

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 147:
A RUDE AND RUSTY LANGUAGE**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 147: A Rude and Rusty Language. In this episode, we’re going to look at the state of English in the early 1500s as the Middle English period gradually gave way to early Modern English. It was a time of transition in England and throughout most of Europe. This was the period that modern historians call the Renaissance. It was a cultural movement that produced new approaches to art, architecture, philosophy, religion and education. It provided the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era, but it did so by looking backwards to the ancient Greeks and Romans. As English scholars embraced the old literature and applied it to the world in which they lived, they needed a language that could communicate all of those ideas and concepts. The problem is that many scholars in England didn’t think that English was up to the task. They thought that English was too rustic and too unsophisticated, with a vocabulary that was too limited. One prominent writer of the period referred to English as ‘rude’ and ‘rusty.’ So rather than use existing English words, those scholars chose instead to use the original terms of the Greeks and Romans. Thousands of those words started to pour into English, and in the process, the English language was transformed from a ‘rude and rusty’ language at the beginning of the century to the language of William Shakespeare at the end of the century. So this time, we’ll look at the Renaissance, and the transformation of English in the early 1500s.

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

Now this time, I want to move our story forward from the 1400s into 1500s. Over the past couple of episodes, we’ve seen that this was a period when the first Europeans voyages were being made across the Atlantic. Those expeditions introduced new cultures to Europe, and also introduced new words derived from the languages of those cultures across the ocean.

But the English language was about to be transformed by words from a much more familiar source – Latin and Greek. English had been borrowing words from those languages since the Anglo-Saxon period, but the total number of words borrowed directly from those sources was relatively small. Of course, English had borrowed a lot of French words, and most of those words had originated within Latin. And quite a few had even deeper roots within Greek. But what’s notable about the 1500s is that there was a major increase in the number of loanwords that came in directly from the original sources – not via French. Of course, French words continued to come in as well, and in many cases it isn’t clear whether the Modern English word came from French or Latin since the forms were often very similar. But in most cases, the Latin and Greek words were distinct, and they were a major factor in the transition from Middle English to Modern English.

Now I’ve touched on this before, but let me explain why this was such an important development in the history of English. As we’ve seen throughout the podcast series, Old English and Old Norse words tend to be very basic and simple words often pronounced with one or two syllables. Even though they represent a relatively small percentage of the overall vocabulary of Modern

English, they are some of the most common and most basic words in the language. They're the words that children tend to learn first like pronouns, body parts, close family relations, common animals, basic actions, numbers, and so on.

But after the Norman Conquest of England, a flood of French words poured into English. About 10,000 words were borrowed from French during the Middle English period. [SOURCE: *The History of English*, Stephan Gramley, p. 88.] Those words gave English many synonyms to accompany the Old English words. And in many cases, those French words are considered to be slightly more elevated or sophisticated. So we have Old English *eat* and French *dine*. Old English *lust* and French *desire*. Old English *hut* and French *cottage*. Old English *feed* and French *nourish*. By the late 1400s, about half of the words found in English were Germanic from Old English or Old Norse, and about half were non-Germanic mostly from French. [SOURCE: *David Crystal, Stories of English*, p. 154, 163.]

So at the end of the Middle English period, English had two registers. A speaker could communicate in a very simple straight-forward way with Old English words, and he or she could speak in a slightly more elevated way by incorporating those French synonyms – something that we still do today to a certain extent. But even so, many writers at the turn of the century still weren't very impressed with the overall state of English at the time, especially with the state of its vocabulary.

In the year 1504, which happened to be the same year that Christopher Columbus returned from his final voyage to the New World, an English poet named John Skelton composed a poem called 'Phyllyp Sparowe.' Skelton was England's poet laureate, and one might expect that he would praise his native language. But he didn't. That poem 'Phyllyp Sparowe' contains the following passage in reference to the English language:

Our naturall tong is rude
And hard to be enneude
With pullysshed tearmes lusty
Our Language is so rustye,
So cankered and so ful
Of frowardes [ugly things] and so dul
That if I wold apply
To write ornatly
I wot [know] not where to finde
Termes to serve my minde

In Modern English, the passage reads:

Our natural tongue is rude
And hard to be renewed
With polished terms pleasing and lusty
Our language is so rusty,

So corrupted and so full
Of ugliness and so dull
That if I would apply
To write ornately
I know not where to find
Termes to serve my mind.

