THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 134: A LANCASTRIAN STANDARD

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 134: A Lancastrian Standard. In this episode, we're going to take the story of English out of the 1300s into the 1400s. This new century was marked by two very important developments in the English language. The spoken language became more unstable as the Great Vowel Shift got underway, and those shifting vowels combined with the various regional dialects to create a great deal of uncertainty in English pronunciation. But while the spoken language was very fluid, the written language was actually becoming more standardized. That process coincided with the arrival of a new ruling family in England – the House of Lancaster. And it appears that the Lancastrian kings of the early 1400s actually contributed to the standardization of English. They promoted English as the language of the government and the bureaucracy, and their scribes adopted a writing standard for all correspondence which became known as the Chancery Standard. That was the first step in a long process that produced the written language we have today. So this time, we'll look at the rise of the House of Lancaster and the beginnings of standard written English.

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Now this time, we're going to transition from the 1300s to the 1400s. Politically, this was a period of turmoil as the main line of Plantagenet kings gave way to a new branch known as the House of Lancaster. This new family dynasty was descended from John of Gaunt – a member of the royal family who we've encountered several times in prior episodes. The Lancastrians had a dubious claim to the throne, and their ascent created a split in the royal family that ultimately led to the Wars of the Roses later in the century.

This period of political turmoil was matched by a period of linguistic turmoil – at least in the way words were pronounced. During the 1400s, the long vowel sounds in English became increasingly unstable. People starting pronouncing those vowel sounds in new ways. And that was the beginning of what became known as the Great Vowel Shift. And it was a process that continued for at least a couple of centuries.

Of course, English also a lot of distinct regional dialects, so the Great Vowel Shift combined with those regional dialects to create a great deal of variation in the way people spoke. But while the spoken language was fluid and variable, the written language was actually moving in the opposite direction. Written English was starting to become standardized for the first time since the Norman Conquest. Government scribes and bureaucrats were starting to weed through all of the various spellings and grammatical features found in English writing, and they were starting select the versions that they wanted to use in government documents. Those decisions narrowed the range of possibilities, and in many cases, the process enshrined one particular version of a word as the standard version going forward.

This new writing standard became known as the Chancery Standard, and many of its features were later adopted by printers when the printing press was introduced. So these early standards influenced the development of Modern English, and we still use some of those Chancery features to this day.

As we move forward with the story of English, I think it's very important to keep these countervailing trends in the back of your mind. The spoken language was headed in one direction, while the written language was headed in the other. The written language was starting to become more standardized and fixed, while the spoken language was still evolving. As a result, the written language became increasingly disconnected from the spoken language. Previously, people wrote the language phonetically based on the way they spoke, and their documents reflected their dialect. Now, they increasingly wrote with a more neutral generic form of English that was uniform throughout the country. So it no longer matched their particular dialect or manner of speech. That meant they had to learn arbitrary rules of spelling and grammar. And that disconnect between spoken English and written English would only increase with time. But it really began here in the early 1400s, and that development can be traced back to certain key decisions and policies promoted by the new ruling family of England – the House of Lancaster.

As I noted, the Lancastrian claim to the throne was somewhat dubious, but the Lancastrians were strong advocates of the English language, and their embrace of English created an environment where the English language could flourish, even to the point of replacing Latin and French as the language of day-to-day government business.

And let me begin this story with a person who took full advantage of that standard form of English as it evolved over the next couple of centuries. Maybe you've heard of him. His name is William Shakespeare. Here's a short clip from one of his history plays called Richard II. This monologue is one of his great patriotic passages. It's a description of England delivered by the character of John of Gaunt – portrayed here by Sir Patrick Stewart:

[CLIP – 'This Sceptered Isle' speech from Richard II]

That's the 'standard English' of William Shakespeare. As I noted, that excerpt is part of a larger monologue which is considered to be one of the great patriotic speeches in the history of England. It features Shakespeare's well-known reference to Britain as 'this sceptered isle.' And it appears in the play Richard II, which is the first of a series of history plays composed by Shakespeare which cover the line of kings from Richard II at the very end of the 1300s to Richard III in the late 1400s. Those plays include a wide range of events, but they are essentially the story of the Rise and Fall of the House of Lancaster.

That monologue is delivered by the character of John of Gaunt. And as I noted earlier, the story really begins with Gaunt because he was the Lancaster for whom the family dynasty was named. He was the Duke of Lancaster, and his descendants were therefore known as the Lancastrians.

We've encountered Gaunt quite a few times over the prior episodes. He was always lurking in the background, but he was never the king. Nor was he in line to be the king. And that's really one of the most important parts of this story. His descendants were not the natural heirs to the throne, but they established a family dynasty that ruled England for the first half of the 1400s. So let's backtrack for a minute, and let's understand how this family dynasty came about.

John of Gaunt was a son of Edward III. Edward III was the great warrior king who launched the Hundred Years War with France, and who won the Battle of Crecy. He had five sons who lived to adulthood, and John of Gaunt was the middle son. So Gaunt had two older brothers and two younger brothers.

The eldest brother was Edward – known as the Black Prince. He was a great hero of the Hundred Years' War, and he was also the heir to the throne. But he acquired a terminal illness in the prime of life, and he died shortly before his father, so he never became king. Instead, the throne passed to his young son Richard who became Richard II. He was the king throughout so many of the events we've covered over the past few episodes from the Peasants' Revolt, to Piers Plowman, to John Wycliffe and the Wycliffe Bible, to the important poetry of Geoffrey Chaucer. So his reign coincided with that great flourishing of English literature in the late 1300s, and he was still the king at the current point in our overall story in the 1390s.

But the important thing to remember about Richard is that he didn't have any children. So without an heir, the line of the eldest son the Black Prince was about to come an end. That meant that the next king would have to come from one of the other sons of Edward III. And the next oldest son after the Black Prince was named Lionel. I actually mentioned Lionel in an earlier episode. When we first encountered Geoffrey Chaucer, he was a young man serving as a page in Lionel's household.

