of the modern versions of the book. So most modern versions follow the sequence of the Ellesmere manuscript. In fact, I should note that this particular manuscript is currently maintained at the Huntington Library in San Marino, California. So it's one of those rare early manuscripts that's actually located in North America.

Now Adam the Scribe didn't just compile the various tales into a formal manuscript. He also included certain notes which have become part of the final version. For example, the Cook's Tale follows the Reeve's Tale, but the Cook's Tale was never completed. So at the end of the tale fragment, Adam wrote, "Of this Cook's Tale Chaucer made no more." And that line is part of most standard versions of the poem that are still printed today.

These two early manuscripts were followed by many more. There are about 50 complete copies of the Canterbury Tales from the 1400s. The ordering of the tales varies within those surviving manuscripts. There are also about 30 other fragments or pieces of a final manuscript which survive from this same period.

About 80 years after Chaucer's death, William Caxton established the first printing press in England. And the first book published by that first printing press in England was the Canterbury Tales. So it is one of the most published books in English history.

So that's the story behind the making of the Canterbury Tales. Now, in the second half of this episode, I want to take you through the first part of the poem called the General Prologue. That's the part I played at the beginning of the episode, and it is the most-well known part of the Canterbury Tales. In fact, the opening lines are probably the most well-known verses in all of the Middle English.

So I'm going to do something a little different this time. I'm going to begin with an extended reading of the passage in Modern English and then in the original Middle English. Then, I'm going to go back through the same passage and analyze each line. So here are the opening lines of the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer.

When April with his showers sweet with fruit
Has pierced the drought of March to the root
And bathed every vein in that liquid
from whose power the flower's birth is given
When Zephyrus also with his breath so sweet
Inspires the tender crops in every wood and heath
and the course of the bright young sun
half through the sign of the ram has run
And small fowls make melodies so nice
And sleep all night with open eyes
So in their hearts nature encourages
Then people long to go on pilgrimages
And pilgrims desire to seek strange strands
To distant shrines known in various lands
And especially from every shire's end
from there to Canterbury they do wend
The holy blissful martyr they seek
Who helped them when they were sick and weak

Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye-
(So priketh hem Nature in hir corages);
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages
And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke.

Those are the opening lines of the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. The first thing to note is that it uses a very familiar rhyming scheme and meter. It's called 'iambic pentameter,' and Chaucer was one of the first English writers to use it in his poetry. Chaucer used it for most of the Canterbury Tales, though he did depart from it in a few instances.

Iambic pentameter basically means that each line consists of 10 syllables with the stress or emphasis on every other syllable. Some people compare it to a series of heartbeats – da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM. And if you want to do a proper reading of the poem, each line is supposed to have that rhythm.

WHAN that APRill, WITH his SHOUres SOOte
The DROGHTE of MARCH hath PERced TO the ROOte

This is the rhythm of the Canterbury Tales. Now, as is often the case with poetry, an extra syllable may find its way into a line from time-to-time, but we're still dealing with the same basic rhythm and pattern.

The reason why that's so important to language historians is that it helps to show how the words were actually pronounced in Chaucer's day. It shows us which syllables had stress and which didn't. And it also shows us that silent letters in some modern words weren't silent in the late 1300s. If the letters were silent, the rhythm wouldn't have worked, so they had to have been pronounced.

This is especially important for all of those words that ended in E. You might remember that many of the Old English inflectional endings had either disappeared or had been reduced to simple 'eh' sound at the end of words. This sound was represented with the letter E. And many

of those words still have that letter E today – only today, that E is silent in most cases. Words like *time* and *date* and *rope* and many, many others all have silent E's today that were once pronounced in earlier periods of English.

Well, around the time of Chaucer, some of those E's were starting to become silent. And Chaucer's rhythms show us which words still had the 'eh' sound at the end and which ones had lost it.