Now this passage is well-known to scholars who study the history of English because it seems to capture the general attitude toward the language in the early 1500s. And I should probably qualify that statement to say that it captures the attitude among the educated classes who were familiar with French and Latin. When Skelton described English as ‘rude,’ he used the word in its original sense as ‘common or uneducated or unrefined.’ And when he described it as ‘rusty,’ he meant ‘rustic’ or ‘unsophisticated.’ So even with all of the French additions, and even with poetry of revered poets like Geoffrey Chaucer, the literate and educated classes of England still looked down on the language as a local vernacular, unable to compete with classical languages like Greek and Latin. As Skelton notes, even if he wanted to write ornately, there weren’t sufficient words in English express his thoughts.

Skelton’s opinion of the English language at the turn of the century mirrors the more general state of learning in England at the time. The educational curriculum taught in schools and universities was largely the same as it had been for centuries – the so-called trivium and quadrivium, the seven liberal arts that I’ve talked about in prior episodes. There was a sense that the traditional curriculum at most schools had become stagnant and stale. [*SOURCE: The Evolution of the English Language, George H. McKnight, p. 86.*]

But all of that was about to change as the new century got underway. And in fact, it had already started to change in parts of southern Europe. A cultural movement was sweeping across Europe that impacted the arts, architecture, science, religion, literature and the educational system itself. It was the movement that we know today as the Renaissance, or /re-NAY-sance/ if you prefer the British pronunciation.

Now the Renaissance is obviously a very broad topic – way beyond the limited scope of this podcast – but is important to our story, so there are few things you should know about it.

First of all, exactly what the Renaissance is and isn’t is a matter of some debate. In fact, the entire concept of the Renaissance was really formulated by historians in France in the 1800s who looked back to this earlier period and noticed some common developments and themes that ran through this period – specifically a renewed fascination with the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans. And that’s why the term *Renaissance* was coined in France.

It’s a French term that literally means ‘rebirth.’ It shares the same Latin root as words like *nascent, natal, native*, and *nativity*. And what was being ‘reborn’ was an interest in the teachings of the mathematicians, and astronomers and philosophers who lived in ancient Greece and Rome. That knowledge provided an inspiration and a practical wisdom for painters, sculptors, architects,

theologians, politicians, writers, and scholars. It injected a much-needed sense of excitement and energy, and it transformed medieval Europe into early modern Europe.

During the last decade of the 1400s and the first decade of the 1500s, Michelangelo was sculpting his Madonna and Child and painting the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican. And Leonardo da Vinci was painting the Mona Lisa and The Last Supper. And those are just a few of the major works of art that were created during this period.

One of the common characteristics of Renaissance painting and sculpture is its realism. For example, the paintings tend to have a depth and perspective that is generally lacking in medieval art. The earlier art often tends to appear flat, but renaissance painters studied the Greek writings on geometry, and they learned how to use a vanishing point and precise angles to create perspective which made the images jump off the canvas. And painters like da Vinci mastered some of the subtle techniques of shading to make the human face look incredibly realistic. These techniques are epitomized in a painting like the Mona Lisa, which must have looked like a modern photograph compared to many of the paintings that preceded it.

Of course, painting was merely a hobby for da Vinci. Da Vinci questioned everything and constantly thought about the practical applications of his acquired knowledge. He designed prototypes of submarines, helicopters, winged aircraft, and parachutes. He also proposed designs for truss bridges, swiveling cranes and horizontal water wheels. [*SOURCE: Cathedral, Forge and Waterwheel: Technology and Invention in the Middle Ages, Frances & Joseph Gies, p. 262.*]

Earlier in the 1400s, a Florentine architect named Filippo Brunelleschi designed and oversaw the construction of massive dome for the Florence Cathedral. A dome of that size was unknown in Western Europe in the Middle Ages, especially one built on an octagonal base like the cathedral had. But Brunelleschi studied the domes build by the ancient Greeks and Romans, and when the dome was completed in Florence in 1436, it was one of the largest domes ever built. [*SOURCE: The Day The Universe Changed, James Burke, p. 70.*] Domes, white columns and other similar features derived from the classical world became hallmarks of Renaissance architecture, and the new designs largely replaced the older Gothic-style cathedrals in many parts of Europe. This new style of architecture emphasized harmony, symmetry, proportion and balance – just like much of the artwork which was also being influenced by the ancient Greco-Roman civilization.

The fascination with the Greeks and Romans also contributed to a new type of learning. This new scholarship focused on the original Greek and Roman manuscripts – not just translations, but the actual original language of those manuscripts. Latin had always been a common language among European scholars, but now there was also an increased interest in Greek.