As the second oldest son, Lionel would have inherited the throne after King Richard, but Lionel had also died as a young man in his 20s. Before he died, he had a daughter, and she went on to have children and grandchildren of her own. So Lionel had descendants who were living at the time. Now under French law, the throne couldn't pass through a female line, so Lionel's descendants would have been disqualified under French law since they were all descended from his daughter. But this was England, not France. And even though England didn't have a specific law to deal with the issue, English tradition held that the throne could indeed pass through a female descendant. But it wasn't that simple. Lionel's daughter was also deceased. And she had a son, but he also died in the late 1300s. That son was survived by a young boy and girl, but they were both small children. The young boy's name was Edmund. He was Lionel's great-grandson, and he was technically next in line to the throne.

So the line of the eldest son, the Black Prince, was about to come to an end. And the line of the second oldest son, Lionel, was preserved by a small child. The next oldest son was John of Gaunt, and at this point, there was no expectation that he or his descendants would ever ascend to the throne. They were too far down the line and too far removed from main line of descent from Edward III. John of Gaunt also had two younger brothers who even further removed from the main line.

So at the current point in our story, John of Gaunt was content with being the elder uncle of the king, and he was happy to dispense his counsel and advice whenever he was called upon.

As I noted, we've encountered John of Gaunt quite a few times in the earlier episodes of the podcast, so let me recap a few of those key moments for you. Like most nobles of this period, he was apparently fluent in both English and French, and he also had formal training in Latin. [*SOURCE: 'The Last Knight,' Norman F. Cantor, p. 87.*] Despite being trilingual, it appears that he had a special affection for English. He was an early patron of Geoffrey Chaucer, and he apparently encouraged Chaucer's decision to compose poetry for the royal court in English. In fact, Chaucer's first major literary work was a poem to commemorate the death of Gaunt's first wife named Blanche.

The next time we encountered Gaunt was in the episode about John Wycliffe and the first English Bible. You might remember that Gaunt was a staunch defender of Wycliffe, and when Wycliffe came under attack by Church authorities, Gaunt stood up at the hearing and threatened to drag the bishop out by his hair. Reportedly, Gaunt later said that if France and other nations had a translation of the Bible in their languages, then England should have a copy in English as well. So again, we see Gaunt acting as a promoter and defender of English.

Now after his first wife Blanche died, Gaunt remarried. His second wife was a Castilian heiress named Constance. She was the daughter of the former king of Castile in northern Spain. Her father had been deposed by a rival claimant to the throne, but Gaunt contended that his new wife was still the proper heiress, and that as her husband he was entitled to defend her claims. So he soon led a military campaign to northern Spain to overthrow the rival claimant to the throne. The plan was that he and Constance would rule Castile together as the king and queen. And this Spanish campaign had some interesting consequences.

First of all, Gaunt felt that he needed the support of Portugal, so he made an alliance with the Portuguese king. The alliance was sealed with a marriage between the Portuguese king and Gaunt's daughter Philippa. So Gaunt's daughter became the Queen of Portugal, and all subsequent Portuguese monarchs were descended from that marriage until the Portuguese monarchy finally came to an end in the early 1900s. So the Portuguese monarchs from the 1400s to the 1900s were all descended from John of Gaunt.

His daughter Philippa not only gave birth to a son who became the king of Portugal, she also gave birth to another son named Henry – or Henrique – who became a famous explorer. He became known as Henry the Navigator, and many scholars credit him with launching the Age of Discovery or the Age of Exploration in Western Europe.

Now this is a bit of a digression, but it is both fascinating and ultimately relevant to our overall story of English. Up until this point in history, European sailors traveled the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Coast of Europe, but they didn't travel very far southward along the western coast of Africa. In fact, they would only travel a few miles down the northwestern coast to a place called Cape Bojador in modern-day Morocco.

The reason why they would stop there is because that's where the westward-flowing trade winds would come off of northern Africa and blow out to sea. Westerly sea currents also took ships out to sea at that point. Now that was a problem because navigators tried to hug the coast in those days. But the westward-flowing trade winds and sea currents near Cape Bojador prevented ships from doing that. A ship might be able to travel beyond the cape, but it couldn't get back home. As soon as the ship made it back to the cape, it would just get blown out to sea. So for all practical purposes, European navigators considered Cape Bojador to be the end of the world. It was thought that no ship could pass beyond the cape and return. And that led to many common superstitions. It was said that sea monsters and whirlpools were found beyond the cape, and they would swallow up any boat that ventured beyond that point. Even if you avoided the sea monsters and whirlpools, it was widely thought that the edge of the world lay beyond the cape. So any ship that ventured beyond the cape would be lost forever.

Well, Henry the Navigator – John of Gaunt's Portuguese grandson – sponsored several expeditions that were designed to test those old superstitions to see if Portuguese ships could make it beyond the cape and return. And those expeditions were successful. Here's how they figured out how to do it. Rather than hugging the coastline, which was nearly impossible along that part of the African coast, they simply let the westward-flowing trade winds take them out to sea. Then they tacked north in the middle of the Atlantic and caught the eastward-flowing trade winds which move in the opposite direction, and those winds took them back home to Europe. By using this roundabout course, and combining the westerly and easterly trade winds, Portuguese ships could maneuver around the northern part of Africa and make it back home. It was counter-intuitive. I mean, they had to sail out to sea away from the coastline in order to make it back home, but it worked. And that opened up western Africa for Portuguese trade and exploration.

A few years later, another Portuguese sailor named Bartolomeu Dias sailed all the way down the western coast of Africa to the Cape of Good Hope, and he then sailed around the cape and reached the Indian Ocean on the other side of Africa. That expedition showed that Europeans could make it to the Indian Ocean without having to go through the Mediterranean. And shortly after that, another Portuguese sailor named Vasco de Gama made the same trek around the southern tip of Africa, but he didn't stop when he got to the Indian Ocean. He kept sailing and made it all the way to India. And that proved that Europeans could reach India by sea without having to follow the traditional trade routes through the Near East. And from there, Portugal and then Spain were off to the races – launching the age of European discovery and exploration. Of course, that also led to colonization, which took Europeans and their languages around the world. And all of that really began with John of Gaunt's Portuguese grandson Henry the Navigator.