As I noted, the rhythm also shows us the stress pattern in certain words, and sometimes the stresses were different in Chaucer's day. English had borrowed a lot of French words, and French words tended to be stressed on the final syllable. But English words were usually stressed on the first syllable. So over time, the stress has tended to shift forward to the first syllable in many of those French loanwords. But when we listen to the *Canterbury Tales*, we can often hear that the shift had not occurred yet in the late 1300s. So in the fourth line, Chaucer uses the word *virtue* which was borrowed from French in the 1200s. Today, the stress has shifted to the first syllable – /VIR-tue/ – but in the time of Chaucer, it was still being pronounced as /vir-TUE/. And we know that in part because that's the pronunciation required to maintain the rhythm of the line:

Of WHICH verTU enGENdred IS the FLOUR;

And speaking of French loanwords, Chaucer is considered to be a master at incorporating those loanwords into his English poems. His writings show the extent to which French had infiltrated the English vocabulary by the late 1300s. It is estimated that English had borrowed about 10,000 French words by the time of Chaucer's death in 1400. [*SOURCE: The History of the English Language, Baugh and Cable (p. 168)*]

In the passage I just read, we have French and Latin loanwords like *March*, *pierced*, *vein*, *liquor*, *virtue*, *engendered*, *flower*, *inspired*, *tender*, *course*, *nature*, *courage*, *pilgrims*, *pilgrimage*, *palmer*, *strange*, and *specially*.

That works out to about 15% of the words used in that passage which is roughly the same percentage of French words used throughout the entire poem. I'll have a lot more to say about Chaucer's use of those loanwords in the next episode, but for now, we just need to keep in mind that he routinely incorporated French and Latin words into his writings, and he is the first known writer to use a lot of those new loanwords.

Chaucer wrote in a London dialect, but London was located near the intersection of three different dialect regions. The East Midlands dialect was the dominant dialect of eastern England north of the Thames. The Southern dialect was the dominant dialect of the far south – south of the Thames. And Kent had a slightly different dialect which was spoken in the far southeastern corner of the country. We've looked at some aspects of those dialects in prior episodes.

Chaucer's writings actually show elements of all three dialects which probably had to do with the fact that London was located near all three of those regions, and also the fact that many people from those regions had moved to London after the Black Death as the feudal system broke down in the countryside.

We can see some of that blending of dialects in the first couple of lines of the Canterbury Tales. In Modern English, the lines literally read:

When that April with his showers sweet
The drought of March has pierced to the root

In the original Middle English, it reads:

Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote

In the first line, we have the word *showers* with a plural 's' ending. You might remember that Middle English had two common ways to mark a plural noun – either the 's' ending that we use today or the 'en' ending still found in words like *children*, *oxen* and *brethren*. Both of those endings were derived from different Old English inflections, but as those inflections were simplified, the north of England came to rely upon the 's' ending, and the south of England came to rely upon the 'en' ending. So up until the late 1300s, you would have generally found the 'en' ending in documents composed around London. But throughout the 1300s, the 's' ending had moved south through the Midlands. And by the time we get to Chaucer, we find that he mostly used that northern 's' ending. Here he uses *showers*, and in the next few lines he uses *crops*, and *pilgrims* and *pilgrimages*. So our modern 's' ending to mark plural nouns had finally become a fixture around London.

In the second line, Chaucer writes that the drought of March 'hath' pierced to the root. So he uses *hath* with a 'th' rather than the more modern *has* with an 's.' Now this represents another north-south divide. As we've seen before, the north used the 's' ending with verbs in 3rd person. So "He has," "She sleeps," "It seems." But in the south, the 'th' ending was used. "He hath," "She sleepeth," and "It seemeth." By the time of Chaucer, both forms were being used in the Midlands, but here we see him using the more traditional Southern form *hath*, and of course, that ending lingered on into the early Modern English period. We still hear it the King James Bible and the writings of Shakespeare.

Now let's look at the next couple of lines. Here's a literal Modern English translation:

And bathed every vein in such liquor,
of which virtue engendered is the flower.

Here's the original passage:

And BATHed EVery VEYNE in SWICH liCOUR,
Of WHICH verTU enGENdred IS the FLOUR;

So again, there's that iambic pentameter rhythm. And it confirms that *virtue* was pronounced /vir-TUE/, and *liquor* was pronounced /li-KOR/. So the stress was still on the second syllable at the time. And over the centuries, those words have become Anglicized with the stress moving forward to the first syllable.

Also, as I noted in an earlier episode, the word *liquor* didn't mean an alcoholic drink originally. It was actually derived from the same Latin root as *liquid*, and initially, it still had that more generic meaning as liquid. And that's the way Chaucer used it here. Some cooks still refer to a cooking broth as 'pot liquor,' but today, the word has become mostly restricted to fermented or alcoholic liquids.

Chaucer says that 'April showers have bathed every vein in such liquor' – so the rain has bathed every vein of the flowers in liquid. He uses the word *veyne* spelled V-E-Y-N-E. And the rhythm of the line suggests that the E at the end of that word was already silent by the time of this poem. To pronounce the E would have thrown off the rhythm.