Those classical manuscripts were composed in an era before Christianity existed, so they reflected a world view that had been largely unknown in Western Europe for a thousand years. Instead of concentrating on eternal life and the nature of God, there was a new focus on the ‘here and now’ and the practical benefits of ancient knowledge for the betterment of human life on earth. Humans were no longer viewed as tiny cogs in a machine with a brief existence on earth filled with sacrifice and suffering. There was a sense that scholars who studied the ancient works

could improve the human condition both physically and spiritually. By studying the natural world and applying that knowledge to solve problems, they could better understand the nature of humanity. Due to this shift of emphasis, this new educational philosophy became known as humanism. It was the educational component of the Renaissance, and it soon challenged the overly technical theological debates that had been so characteristic of schools and universities in the Middle Ages.

That's actually how we got the word *dunce*. I mentioned this in an earlier episode, but a Scottish theologian named Duns Scotus lived a couple of centuries earlier in the 1200s, and his teachings epitomized that traditional approach to education in Britain before the Renaissance. Well, when the so-called 'New Learning' arrived, the people who continued to adhere to the teachings of Duns Scotus started to be called 'Duns Men.' The term was meant to be derogatory – and it was eventually shortened to just *dunce*.

Again, this overall cultural movement began in Italy, and more specifically, in Florence. One traditional view links this development to the economic prosperity in the region as Europe's population and economy slowly recovered from the Black Death about a century earlier. That economic prosperity created a new merchant class with a great deal of wealth. Prominent families like Medicis loaned money to kings and popes, and they also patronized many of the important artists of the period. [*SOURCE: Europe and England in the Sixteenth Century, T.A. Morris, p. 29.*]

Another contributing factor was the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Much of the scholarship of the ancient world had been lost to Western Europe when the Western Roman Empire fell. But much of that early Greek scholarship was retained in the east in what became known as the Byzantine Empire with its capital at Constantinople. So when the Ottomans captured Greece and then the Byzantine capital – many of those Greek scholars fled westward to Italy, and they took their Greek manuscripts with them. As a result, many of those Greek texts were reintroduced to Western Europe for the first time in a millennium.

Now modern scholars are quick to point out that some of that ancient learning had already been received in Western Europe before the fall of Constantinople. As I noted way back in Episode 95, some of those Greek manuscripts had found their way to Western Europe several centuries earlier and had contributed to an earlier period of scholarship and learning the 1100s. That period is sometimes called the 'Twelfth Century Renaissance' today. Again, I touched on that in earlier episodes, but just to remind you, some of these lost Greek writings had been discovered by Arab scholars in the eastern Mediterranean, and they were translated into Arabic. From there, they made their way across North Africa and the Mediterranean, and they eventually came to be read and used by Muslim scholars in Spain, which was still under Muslim control at the time.

From there, some of those works had been translated into Latin, and then they spread to scholars throughout Western Europe. As I noted in an earlier episode, those events contributed to the establishment of many of the early universities in Europe.

But even though some of these Greek works had reached Western Europe a couple of centuries earlier, there were a couple of problems with those earlier developments. First, those manuscripts had been translated from Greek, to Arabic, to Latin. And through that process, some of the original concepts and ideas had been lost in those various translations. It was common for translators to add new passages and to delete old passages. So those Latin translations weren't exactly word-for-word translations of the original Greek manuscripts. A second problem was the fact that access to those Latin translations was limited because the printing press had not been invented yet. So there were only a few handwritten copies of those translations circulating around Europe.

But when Constantinople fell, Greek scholars brought the original versions of those manuscripts to the West, along with lots of other manuscripts that were previously unknown. So now, those Western scholars could study those documents in the original Greek, and they could compare them to the versions they already had. And thanks to the printing press, scholars throughout Europe could easily get their own copies. So it was really a combination of factors that set the Renaissance in motion.

All of these factors really came together at a printing shop in Italy operated by an Italian scholar named Aldus Manutius. He established a press in Venice in the late 1400s, which happened to be where a lot of those Greek scholars had re-settled after leaving Greece and Constantinople. Aldus's press is known today as the Aldine Press because it published so many popular books in these early years of printing. His press also developed a specific typeface with letters that were slightly slanted rather than being vertical. This typeface proved to be very popular, and it is the origin of what we call *italics* today. It was called that because it was invented and used by this particular Italian press.

Well, Aldus was a humanist, and he decided to print as many of the original Greek manuscripts as he could find. And he decided to print them in the original Greek language. He wrote that that was the only way to truly understand and appreciate the writings of those classical authors. The first thing he had to do was to develop a new typeface with the Greek letters. But after he did that, he invited Greek scholars and other Greek speakers to help him produce those new Greek books. Nearly half of his workers were Greek refugees from the Byzantine Empire. [*SOURCE: Connections, James Burke, p. 105.*] He soon produced a five-volume folio of Aristotle's works. And over the following decade and a half, he published works by all of the major authors of ancient Greece – including Aristophanes, Sophocles, Herodotus, Euripides, Homer and Plato. [*SOURCE: A World Lit Only By Fire, William Manchester, p. 106.*] Most people today have never heard the name Aldus Manutius, but he was largely responsible for preserving the works of ancient Greece and disseminating them throughout Western Europe. Of course, he also published works in Latin, and those were also added to the collection of classical manuscripts.