So let's return to Gaunt's attempted conquest of Castile. He had his alliance with Portugal, so he proceeded to Castile, and he laid siege to the region, but he was never able to secure a decisive victory. The campaign lingered on, and after several years, he finally gave up and decided to return to England.

As part the truce which ended the war in Castile, Gaunt agreed to another arranged marriage. The Castilian king's son was the heir to the throne, so it was agreed that the son would marry Gaunt's young daughter Catherine. That was Gaunt's daughter with his second wife Constance. Through that marriage, young Catherine eventually became Queen Catherine of Castile. And all of the subsequent Castilian and Spanish monarchs were descended from that marriage. So that means that both the Portuguese and Spanish monarchs were descended from John of Gaunt thanks to those two arranged marriages.

And here's another interesting fact. Those Castilian monarchs included his great-granddaughter Isabella who married Ferdinand of Aragon, and that effectively unified those two kingdoms bringing about modern Spain. Well, if you know a little bit about this period of history, you've probably heard of Ferdinand and Isabella before because they famously sponsored Christopher Columbus's voyages to the New World in the late 1400s.

Remember how the Portuguese had figured out how to take the westward-flowing trade winds out to sea in the Atlantic and then tack north and catch the eastward-flowing trade winds back home? Well, Columbus had the bright idea to take those same westward-flowing winds all the way across the Atlantic to the Indies. He could then catch the eastward-flowing winds back home. If it worked, it would be a direct route across the ocean to the Indies – much closer than going all the way around Africa. The only problem is that Columbus, and Isabella and Ferdinand, didn't know about North and South America. So Columbus actually landed in the Caribbean and Central America, not the Indies. But the main point here is that Portugal and Spain dominated the early period of exploration, and they did so in part due to the key contributions made by John of Gaunt's grandson Henry the Navigator and his great-granddaughter Isabella of Castile. And that's why today, most of Central and South America speaks either Spanish or Portuguese. All of that stemmed from Gaunt's expeditions in Spain in the late 1300s.

Now when John of Gaunt returned to England, he found that the political situation there had deteriorated in his absence. Of course, his nephew Richard was the king, but while Gaunt was away, Richard had come under attack by a group of nobles who were known as the Lords Appellant. I touched on this development in the prior episodes. That was the period of the so-called Merciless Parliament when several of Richard's close advisors were accused of treason and executed. The Lords Appellant who led the opposition consisted of five prominent nobles, including John of Gaunt's eldest son Henry Bolingbroke, but Henry didn't play a major role.

When Gaunt returned to England, the Lords Appellant backed off. And that allowed Richard to declare himself to be of age and old enough to rule in own right without supervision. After that, things settled down and the political situation stabilized for a while. But Richard seethed with anger at the nobles who had opposed him and killed his advisors. And he waited for the right time to get his revenge.

A few years later, John of Gaunt's second wife Constance died. That marriage had always been a political marriage, and it doesn't appear the two had much personal affection for each other. Throughout that marriage, Gaunt had been carrying on an open affair with one of the ladies of his household named Katherine Swynford. In fact, they had several children together. And when Constance died, Gaunt decided to marry Katherine in part to legitimize the children that they had together.

Now Katherine's name might ring a bell for you because she was the sister of Philippa Chaucer – Geoffrey's Chaucer's wife. And so, by virtue of Gaunt's third marriage, he and Geoffrey Chaucer actually became brothers-in-law.

Now Gaunt's third marriage to Katherine was another important development in our overall story because it legitimized the children which they had together. One of their sons was named John, and he later had a son of his own named John, who had a daughter named Margaret. And Margaret married a noble from a prominent Welsh family named Edmund Tudor. And their son Henry Tudor eventually became Henry VII – the first of the Tudor monarchs. So all of the very well-known Tudor monarchs like Henry VIII and Elizabeth I were descended from John of Gaunt, and we're also descended from Katherine Swynford who was Geoffrey Chaucer's sister-in-law.

I mention that connection because we can now see that John of Gaunt's descendants included the kings and queens Portugal, Spain, Lancastrian England, and Tudor England. They were all descended from Gaunt and one of his three wives. And of course, that included Queen Elizabeth I of England who was Gaunt's great, great, great, great grand-daughter. And she was the queen who authorized the establishment of the first English colony in North America. So we saw earlier that Gaunt's descendants played a key role in the settlement of the New World by the Portuguese and the Spanish. And now we can see that another one of his descendants, Elizabeth I, played a key role in the settlement of the New World by the English. So the people responsible for exporting Spanish, Portuguese and English to the New World all have a common connection in John of Gaunt.

Now shortly after marrying Katherine Swynford, England entered another period of turmoil. And that turmoil stemmed from King Richard's desire to take revenge on his old enemies. There are suggestions that Richard might have been having a mental breakdown with the death of his wife around the same time, but whatever the cause, he began exacting his revenge. He detained the three main nobles who led the opposition against him a few years earlier. One of them was tried and executed, another was banished from the kingdom, and the third was murdered before he could be brought to trial.

So Richard's three leading critics were now out of the way. And Richard seized their respective lands and distributed much of those lands to his own supporters. [*SOURCE: 'Making of England to 1399,' Hollister, p. 356.*] That raised the ire of many of the other nobles who didn't like the idea that the king could get rid of his critics so easily and seize their lands.

Then in the following year, a dispute broke out between the two remaining men who had been involved in the opposition to the king's rule. Those two men were a noble named Thomas Mowbray and John of Gaunt's son, Henry Bolingbrook. Each of them accused the other of treason, and this is where Shakespeare's cycle of history plays covering this period begins. It begins with the play Richard II, and in Shakespeare's version of the story, Thomas Mowbray takes offense at the accusations made against him. He addresses the king and says "My dear lord, The purest treasure mortal times afford is spotless reputation . . ." [*Richard II, Act, Scene 1, 176–181*]. And even though that passage was written by Shakespeare two centuries later, it contains the first recorded use of the term 'spotless reputation.' So that was one of many terms coined by Shakespeare, and it was first used in that context.