There's also a question here as to how that word *veyne* was actually pronounced at the time. In the passage, it's spelled with an 'EY' (V-E-Y-N-E), and there is some disagreement among scholars as to the specific sound of that vowel at the time. Modern scholars think they know the Middle English sounds represented by the basic vowel letters A, E, I, O, U and Y. Those sounds sometimes varied from region to region and from one dialect to the next, but scholars think they know with some certainty how they were pronounced in various parts of the country. But when we get to vowel combinations like 'EI' or 'EY' – or 'AI' or 'AY' – things get a little more complicated. In these cases, the letters are presumably representing diphthongs which are the combination of two separate vowel sounds into one.

So for example, the modern /ay/ sound in the word *vein* is really a diphthong. It's a combination of /eh/ and /ee/. When pushed together, you get /eh-ee/ – or if you squeeze it into one syllable – /ay/. And since the /eh/ and /ee/ sounds were represented with the letters E and I – or E and Y – in Middle English, most scholars think this 'EI' or 'EY' spelling represented the /ay/ sound, at least early on when this spelling was adopted. So V-E-Y-N-E would have represented /vain/ when that spelling was adopted. And that's the way we pronounce the word today. V-E-I-N is /vain/.

But we also have the word V-A-I-N which is also pronounced /vain/. That word can mean feeble as in 'to try in vain.' And it can mean conceited as in 'you're so vain.' But notice that it is spelled with 'AI' instead of 'EI.' Well, the 'AI' spelling can also be found in Middle English, but it apparently represented a different sound at one time. It represented the sound produced when you combined /ah/ and /ee/, and that was /ah-ee/ or /eye/. So in early Middle English, around the year 1300, V-E-I-N or V-E-Y-N was /vain/. But V-A-I-N was /vine/.

But at some point in the 1300s, the distinction between these two sounds was lost. They merged together and became the same sound. At least that's what happened in and around London. And we know that happened in part because Chaucer routinely rhymed words with those distinct spellings. So for example, the early form of our word *way*, as in 'show me the way,' was usually spelled W-E-I. So it was probably pronounced /way/ much like today. And the word *day* was spelled D-A-I, and was probably pronounced /die/. But in the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer routinely rhymed those two words. And of course, today, the words *way* and *day* have the same vowel sound, as do the two different versions of the word *vain* – V-E-I-N and V-A-I-N. So based on modern pronunciations, and based on the fact that poets like Chaucer routinely rhymed those types of words in the late 1300s, it appears that the sounds represented by those spellings merged together at some point in the 1300s. But what sound did they use? Was it /ay/ or /ai/?

Well, we might assume that the sounds merged into /ay/ because that's the way we pronounce those words today – *vein*, *vain*, *way*, *day* – they all have the /ay/ sound today. And some scholars think that's what happened. But we have to keep in mind that this was before the Great Vowel Shift, when most of the long vowel sounds shifted around, and in most cases, they were raised higher in the mouth. So the other possibility is that they merged into /ai/ which is pronounced lower and in the back of the mouth, and then they were raised to /ay/ during the Great Vowel Shift. In that case, all of these words would have been pronounced by Chaucer with an /ai/ sound – /vine/, /why/ and /die/ – instead of /vain/, /way/ and /day/. And there are other scholars who think that is what happened.

But there is also a third view which I find even more compelling, and that's that the sounds merged somewhere in the middle – something like /æ-ee/ which is located in between /ai/ and /ay/. So in the mouth, you would go from /ai/ to /æi/ to /ay/. So if this is what happened, words like *vain*, *way* and *day* would have been pronounced /væin/, /wæi/ and /dæi/. And then when the Great Vowel Shift occurred, that in-between vowel was raised up slightly up to /ay/, thereby giving us modern *vain*, *way* and *day*. This is the view advocated by Chaucerian scholars like Helge Kokeritz in his book called "A Guide to Chaucer's Pronunciation," and Peter Beidler in his book called "A Student Guide to Chaucer's Middle English."