The circulation of these books throughout Europe helped to spread the new learning associated with Humanism, and it helped to spread interest in Greek. It also helped to spread a renewed interest in classical Latin, which was a bit different from the medieval Latin commonly used in schools and universities. There was a particular interest in the writings of the Roman statesman and scholar Cicero. It was thought that his works were perfect representations of classical Latin,

as opposed to the late medieval Latin that was being used in Europe at the time. From the mid-1400s through the 1500s, it is estimated that about two million copies of Cicero's works were published by printers throughout Europe. [*SOURCE: The Book in the Renaissance, Andrew Pettegree, p. 182.*]

As printing presses churned out the works of Cicero and all of those other Roman and Greek authors, those books met with a quickly expanding audience eager to consume all of that new information. As I noted earlier, the population of Europe was slowly recovering from the Black Death, and the breakdown of the feudal system over the intervening years had produced a growing middle class in the towns and cities. The availability of cheap books meant that people throughout Europe wanted to learn how to read, and they wanted their children to learn how to read and write as well.

By the current point in our story, towns and cities across England were establishing grammar schools that were operated separately from the traditional Church schools.

Even though the grammar schools and universities taught Latin, and sometimes taught Greek, most of the new readers in England were not fluent in either of those languages. They only knew English, so printers aimed their publications at that market by printing in English. Through the 1500s, about 90% of the books printed in England were printed in English. Now there was demand for books in Latin and Greek, but most of those books were imported from the continent. [*SOURCE: The Book in the Renaissance, Andrew Pettegree, p.124.*]

I should also note that a lot of books composed in English were also imported. The printing industry in England remained very small even after the arrival of William Caxton. There were only a few printers in England during the 1500s, and they were not able to fully satisfy the demand for books in English. So quite a few English language books were published on the continent and exported to England. Some of the English printers complained about those imported books because the continental printers often spoke English poorly and the books were riddled with mistakes.

Richard Pynson was one of those English printers, and in fact, he was the official printer of the king Henry VII. He wrote that the imported books were often written in a (quote) "corrupte englysshe" that no one could understand. [*SOURCE: The Evolution of the English Language, George H. McKnight, p. 61-2.*] And that may help to explain some peculiar spellings in Modern English.

For example, the word *tongue* is spelled with a 'u-e' at the end. It's an Old English word like *lung* and *song* and *ring*. And up until Modern English, the word was usually spelled with a final 'g' or 'ge.' So where did that 'u' come from in the word *tongue*? Well, it started to appear in English documents around the current point in our story in the late 1400s and 1500s, and one theory is that continental printers in France were accustomed to spelling words that ended in a hard 'g' sound with the letters 'g-u-e.' And some of those printers may have accidentally spelled an English word like *tongue* the same way, thereby introducing a 'Frenchified' spelling of the word to books printed in English, which later became standard within English itself. The word

dialogue shows the same development. It's actually a word that originated in Greek, but it can be found in Old English documents. Again, it was always spelled with a final 'g' or 'ge' in English documents until the current point in our story. Then it suddenly started to appear with its modern ending spelled 'g-u-e.' The same development is also found in the similar loanword *prologue*, which had first appeared in English in the 1300s but got a new spelling in the 1500s. And we also see that development in the word *league* which had also been borrowed in the 1300s but was later re-spelled. Again, both of those words received their modern 'g-u-e' endings after the invention of the printing press, and it may have come from continental printers who were producing books for the English market. [SOURCE: *The Evolution of the English Language*, George H. McKnight, p. 61-2.]

The same process probably explains some other unusual spellings that appeared during this period. For example, words that traditionally ended with a 'c' or 'k' or 'ck' in Middle English, now sometimes appeared with a new ending spelled 'q-u-e.' That spelling was common in French, and again, it may have been introduced by continental printers. So we find the word *logic* spelled 'l-o-g-i-q-u-e,' and *music* spelled 'm-u-s-y-q-u-e.'

Now, obviously, most of those 'q-u-e' endings didn't stick, but there were cases where an alternate version of the word emerged with that ending. In those cases, the word either came directly from French or was formed within English on the French model. That gave us word pairs like *critic* and *critique*, and *mystic* and *mystique*, and *physic* and *physique*

There's also something else interesting about many of the examples I just mentioned. Most of those words come from Greek – words like *dialogue*, *prologue*, *music*, *logic*, *ethic*, *physic*, *physique*, *mystic*, *mystique*, *critic*, and *critique* – they are all derived from Greek. And they reflect the important influence of Greek during this period. Some of those Greek words had been borrowed in the Middle English period, but the floodgates really opened in the early 1500s. Over the course of the 1500s, English not only acquired words like *lyric*, *epic* and *critic*, it also borrowed Greek words like *crisis*, *enthusiasm*, *system*, *scheme*, *rhythm*, *democracy*, *topic*, *chaos*, and many, many more that we'll see a little later in the episode.