Now in real life, King Richard wasn't able to decide who was telling the truth, so he banished both of the men from the kingdom. Mowbray was banished for life, and once again, his lands were confiscated and redistributed. John of Gaunt's son Henry was also banished, but his exile was limited to a period of ten years.

A short time later, John of Gaunt finally died. Some historians suggest that he died of a broken heart because his son had been exiled from the kingdom, but by this point, Gaunt was nearly 60 years old which was quite old for the late Middle Ages. And this is where the king, Richard II, made a fatal mistake. Immediately after Gaunt's death, the exile of Gaunt's son Henry was made permanent. That meant that Henry couldn't return to England. And Richard compounded that decision by declaring that Henry was no longer entitled to inherit his father's lands. Instead, Richard seized all of Gaunt's lands. So instead of the massive Lancastrian estate passing to Gaunt's son Henry, it was seized by Richard. And that freaked out most of the other nobles in England. John of Gaunt had been one of the biggest landholders in England with holdings that rivaled those of the king. If Richard could casually seize those lands, then he could seize anybody's lands.

Richard compounded that lack of judgment with another major mistake. The English foothold in Ireland was coming under attack by Irish rebels there, so Richard headed to Ireland to put down the uprisings. So at the very moment when he seized Henry's inheritance and freaked out many of the nobles, he decided to leave the country and head to Ireland. That left England wide open for Henry to return and take his lands back by force. And that's exactly what he did.

Henry sailed back across the Channel from France and landed in York in June of 1399. He quickly gained the support of the northern nobles who agreed to help him reclaim his lands. It seems that Henry's supporters were initially moved to help him take back his rightful inheritance, but it soon turned into something bigger. Many of the nobles wanted Henry to replace Richard altogether. [*SOURCE: 'Making of England to 1399,' Hollister, p. 356*] Within a few weeks, most of important nobles in northern and eastern England had allied themselves with Henry's cause. And by the time Richard got word of what was happening, it was too late. He headed back to England, but by the time he arrived, all of the major nobles had turned against him and sided with Henry. Richard was captured and taken into custody. Henry now had the support of the major power-brokers throughout the country. And all that was left was for a formal transfer of power to take place. But there were two major problems with that.

First, Richard had to agree to abdicate – to give up the throne. And second, even if he did that, Henry wasn't actually next in line to the throne. Remember that Henry was the son of John of Gaunt, but Gaunt had that older brother Lionel. And Lionel's heir was his great-grandson Edmund. I mentioned him earlier in the episode, and he was technically next in line to the throne.

Now Henry didn't really have a good argument to get around that claim. He tried to argue that under French law, the throne didn't pass through a female heir, so that excluded Lionel's descendants since they were all descended from Lionel's daughter. But French law didn't apply in England. Henry also tried to point to the fact that his mother Blanche had royal blood as well. She was a direct descendant of an earlier king – Henry III. So he tried to argue that he had a superior claim through his mother's line, but that didn't really work either because she was descended from a younger brother as well. So it didn't matter if he traced his line through his mother or his father. His cousin Edmund still had the better claim either way.

Henry ended up basing his claim to the throne on a vague notion of inherited right combined with the support of the nobles, but that argument was also tenuous because there was no guarantee that the nobles would continue their support. All of that uncertainty clouded Henry's reign, and it ultimately led to the Wars of the Roses later in the century because Lionel's descendants never gave up their claims to the throne. So the split in the Plantagenet family really began here with Henry's selection as the new king and the rise of the House of Lancaster.

But before he could become the new king, there was the matter of current king Richard who was still alive and still technically the king. Only a sitting king could call Parliament, so Henry's supporters forced Richard to call Parliament into session, and then they forced him to abdicate in favor of Henry. Richard was brought before the assembly where he read a statement of resignation. The written statement was composed in both Latin and English, but not French. Then a list of thirty-three articles of deposition were read out loud. These were a list of Richard's failings and wrongful acts. And again, the Parliamentary records indicate that the articles were read out loud in both Latin and English, not French. Richard didn't object to the articles, and it was formally declared that he was no longer the king. [*SOURCE: 'The Last Plantagenets,' Costain, p. 232-3.*]

Henry then stepped forward to claim the throne. And he addressed the assembly in English. The Rolls of Parliament include the statement that he delivered, and interestingly, the records specifically state he delivered the statement in English because that was his 'mother tongue.' [*Rolls of Parliament, III, p. 422*] That is a very interesting statement because it is the first time since the Norman Conquest where we have an official recognition that the English king actually spoke English as his native language.

Now it is often said that Henry only spoke English, and that he was the first king to speak English exclusively since the Norman Conquest. Well, that's probably an exaggeration. He had certainly been trained in Latin and French, and he probably used those languages when he needed to. But he definitely had a strong preference for English, and he used English when he addressed Parliament and when he was at court. [*SOURCE: 'The Wars of the Roses,' Alison Weir, p. 31.*]

And that isn't really surprising when we consider that Henry's father was John of Gaunt, and Gaunt had been an active promoter and defender of English. So when the Lancastrians claimed the throne, they did so in English, and English finally re-emerged as a formal language of the royal court.

By the way, here is the speech that Henry made to the assembly in which he claimed the throne – first in Modern English and then in the original Middle English:

> In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, I, Henry of Lancaster, claim this realm of England and the crown with all of its members, appurtenances and privileges, as I am descended by the right line of blood coming from the good lord King Henry the Third, and through that right which God's grace has granted me, with the help of both my kindred and my friends to recover it, because the said realm was at the point of being undone due to poor governance and the undoing of good laws.
>
> "In the name of Fadir, Son, and Holy Gost, I, Henry of Lancaster chalenge this rewme of Yngland and the corone with all the members and the appurtenances, als I that am disendit be right lyne of the blode comying fro the gude lorde Kyng Henry Therde, and thorghe that ryght that God of his grace hath sent me, with the helpe of my kyn and of my frendes, to recover it - the whiche rewme was in poynt to be undone for defaut of governance and undoing of the gode lawes."