So the bottom line is that when we encounter spellings with EI, or EY, or AI or AY in Chaucer's works, the spellings apparently represented the same sound because Chaucer rhymed those words. And the sound represented a range somewhere between /ai/, /æi/ and /ay/. And I mention that because I got some feedback about my pronunciation of the name *Criseyde* in the last episode when I talked about Chaucer's poem Troilus and Criseyde. Several of you contacted me to suggest that the pronunciation should have been /cri-sayd/. And that is a very common modern pronunciation using the modern /ay/ pronunciation. But again, the nature of that sound in Chaucer's time was somewhere between /ai/ and /ay/ – probably more like /cris-æid/. So that's part of the reason why I pronounced with it with the lower vowel sound. Also, there's a great audiobook of the poem read by the British narrator Charlton Griffin, and he also pronounced the name as Criseyde. So that was a factor as well. But ultimately, I don't think you can go wrong with any of those pronunciations. And there was probably variation even during the time of Chaucer, just as there is variation in the pronunciation of vowel sounds today.

So we've only looked at the first four lines of the Canterbury Tales, but we've already uncovered a lot of linguistic nuggets. Now let's look at the next few lines – first in a literal Modern English translation:

When Zephyrus also with his sweet breath
Has inspired in every holt and heath
the tender crops, and the young sun
hath in the Ram his half course run.

The original passage reads:

Whan Zephyrus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halfe cours yronne

So this passage mentions Zephyrus who was the Roman god who brought the winds and breezes associated with springtime. And 'holt and heath' meant the woods and wilderness and uncultivated land. So Zephyrus brings springtime breezes that inspires life in the tender crops in the woods and wilderness. And the young Sun has traveled half its course through the ram – the ram being the zodiac sign of Aires running from March 21 to April 20. So halfway through the course of the Ram means that the events of the poem take place in the middle of that period – sometime in early April.

It should go without saying at this point that it was standard in Middle English poetry to begin the poem in springtime. We've seen that approach used again and again. And obviously, Chaucer has done the same thing here.

Now here are the next couple of lines in a literal Modern English translation:

And small fowls make melody
That sleep all the night with open eye

And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye

So small birds make melodies – or sing songs – and sleep at night with open eyes. The passage I just read actually says that fowls 'maken' melody instead of 'make' melody, and 'slepen' with open eyes instead of 'sleep' with open eyes. That '-en' verb ending was a feature of the Midlands dialects, and it was used when the subject was a plural noun. So since Chaucer was writing about 'fowls' – plural – then they 'maken' and 'slepen' with the '-en' suffix. So this was another Midlands feature in his dialect.

Then we have the next two lines – first in Modern English:

So pricketh them nature in their courages
Then long folk to go on pilgrimages

Now in the original Middle English:

So PRIKeth HEM naTURE in HIR coRAGES;
Thanne LONGen FOLK to GOON on PILgriMAGES

OK. So let's unpack that. The first thing to mention is that the first line uses the pronoun *hem* instead of *them*, and *hir* instead of *their*. Those are the older 'h' forms that were still being used in southern England. As we know, the 'th' forms – *them* and *their* – are the Norse versions, and they were used in the north of England where the Viking influence was much greater. They gradually spread southward, but Chaucer didn't use them in the late 1300s, so they weren't common in London yet. What's interesting though is that he did use the subject form *they*. The pronoun *they* is used throughout the poem. And that is consistent with other observations about the spread of the northern 'th' forms. As they spread southward, the subject form *they* was usually accepted first. Then at a later date, the object and possessive forms – *them* and *their* – were accepted. And the Canterbury Tales was composed right in the middle of that process in southern England. *They* was used, but *them* and *their* weren't.

The next thing to note is that the first line reads 'So priketh hem Nature in hir courages' – 'So pricketh them nature in their courages.' What does that mean? What does it mean for nature to prick them in their courages? Well, the key is that word *courages*. It didn't mean courage in the modern sense. It actually meant their hearts because it was thought that the heart was the center of feeling and emotion. So when nature pricks them in their courages – or hearts – it meant that the springtime touched their hearts and put them in a special state of mind. And then the next line says that – 'the folk or people then long to go on pilgrimages.' So when springtime arrives, it touches people's hearts in a way that it 'encourages' them to go on pilgrimages.

And the verb '*to encourage*' is just a variation of the word *courage*. It meant to inspire or incite. Of course, over time, the meaning of the word *courage* was extended from this original sense of the feeling or emotion stemming from the heart to a more specific sense of confidence or boldness or bravery.