As I noted, more and more people in England were reading books in English, and scholars and writers in England were starting to embrace the new learning associated with humanism. And that meant that there was a renewed focus on Greek and Latin literature. In the 1470s, Oxford had invited an Italian scholar to lecture on Greek. One of the students in attendance was named William Grocyn. He was fascinated by Greek, and he traveled to Italy to study the language. He returned to Oxford in 1491, and he formally introduced Greek to the curriculum there. [SOURCE: *A History of England: Prehistory to 1714*, Clayton Roberts and David Roberts, p. 236.]

In 1508, another English scholar named John Colet founded St. Paul's school in London. It quickly became a center of humanistic studies. It was the largest grammar school in England at its founding, and in order to prevent interference by Church authorities, it was supervised by the local mercer's guild rather than the Church. The school was opened to anyone who was literate, regardless of class or background, and it was made free to those who attended. Greek was soon

introduced to the curriculum, alongside English and Latin. The writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans were studied in their original languages. And new subjects like geography and history were added to the curriculum. [*SOURCE: A History of England: Prehistory to 1714, Clayton Roberts and David Roberts, p. 236.*] In fact, geography and history became a new areas of study in schools throughout Europe during this period. And both of those words – **geography** and **history** – are ultimately derived from Greek.

Around the same time, Corpus Christi College was founded at Oxford, and it became the first college in England dedicated to humanistic studies. [*SOURCE: A History of England: Prehistory to 1714, Clayton Roberts and David Roberts, p. 237.*] Those schools and their respective students had access to all of that ancient Greek and Latin literature thanks to continental printers like Aldus Manutius, and they helped to usher in the Renaissance and the study of humanism to the British Isles.

Thanks to these developments, lots of new ideas and concepts were flowing into those schools, and into the minds of those students, and into the English books that attempted to explain and process all of that new information for an English-speaking audience. And this is where those writers and scholars ran up against the perceived limitations of the English language. And that takes us back to where we began – with John Skelton’s description of the English language as too ‘rude’ and ‘rusty’ to express many of those new ideas and concepts.

The obvious solution for many English scholars who held that point of view was to simply borrow the needed words directly from Greek and Latin. If necessary, a writer could always explain what a particular term meant by defining it in English, and once the word was defined, the writer could just use the loanword for the remainder of the text. That’s what Skelton often did in his writings.

He was typical of many English writers of the period who chose to borrow words from Greek or Latin rather than use native English words. His various writings contain the first recorded English use of Latin terms like **fact**, **accumulate**, **affectionate**, **accentuation**, **obfuscate**, **defecate**, **ambiguous**, **allude**, and **mandatory**. He also provided the first known English use of Greek words like **analytical**, **Mycenaean**, and as I noted a moment ago, the word **geography**. The Greek word **poem** also appeared for the first time in English in his writings.

Again, Skelton adopted these words because he felt that English was too ‘rude’ and ‘rusty’ to handle the new learning without borrowing terms from other languages. Sometimes that approach was taken to excess. In the same manuscript that contains the first known English use of words like **poem** and **fact** and **geography**, Skelton also included the word **etymologization**, which was literally ‘the act of investigating the origin of words.’ The five syllables of **accentuation** and the seven syllables of **etymologization** are far removed from the simple one-syllable words of Old English. And writers like Skelton were quick to adopt those long-winded technical terms. Over time, some English writers would push back and claim that those types of loanwords were excessive and unnecessary, but for now, most English scholars embraced them.

Another one of those scholars was Sir Thomas Elyot. He was a contemporary of John Skelton, and he shared Skelton's view that English was a rustic vernacular incapable of expressing the sophisticated ideas associated with the new Humanistic movement. In 1531, he composed a guidebook for young men who were likely to serve in government. The book was called 'The Booke named the Governour' – sometimes referred to as 'The Book of the Governor.' It is one of the more important works of political prose from the early Modern English period. Now again, this book was composed in 1531, so that's a couple of decades later in our story, but I want to address it here because it provides a great illustration of the problem that English writers encountered when trying to explain these new humanistic concepts. Time and again, Elyot complains about the limitations of the English language, and he introduces Greek and Latin terms to explain what he's talking about. Let me take you through some of the key passages in the book to illustrate these challenges.