A few days later, Henry – also known as Henry Bolingbroke or Henry of Lancaster – was officially crowned as the new King of England, and thereby became Henry IV.

I should note that the deposed king Richard was shuttled away to a castle in the north of England where he was held in captivity. He died a short time later, in the first few weeks of the year 1400. The official account was that he went on a hunger strike and died of starvation, but most historians think he was intentionally starved to death. At any rate, Richard was now out of the picture.

So we begin a brand new century with a new king, a new ruling family, and a more prominent role for English at the royal court.

Even though Henry spoke English as his native language, his official court documents continued to be written in French and Latin. So at this point, English was still not fully accepted as an official written language. You might remember that I talked about the Statute of Pleading a few episodes back. That was the law which authorized the use of English for oral arguments in Parliament and in court. That statute was a big deal in terms of the acceptance of English as an official language. But you might also remember that the statute made this odd distinction whereby it continued to require that written records be maintained in Latin. So English was accepted as an official spoken language, but it wasn't fully accepted as an official written language. And that distinction applied to the royal court as well. By all accounts, Henry IV spoke English at court, but most of his official documents continued to be written in French and Latin.

Now despite the dramatic circumstances that led to Henry's coronation, his actual reign wasn't all that memorable. Since his claim to the throne was dubious from the start, he spent the first few years trying to secure his position. He needed the support of the Church, so he agreed to go along with one of their controversial demands. The followers of John Wyclifffe were running around England spreading their message and making copies of their new English Bible. They were called the Lollards, and their views challenged a lot of the traditional teachings of the Church. So the Church wanted a law that could be used to crack down on the movement. And Henry agreed to enact that law. In Latin it was called De Haeretico Comburendo – literally 'On the Burning of Heretics.' It was the law that allowed heretics to be burned at the stake. And it was a law that would be used – and abused – for centuries to come. It was initially used against the Lollards, but over time, it was used against all kinds of people who were deemed to be enemies of the Church or the State.

Though Henry tried to shore up his support early on, he faced rebellions throughout the first few years of his reign. First, there was an uprising in Wales, and then several other prominent nobles joined in. Henry spent the first half of his reign trying to put down those challenges and rebellions. In Shakespeare's account of Henry's life, in the play Henry IV, he has Henry utter the famous line, "Uneasy lies the head that wears a Crown." [*Henry IV, Part 2, Act 3, Scene 1, 26-31*] That's where that quote originated, and it referred back to Henry's troubled reign in the early 1400s.

Shakespeare's story of Henry IV was actually composed in two parts. And much of the story centers around Henry's son the young prince. He was also named Henry, but Shakespeare refers to him as Prince Hal.

In Shakespeare's story, Prince Hal hangs out a bar called the Boar's Head Inn. One of his drinking buddies is the comic character Falstaff. He's an older overweight knight who loves to brag and boast, but he's actually a coward in battle. Shakespeare depicts a famous battle called the Battle of Shrewsbury where the young prince defeated a rebel army in the year 1403. In Shakespeare's version of the story, Falstaff fights alongside Prince Hal, but Falstaff lies on the ground and pretends to be dead in order to avoid getting hurt. When we later discover that Falstaff was faking his injuries, he utters the famous line, "The better part of valor is discretion, in the which better part I have sav'd my life." [*Henry IV, Part 1, Act 5, Scene 4, 120-121.*] And that's where we get the phrase "Discretion is the better part of valor." Falstaff later ends up back at the pub, eating and drinking, and not paying his tab. The frustrated hostess says of Falstaff, "He hath eaten me out of house and home, he hath put all my substance in that fat belly of his." [*Henry IV, Part 2, Act 2, Scene 1, 74-79*] And that's where we get the phrase "to eat someone out of house and home." Those phrases come from Shakespeare's account of this period in his history play Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2.

Now as Henry IV got older, he acquired a debilitating disease. Contemporary accounts described it as leprosy, but the physical descriptions suggest that it was something else. Whatever it was, it consumed Henry's life and reign from around the year 1406 onward.

And speaking of illness, there is an interesting little side note from this same time period regarding the treatment of sick people in London. There was a hospital in London called The Hospital of St. Mary of Bethelem, but it was often simply referred to as 'Bethelem Hospital.' It treated people who were physically sick, but in the early 1400s, it also started to treat people who were mentally ill. And it soon became an institution for the insane and the mentally ill. And the name Bethelem was later slurred and shortened to ***Bedlam***. And that's actually where we get the modern word ***bedlam*** meaning madness, or confusion or an uproar. It's really just a shortened form of ***Bethelem***. The term ***bedlam*** was originally associated with the hospital and the perception of the people who were treated there. And over time, the word became a general term within the language.

Now it appears that King Henry's problems were more physical in nature – not mental. And his condition worsened over time, probably due to one or more strokes. *[SOURCE: 'The Wars of the Roses,' Alison Weir, p. 52.*] He finally died in the year 1413 having ruled England for about 14 years. His Will was written in English, and it was the first time since the Norman Conquest that a king left a Will composed in English.

At his death, Henry was succeeded by his son, Prince Hal, who then became Henry V. The younger Henry continued the line of Lancastrian kings, and this particular Henry is regarded as one of the great kings of English history.

He is most famous for turning around England's fortunes in the Hundred Years' War with France. You'll notice that haven't mentioned that war very much over the past few episodes. And that's partly because there wasn't much to say about it. Technically, the war lingered on, but England had lost most of its captured territories in France about 40 or 50 years earlier. England really hadn't achieved a major victory in the war since then. But the English kings still claimed the French throne. And the new English king Henry V was determined to make good on those claims. And in a very short period of time, he almost conquered France. In fact, if had lived a few weeks longer than he did, he would have been crowned as the King of France under a peace treaty that he negotiated. But his life was cut short before that could happen.