Again all of this stems from the original link between the word *courage* and the heart. And that link is even more apparent when you consider that the word *courage* is actually related to the French word for heart which is *coeur*. And both words are derived from the Latin word for heart which was *cor*. And that Latin word *cor* is actually cognate with the English word *heart*. *Cor* and *heart* both come from the same Indo-European root word. Grimm's Law tells us that the Indo-European 'k' sound became an 'h' sound in the Germanic languages. And in an earlier episode, we saw that *heart* is also cognate with *cardio* and *cardiology* from Greek. So we have *heart* from Old English, *cardio* and *cardiology* from Greek, and *courage* and *encourage* from Latin. All of those words are cognate and all ultimately relate to the heart. And when Chaucer referred to nature pricking folk in the '*courages*' – that's what he meant.

I should also make note of the stress pattern again. The line was:

So PRIK-eth HEM naTURE in HIR corAGES.

So the stress pattern tells us the French loanword *nature* was actually pronounced /na-TURE/ in the French manner with the stress on the second syllable. And the same with *courages*. Here it was actually pronounced /cor-AGES/, again in the French manner. Of course, in both of those words, the stress has shifted forward over time. Like so many French loanwords from this period, both of those words have been Anglicized over the centuries.

By the way, this is a process that still occurs today. Think about the different pronunciations of *homage* (/oh-MADG/) and *homage* (/HA-mij/). And *garage* (/ga-RADG/) which is common in the US versus *garridge* (/GAR-ij/) which is more common in Britain. Those are examples of French loanwords where both pronunciations are used in Modern English – one closer to the original French pronunciation and one that’s been Anglicized over the years. And for words like *nature* and *courage*, they also underwent those same changes, but they apparently did so after the time of the Canterbury Tales.

By the way, during this period, the T in *nature* was actually pronounced as a T – /na-TURE/. The modern pronunciation /NAY-chure/ with a ‘ch’ sound came later.

Now moving on, the next couple of lines of the passage are:

And palmers for to seek strange strands
To far hallows, known in sundry lands

And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;

In that passage, we have the word *palmer* for pilgrim that I discussed earlier in the episode. And again, it mainly survives today as a surname. The word *strand* was the Old English word for shore. In some places, the shoreline is still often referred to as the strand. And the passage also used the word *halwes* – or *hallows* – for shrines. If we think of something as ‘hallowed,’ it usually means that it’s sacred. So *hallows* was just another word for shrines. By the way, *hallow* is related to the word *holy*, and it’s also the root of *Halloween* which is derived from All Hallow’s Eve, the day before a specific religious holiday that normally took place on November 1.

So the palmers – or pilgrims – seek far-away hallows – or shrines – on strange and unfamiliar shores.

Then we have the last few lines of this opening passage. First in a literal Modern English translation:

And especially from every shire's end
of England, to Canterbury they wend
The holy blissful martyr for to seek
That them had helped, when that they were sick

And specially from every shires ende
Of Engelond, to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke
That hem hath holpen, whan that they were seeke.

So from the end – or far-corner – of every shire in England, the pilgrims make their way to Canterbury. They go to seek the blissful martyr which is the shrine of Thomas Becket. And the passage says that he was the one who helped them when they were sick. In other words, people prayed to Thomas Becket – or Saint Thomas – when they were ill.

So those are the first few lines of the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales. As I noted earlier, it is arguably the most well-known and most referenced passage in all of Middle English literature. And it may be the most well-known passage in English prior to the time of Shakespeare. As you can tell, there is a lot of information in that passage about the overall state of the language at that time in the late 1300s.

Now having introduced the poem and told us that the springtime was the time for pilgrimages, Chaucer then sets the scene at the Tabard Inn in Southwark. Southwark was an area on the south side of the Thames across the river from the main part of London. Chaucer tells us that a group of pilgrims had gathered there ready to make their way to Canterbury. He then provides a brief description of the various pilgrims in attendance. They include a knight, a squire, a yeoman, a prioress, a monk, a miller, a reeve, a merchant, a cook, a plowman, and many others. These people represent a cross-section of English society.

And as Chaucer presents these characters, and as these characters present their tales, Chaucer often shifts his language to reflect each character's social status or place of origin. Obviously, this is a period long before audio tape, so we don't have recordings to illustrate how people of different classes and different regions actually spoke. But we do have the Canterbury Tales, and this type of work is about as close as we can get to that type of recording. Chaucer gives us regional accents and class distinctions. So next time, we'll explore the characters presented by Chaucer, and we'll see how their linguistic differences are reflected in the poem.

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