In the first part of the book, Elyot discusses the political structure of society noting that (quote) "In the latin tonge it is called Respublica." He then introduces several basic concepts like the 'public' and the 'commons.' With regard to the words *public* and *common*, he states that they have been "borowed of the latin tonge for the insufficiencie of our owne langage."

He then notes of the word *people* is called *Populus* in Latin, and he explains that term *Populus* refers to 'all the inhabitants of a realm or city.' So as he often does, he tries to explain the Latin or Greek loanword by defining it with more common English words.

Then he explains that the ancient Greeks had various political systems governed by the people. He explains that one of those systems was governed by "them whiche excelled in vertue, and was in the greke tonge called aristocratia, in latin Optimorum Potentia, in englisse the rule of men of beste disposition." So here, he introduces the Greek word *aristocratia* – or *aristocracy*. It's one of the first known uses of the word in an English manuscript, and in using the word, Elyot defines it first by reference to Latin – "Optimorum Potentia" – literally 'rule by those with the optimum potential.' Then he defines it in English by saying that it means "the rule of men of beste disposition." Of course, the word *disposition* is a French and Latin loanword, but it had been used in English for over a century, so Elyot considered it to be an English word.

Elyot then describes a different political system used by the Greeks – one "where equalitie was of astate amonge the people, and only by theyr holle consent theyr citie and dominions were gouerned." He says "This maner of gouernaunce was called in greke Democratia, in latin Popularis potentia, in englisse the rule of the comminaltie." So again, this is one of the earliest uses of the word *democracy* in an English document. Elyot uses that Greek term *Democratia*. Then he defines that term by reference to Latin – "Popularis potentia." Then he defines it in English – "the rule of the comminaltie." Again, *rule* and *commonality* are both loanwords, but the word *rule* had been around in English since the 1200s, and *commonality* had been around since the 1300s, so Elyot treated them as English terms. But again, we see Elyot trying to discuss these concepts by using the original Greek and Latin terms which he prefers, and then trying to explain them with English terms.

In the next section, Elyot discusses the traditional role of the magistrate using that term borrowed from Latin. He writes “All be it they be named in latine Magistratus. And hereafter I intende to call them Magistratis, lackynge a more conuenient worde in englisshe.”

A bit later in the book, Elyot says than a speaker or orator must be familiar with all types of learning, which he encompasses with the Greek word *encyclopedia*. He says that some people call it “the worlde of science,” and others call it “the circle of doctrine,” but he is going to use the single Greek word *encyclopedia*. So *encyclopedia* means the storehouse of all learning, and that passage is the first recorded use of the word *encyclopedia* in the English language.

Later in the book, Elyot attempts to discuss an advanced stage of personal development, but he struggles for a word that encompasses the idea. He considers the words *ripe* and *ready*, but he says that *ripe* is better reserved for fruit, and *ready* is better reserved for other things. For people, he says that he feels obliged to use a Latin term – *maturity*. In the passage, he essentially apologizes for using that term since the English language isn’t otherwise capable of expressing the subtle distinction that he is trying to make. He writes:

“Wherefore I am constrained to usurpe a latine worde, callyng it Maturitie: whiche worde, though it be strange and darke, yet by declaring the vertue in a few mo wordes, the name ones brought in custome, shall be facile to understande as other wordes late comen out of Italy and Fraunce. . . .”

‘Wherefore I am constrained to usurp a Latin word, calling it Maturity: which word, though it be strange and dark, it’s virtue can be declared in a few more words, and once the name is brought into use and made customary, it shall be as easy to understand as other words that have lately come out of Italy and France. . . .’

So Elyot says that the word *maturity* may seem new and unfamiliar to English readers now, but through regular usage, the word will soon become as familiar as all of those other words which have been borrowed from Latin and French over the prior centuries. And he was obviously correct about that.

He then concludes with the following passage in which he tries to distinguish the new word *maturity* from existing words like *ripe* and *ready*. Here’s the passage in the original early modern English:

“Maturum in latyn maye be enterpretid ripe or redy, as fruite whan it is ripe, it is at the very poynte to be gathered and eaten. And euery other thyng, whan it is redye, it is at the instante after to be occupied. Therefore that worde maturitie, is translated to the actis of man, that whan they be done with suche moderation, that nothing in the doynge may be sene superfluous or indigent, we may saye, that they be maturely doone: reseruyng the wordes rype and redy to frute and other thinges seperate from affaires, as we haue nowe in usage. And this do I nowe remembre for the necessary augmentation of our langage.”