So Henry V is mainly remembered as a warrior, but his military prowess has largely overshadowed another major contribution for which he should be better remembered, and that contribution was the adoption of English as an official written language for government purposes. And that decision had another impact on the history of English. It led to the first attempts to standardize English writing after the Norman Conquest. Unlike his father who continued to use French and Latin for written documents, Henry decided to make the shift to English. He was the first English king since the Conquest to use English for the day-to-day business of government. His letters and writs and other basic documents were mostly composed in English – not French or Latin. And the office of the Chancery that produced those documents adopted a standard version of the language which was later adopted by printers, and which had a significant impact on the development of modern standard English. Believe it or not, some of our modern spellings and grammatical features can be traced back to the standards adopted by Henry's scribes in the early 1400s. So let's take a closer look at the reign of Henry V.

Since the younger Henry is mostly remembered for pursuing the war against France, let's begin there. His effort in the war was aided by the fact that the French king was mentally ill. I mentioned a moment ago that a hospital for the mentally ill in London became known as ***Bedlam***. Well, when Charles VI of France became mentally ill, 'bedlam' is what happened in France as well. The king's illness had manifested itself about 20 years earlier, and it was a condition that came and went, but overall, it prevented him from being an effective king. He became known as Charles the Mad. Over time, political power in France shifted down to the great nobles, and France became divided into two factions – those loyal to the king's uncle, the Duke of Burgundy, and those loyal to the king's brother, the Duke of Orleans. Those two factions fought against each other, and that left France in a weakened state.

When Henry came to power in England, he demanded that France return all of the lands that had once been held by the English kings – basically the old Angevin Empire, so most of northern and western France. It was a ridiculous demand, especially considering the fact that the English hadn't posed a serious threat in France for decades. When the demand was rejected, Henry led an expedition across the English Channel to the town of Harfleur at the mouth of the River Seine. After a few weeks, Henry broke the French defenses, and captured the town. Rather than heading up river toward Paris, Henry decided to head to the port city of Calais which was one of the few cities that the English still held. Henry's troops moved northeast toward Calais traveling parallel to the coast.

But before Henry could reach Calais, he was cut off by French forces outside the town of Agincourt. Henry's forces were vastly outnumbered. Estimates vary, but Henry's forces were probably outnumbered about 3 to 1, or perhaps even 4 to 1. Even though he had a much smaller army, the vast majority of his men were archers skilled at the longbow. [*SOURCE: 'A History of England: Prehistory to 1714,' Roberts, p. 198*.]

So Henry faced a daunting prospect. He had to fight a much larger French army on French soil where the English had not won a significant victory within the lifetime of most of his men. Prior to the battle, Henry supposedly delivered a speech to his soldiers – to encourage them and give them the confidence to defy the odds. In Shakespeare's account of the story, he has Henry deliver a very patriotic and rousing speech to his men, and it is one of the most famous speeches composed by Shakespeare. It is often known as the St. Crispin's Day Speech because the battle was fought on a holiday known as St. Crispin's Day. The speech is famous for Henry's reference to his men as a 'band of brothers' – a term which is still used today for a group of soldiers. I would be remiss if I didn't play you a portion of that speech since it is considered to be one of the great patriotic speeches in English literature. Here is Laurence Olivier's version from the 1940s:

[CLIP - 'St. Crispin's Day speech]

So that's Shakespeare's version of the speech. We don't what Henry actually said that day before the Battle of Agincourt, but whatever it was, it worked.

Even though the French had a lot more soldiers, they made a strategic mistake. The battlefield was located in an open field with woods on each side. And as the French cavalry advanced on the English, the wooded area on each side acted as a funnel. It forced the cavalry together, creating a bottleneck and that slowed them down. There had also been very heavy rains the night before, so the mud was a further impediment. When the French advance stalled, the English archers fired away with one barrage of arrows after another decimating the French troops. According to some estimates, the French lost more than five thousand men, compared to only two or three hundred for the English. [*SOURCE: 'A History of England: Prehistory to 1714,' Roberts, p. 198.*] The English victory at Agincourt is still remembered as one of the greatest military victories in the history of England. It sparked a new sense of nationalism, and the whole of England enthusiastically renewed the war effort against France.

Though Henry won the Battle at Agincourt, it was still just one battle. It would take a concerted effort, and many more victories, to bring an end to the war. Two years after Agincourt, Henry returned to France to continue the war effort. And in fact, Henry spent much of his relatively short reign in France pursuing the war. That meant that he had to govern England from across the Channel, and that required him to dispatch letters back to England on a regular basis.

Beginning around this time, in the year 1417, we have a series of surviving letters issued by Henry and written down by his personal scribes who traveled with him. And what is so fascinating about these letters is that they're written in English, not the traditional French used by prior kings. Henry apparently directed his scribes to use English in his official correspondence, and that was the first sign that the day-to-day business of government was going to be conducted in English going forward. Here is an excerpt from one of those letters sent in September of 1417 – first in Modern English and then in the original Middle English:

> By the King: Worshipful father in God we ask that you do make writs of proclamation into all our ports of England . . . for all manner of men that will bring victuals (that's 'food and provisions') unto our town of Caen for the refreshing of us and of our host in our Duchy of Normandy and that they shall pay therefore no custom so that they might find sufficient certainty and reassurance; that they shall bring the said victuals into our said town of Caen for the refreshment . . . of our said host . . .
>
> "By the Kyng: Worshepful fader in god we wyl that ye doo make writtes of proclamacion in to alle oure portes of Englond . . . al maner men that wil bryng vitailles vn to oure tovn of Caen for the Refresshing of vs and of our hoost in our Duchie of Normandie that they schul paye therfor no custume / so that they fynde sufficeant seurte. that they shal brynge the sayd vitailles vn to our said tovn of Caen for the refress. . . of our seyd hoost . . ." [*1417C81/1364/37Signet of Henry V*]

Now these types of letters became somewhat standard during the years that followed. From this period in 1417 until Henry's death five years later, nearly all of Henry's letters to government officials, town councils, guilds and other institutions were composed in English. [*SOURCE: 'From Dialect to Standard,' Hans Frede Nielsen, 138.*]

The letters were written down by the scribes who followed the king. They were basically his personal secretaries, and they comprised what was known as the Office of the Signet. That was the office responsible for preparing the king's personal documents and maintaining his official royal seal. And the fact that those scribes adopted English during this period appears to represent an intentional decision by Henry to use English as his official language going forward. [*SOURCE: 'Henry V, the English Chancery, and Chancery English,' Malcolm Richardson, Speculum, 55,4 (1980), p. 727*]

And those letters were arguably the very beginning of a standard form of written English because the use of English soon spread beyond Henry's personal Signet Office to the main administrative office of the English government known as the Chancery, which was a shortened version of the word ***Chancellery***. That was the office that generated legal and government documents that were read and implemented throughout the country. And much of that Chancery standard was then adopted by printers when the printing press was introduced at the end of the century. So in that sense, we can trace the beginning of a standard form of written English to Henry's letters and other official correspondence in the early 1400s.