Now here’s the same passage in contemporary Modern English:

‘Maturum in Latin may be interpreted as ripe or ready, as when fruit is ripe, it is at the very point to be gathered and eaten. And when every other thing is ready, it is from that instant capable of being occupied. Therefore that word maturity is translated as the acts of man, that when they be done with such moderation, that nothing in the doing may be seen as superfluous or indigent, we may say that they are being done maturely: reserving the words ripe and ready to fruit and other things separate from the affaires as we now have in usage. And this I do now remember for the necessary augmentation of our language.’

By the way, the words *ripe* and *ready* are Old English words, so they were very familiar to English speakers, but those words just didn’t capture the subtle sense of maturity. As Elyot said, it was necessary to ‘augment’ the English language to make the subtle distinctions he was trying to express.

Elyot apparently thought he was the first English writer to use the word *maturity*, but it had actually appeared in a few other English documents prior to that in the late 1400s and early 1500s. Elyot was probably not aware of those other uses, but he was right that the word *maturity* was a relatively new and unfamiliar word to most English speakers.

Even though Elyot wasn’t the first English writer to use the word *maturity*, this particular book does contain the first known use of several words in English. In addition to those I’ve already mentioned, those new words include *frugality*, *modesty*, *acumen*, *irritate*, *circumspection*, *commentary* and *persist*.

However, Elyot’s book also illustrates another phenomenon associated with all of these new loanwords. Not all of them survived. In fact, about one-third of the words borrowed during this period either disappeared from the language or have become so rare that they are virtually obsolete. For example, this particular book – the Book of the Governor – contains the first use of words like *adminiculation* meaning ‘aid or support,’ and *adumbration* meaning ‘a shadow or shade,’ and *bissex* meaning the extra day in a leap year, and *conglutinate* meaning ‘glued together,’ and *demulce* meaning ‘to soothe or make gentle.’

The book also contains the first use of the word *attemptate*, which was eventually shortened to just *attempt*. That type of shortening happened with a lot of words borrowed during this period. *Consolate* became *console*, and *denunciate* became *denounce*. But note that even though the verbs *consolate* and *denunciate* were shortened, the related noun forms *consolation* and *denunciation* survived.

Similarly, during this period, the word *expedite* was borrowed, and it was soon shortened to *expede*. But *expede* died out. So today, we just have the original longer form *expedite*. English also borrowed the opposite version of that word. That opposite version was *impedite* meaning ‘to hinder or block.’ And *impedite* was also shortened from *impedite* to *impede*. So this was a parallel development. But whereas in the case of *expedite* and *expede* the longer form *expedite* survived, in the case of *impedite* and *impede* the shorter form *impede* survived. So this process wasn’t necessarily logical. When we look at which words survived and which ones died out, the results often appear to be random.

Along these same lines, English borrowed a lot of words during this period with the Latin prefix ‘-dis’ meaning ‘not or opposite or away from.’ Some of those loanwords with that prefix survived like *dismiss*, *disagree*, *disapprove* and *disband*. But others fell out of use like *disadorn*, *disaccustom*, *discongruity* and *disbandon*.

Even though about a third of those loanwords gradually disappeared or became very rare, the vast majority of them survived. Thousands of those words passed into English, with the peak of borrowing being in the late 1500s and early 1600s. And those Latin and Greek words that survived tended to be more technical and scholarly than the earlier words borrowed from French.

Whereas French loanwords had given English lots synonyms and had effectively given English a second register above Old English, all of these new Latin and Greek words gave English a third register. It meant that English speakers were often given three different words to choose from – a basic and plain Germanic word from Old English or Old Norse, a slightly more elevated or posh word from French, and now an even more sophisticated or scholarly word from Latin or Greek.

I’ve mentioned a few examples of this phenomenon in earlier episodes, but let give you some more examples to illustrate how these developments impacted Modern English. Today, you might *think* about a problem with the Old English word *think*, or *ponder* it with the French word *ponder*, or *contemplate* it with the Latin word *contemplate*. If you need help, you might rely upon an Old English *helper*, or a French *aide*, or a Latin *assistant*. If you’re worried about something, you might have Old English *fear*, or French *concern*, or Latin *trepidation*. If you’re wrapping up a project, you might *end* it in Old English, or *finish* it in French, or *conclude* it in Latin. If you climb a hill, you might *rise* in Old English, or *advance* in French, or *ascend* or *elevate* in Latin. You might describe a spiritual place with the Old English word *holy*, or the French word *sacred*, or the Latin words *sacrosanct* or *consecrated*.