Prior to that point, English writers wrote like they spoke. In other words, they wrote phonetically in their own local dialect. Their spellings reflected the way they pronounced words, and their grammar and syntax reflected the way they put words together when they spoke. But now, an official form of English was emerging that people were adopting and using, even if it didn't necessarily reflect any particular dialect or manner of speech. So it was a somewhat neutral standard, no longer inherently personal to the writer.

In fact, Henry V may ultimately be responsible for the usual way that we form adverbs from adjectives in Modern English. We do that today with the common suffix '-ly' (L-Y). That's how we turn ***quick*** into ***quickly***, and ***quiet*** into ***quietly***, and ***secret*** into ***secretly***. Well, you might remember that the pronunciation of that particular ending varied in Middle English. The southern dialects pronounced it /-lich/, which was basically the Old English version of the suffix. But in the north and in parts of the East Midlands, the consonant at the end was dropped, and it was simply pronounced as '-ly' (/lee/). Well, during the 1300s, there was a significant migration of people from the East Midlands into London. This was partly due to the collapse of the feudal system after the Black Death. The East Midlands was the most populous part of the country, and as those people moved into London, the London dialect took on a lot of East Midland features like that 'L-Y' adverb ending. In the late 1300s and early 1400s, '-lich' and 'ly' were both used around London. But Henry's letters back to England almost always used the 'L-Y' form of the suffix. They included words like ***expressely***, ***redely***, ***yeerly***, ***gretly***, ***cleerly***, ***effectuelly*** and ***resonably***. And that may have been because that was the ending that Henry used when he spoke, and so that was the way he dictated his letters. All we can say for certain is that the 'L-Y' suffix was used in most of his letters, and it also became the standard form of the suffix used by the Chancery a short time later. And from there, it became the standard form of the suffix used by printers. And from there, it became the standard form of the suffix used in Modern English. So it is altogether possible that today we say ***quickly*** instead of ***quicklich*** and ***greatly*** instead of ***greatlich*** because that's the way Henry V spoke.

Now you might wonder how Henry's personal correspondence could have such widespread influence. Well, his letters were sent to a variety of institutions around England, and we have a clear indication that his choice of language and writing style had an immediate impact. Five years after Henry adopted English for his official documents, the Brewer's Guild of London decided to change the language it used for its official records. It had previously used Latin like the other guilds, but in 1422, it decided to switch to English. And in a statement explaining its decision, it specifically cited Henry's use of English in his official letters and documents. The memorandum was actually written in Latin, but here is an English translation of that part of the statement:

> ". . . our mother tongue, to wit, the English tongue, hath in modern days begun to be honorably enlarged and adorned; for that our most excellent lord king Henry the Fifth hath, in his letters missive, and divers affairs touching his own person, more willingly chosen to declare the secrets of his will [in it]; and for the better understanding of his people, hath, with a diligent mind, procured the common idiom (setting aside others) to be commended by the exercise of writing." [*Quoted in THE OXFORD HISTORY OF ENGLISH, Lynda Mugglestone, p. 141*]

So the Brewer's Guild followed Henry's lead. And other London guilds soon followed suit. (*SOURCE: 'From Dialect to Standard,' Hans Frede Nielsen, Note 10, 138-9*). And that trend continued when the Office of the Chancery also started to generate its documents in English.

As I noted earlier, the Chancery was the primary office for document-production in the English government. Almost all of the legal and government documents required to run the kingdom were generated by the Chancery Office. It produced legal writs, licenses, inheritance records, deeds for transferring property, business agreements and a variety of other official documents. The office was staffed with about 120 clerks in the early 1400s, so it was much larger than the king's personal Signet Office. [*SOURCE: 'The Stories of English,' David Crystal, p. 233.*] The Chancery documents were read and administered throughout the country, which meant that the language used in the documents established a written standard that was used everywhere, regardless of dialect. Traditionally, those documents had been written in either Latin or French, but the office gradually followed Henry's lead and began using English in the 1420s. By the 1430s, the Chancery was routinely using English in its documents, and it was using a form of English that had become somewhat standardized. [*SOURCE: 'Henry V, the English Chancery, and Chancery English,' Malcolm Richardson, Speculum, 55,4 (1980), p 726.*]

The dozen or so masters who oversaw the office apparently selected certain spellings and certain grammatical features to be used as a general practice. Now it's easy to exaggerate the degree of uniformity in those documents. The fact is that there was still quite a bit of variation in the language that was used. But there is no doubt that the Chancery adhered to certain general rules when it came to spellings and word choices.

As I noted, the Chancery tended to use the '-ly' adverb ending over the alternate '-lich' ending. And that adverb ending was later adopted by printers and became the standard adverb ending in Modern English.

Similarly, you might remember from the Chaucer episodes that our first person pronoun '***I***' was originally pronounced with a different vowel sound. It was pronounced as /ee/ in the north of England, but it was ***ich*** in the south with a 'C-H' ending. Again, just as the Chancery preferred '-ly' over '-lich,' it also preferred '***I***' (/ee/) over ***ich***. ***Ich*** gradually fell out of use, and that left us with the single letter pronoun pronounced /ee/ at the time, which became '***I***' during the Great Vowel Shift. [*SOURCE: 'The Story of English,' Joseph Piercy, p. 97*.]

Lots of basic words also got their modern spellings in the Chancery. Words like ***and***, ***any***, ***but*** and ***not*** had lots of different spellings in Middle English, but the Chancery adopted the spellings that we use today. The word ***if*** was often spelled with a Y in Middle English, as either Y-I-F or Y-E-F, but Chancery dropped the Y and adopted the modern spelling I-F.

The word ***which*** (W-H-I-C-H) was often spelled with just a W at the front in Middle English, but Chancery adopted the 'W-H' spelling that is still used today. Similarly, the word ***such*** was highly variable in Middle English. The vowel sound was represented with various letters – sometimes with an I, sometimes a Y, sometimes an E and sometimes a U. And a W was often inserted after the S, producing the word ***swiche,*** which was based on the Old English pronunciation of the word. Chancery dropped that W and adopted the letter U for the vowel, thereby giving use the modern spelling S-U-C-H, which probably helped to standardize the pronunciation of the word over time. The word ***much*** also acquired its modern spelling in the Chancery Office. A word like ***land*** was often spelled with an O in Middle English. That's the way Chaucer spelled it. But the Chancery tended to use an A, and that gave us the modern standard spelling L-A-N-D. *[SOURCE: 'The Story of English,' Joseph Piercy, p. 97*.]

Chancery also made a couple of other spelling decisions which had a major impact on the way we spell words today. The /sh/ sound at the beginning of words could be represented many different ways in Middle English. Old English had used 'S-C' for that sound. In the 1200s, scribes started to represent that sound with 'S-C-H.' Scribes in Canterbury often represented the sound with 'S-S.' Some northern scribes even used an 'X' for that sound. The modern letter combination 'S-H' first appeared in the Ormulum which I discussed in an earlier episode. In the 1300s, 'S-H' became common among London scribes, and that may have influenced how Chancery decided to represent that sound. The Chancery scribes mostly used 'S-H,' especially in words like ***shall*** and ***should***. And that decision played a key role in the modern use of 'S-H' to represent the /sh/ sound. [*SOURCE: 'A History of English Spelling,' D. G. Scragg, p. 46.*]

Chancery made another spelling decision which has lingered into Modern English, and which frustrates children learning to spell English to this day. As I've noted before, Old English and early Middle English had a /x/ sound which has largely disappeared from Modern English. It still lingers in some regional dialects, like those of Scotland and some in northern England. But that sound was very common at one time, and it was represented with a variety of letters and letter combinations over the centuries. Most Middle English scribes had settled on the letters 'G-H' to represent that sound. But in the early 1400s, that sound was disappearing from English, and we know that because it became common to spell words with no letter at all for that sound.

But Chancery made the very conservative decision to preserve the traditional 'G-H' spelling in words like ***right***, ***night***, ***high***, ***though***, and ***ought***. And that decision helped to preserve all of those GH's – which are usually silent in Modern English. [*SOURCE: 'Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century,' John H. Fisher, Speculum, 52 (1977), p. 881.*]

The Chancery Office also helped to shape the forms of grammar used in written English. As I've noted before, plural nouns were often indicated with an 'S' ending in the north of England, like in ***dogs***, and ***cats*** and ***trees***. But in the south of England, the plural form was often indicated with an 'E-N' ending, like in ***children*** and ***oxen*** and ***brethren***. Well, by the early 1400s, the 'S' ending had spread southward and was increasingly common around London. So Chancery adopted the 'S' ending as a general rule, and that probably contributed to the continued decline of the E-N ending with plural nouns. [*SOURCE: 'The Emergence of Standard English,' John H. Fisher, p. 14.*]

Chancery also preserved the Southern third person verb ending that was used in present tense. You might remember that southerners ended those verbs with a 'T-H' sound, as in ***hath***, and ***doth***, and ***seemeth***. Northerners actually used the modern 'S' ending, as in ***has***, and ***does*** and ***seems***. Chancery mainly used the Southern 'T-H' ending which lingered on well into the 1600s, and is still familiar to us today in the works of writers like Shakespeare. Of course, that was a case where the Chancery decision was eventually replaced with a competing option, which was of course the modern 'S' ending. [*SOURCE: 'The History of English: An Introduction,' Stephan Gramley, p.105.*]

Chancery also preserved the traditional singular pronouns ***thou***, ***thee*** and ***thy***, and those pronouns also lingered into the time of Shakespeare, but of course, they were eventually replaced with the pronoun ***you***, which thereby became the standard form used for both second person singular and plural. [*SOURCE: 'The Emergence of Standard English,' John H. Fisher, p. 14.*]

So some of Chancery's decisions were more enduring than others, and again, those decisions were not always universal. There was often some variation within the documents. But the important point is that the writing standard used at Chancery spread throughout the country. And again, much of it was later adopted by printers. By the end of the century, most of the documents written in English were based on a common writing standard, no matter where they were composed. By that point, it was no longer possible to identify where the document was composed based on the particular dialect of the writer. [*SOURCE: 'From Dialect to Standard,' Hans Frede Nielsen, 140.*] Almost all writers were using a more standard generic form of English in their documents, and that standard can be traced back to the documents produced by the English Chancery, which can be traced back even further to the documents produced by the personal secretaries of Henry V.

Henry V is most famous for his military victories, but those victories were fleeting. Most of his military gains were lost after he died. But his decision to use English instead of French left a much more enduring legacy. And that legacy has its roots in an attitude toward English that was shared by all of the early Lancastrians. That attitude was based on the notion that England

should be governed in its native language, not the language of its enemies across the Channel. And that attitude forged those first steps toward a standard form of written English in the early 1400s.

Those first baby steps soon turned into a marathon when the printing press was introduced a few decades later. And in fact, around the time that the Chancery Office started producing documents in English, the first printing press appeared in Germany. And that invention fundamentally changed the English language by standardizing the language in a way that the Chancery Office never could have done. So next time, we'll take a closer look at the invention of the printing press. And we'll see how the printing press changed both the written word and the world in which those words were used.

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