One of my favorite examples of this process can be found in the terms for the collection of little symbols that we use for spelling. The Anglo-Saxons called one of those little symbols a *stæf* because they were usually crooked like a staff or a walking stick. A collection of those symbols was called a *stæfrow* – literally a ‘staff-row.’ But in the 1200s, after the Norman Conquest, English borrowed the word *letter* from French. And a collection of those symbols became known as *letters*. Then around the current point in our story in the late 1400s and early 1500s, English borrowed the word *alphabet*. The word *alphabet* was borrowed directly from Latin, but it’s ultimately a Greek word because it’s derived from the Greek names of the first two letters – *alpha* and *beta*. So we’ve gone from Old English *stæf* to French *letters* to Greek and Latin *alphabet*.

In fact, the study of literature gave English lots of new Latin and Greek words during this period. I don’t want to bore you with long lists of words, but I do want to give you a general sense of how the English language was impacted by these changes. During this period, we find the first recorded uses of the following literary terms derived from Greek: *drama*, *poem*, *poet*, *epic*, *ode*, *lyric*, *diatribe*, *elegy*, *scene*, *stanza*, *metaphor*, *phrase*, *irony*, *syntax*, *epilogue*, *dialect*, and *monosyllable*. And I suppose we can also throw in that word *encyclopedia* which I mentioned

earlier. Some of those words came in directly from the Greek, while others came in via Latin or French, but they all have Greek origins.

Latin also contributed a lot of literary terms during this period, including the word *literature*, as well as words like *linguist*, *fiction*, *satire*, *manuscript*, *transcribe*, *inflection*, and *folio*.

Let me give you another example to show how Greek and Latin expended the vocabulary of English. And that example is the word we use for words. *Word* is an Old English term, and the Anglo-Saxon sometimes called a group of words a ‘word hoard.’ But in the early 1500s, English borrowed the word *vocabulary* from Latin. So after that, we could refer to either a person’s *words* or their *vocabulary*. Then about a century later in the early 1600s, English borrowed the Greek word *lexicon*. And that provided yet another option. So from *words* to *vocabulary* to *lexicon*, we now have multiple ways to refer to a collection of words.

And speaking of a collection of words, English also borrowed a lot of words from Italian during this period. This reflects the overall influence of the Italian Renaissance. So during the 1500s, we find the first use of Italian loanwords like *stanza*, *fresco*, *bankrupt*, *cameo*, *model*, *miniature*, *replica*, *ballot*, *violin*, *rocket*, *parakeet*, and a variety of military terms like *militia*, *battalion*, *squadron*, *frigate*, *infantry*, *cavalry*, *cavalcade*, *corporal* and *colonel*. Most of those military terms came in via French, but they originated in the local vernacular of Italy.

We can also thank Italian for an English suffix that started to appear around this time. Some Italian words ended with the ending ‘-esco.’ And that ending was reduced to ‘-esque’ in French before the words passed into English. And it was during this period that we find the first loanwords entering English with that ‘-esque’ ending. The word *arabesque* is found in English in the mid-1400s, and that may be the first word with that ending to pass into English. It began as the Italian word *arabesco*.

About a century later, the word *grotesque* appeared in English for the first time in writing. Now today, we think of the word *grotesque* in the sense of something ugly or severely deformed. Well, believe it or not, it began as an Italian word – *grottesco* – which referred back to ancient Rome. Some of those ancient buildings had murals or sculptures that featured comically distorted figures. Some of them featured humans or animals interwoven with plants and foliage. Those types of murals or sculptures were called *grottesco* in Italian, which later passed into English as *grotesque*. And from there, the sense of the word expanded from a distorted or deformed image on a work of art to anything distorted, deformed or ugly.

By the way, during this period, English borrowed another word from Italian with a similar meaning. That Italian word was *antico*, and it passed into English as *antic* – ‘a-n-t-i-c.’ Again, it was just another word for these types of ancient murals or sculptures with distorted images. But since the humans and animals were often depicted in a distorted manner, the word *antic* came to refer to any type of wild or comical gesture. So today, we might refer to a person’s crazy *antics*, usually meaning their wild or bizarre gestures or actions.

But remember earlier I mentioned that words ending in a simple ‘c’ or ‘k’ were sometimes given a new French spelling during this period. They were sometimes spelled with ‘q-u-e’ at the end. Remember that may have happened because many English books were being published on the continent and may have picked up those spellings there. But there were also cases where a French version of the word entered English around the same time with the French spelling. Well, that’s what happened with the word *antic*. Around the same time that the Italian word *antic* first appeared in English in the early 1500s, we also find the alternate French version *antique* – eventually spelled ‘a-n-t-i-q-u-e.’ So, believe it or not, *antic* and *antique* are derived from the same Latin root word. Again, *antic* is the Italian version, and *antique* is the French version. *Antique* retains much of the original Latin sense of the word as something very old like those old buildings in Rome, whereas *antic* shows that extended sense from something old, to an old building, to an old building with distorted images on it, to a person’s gestures or actions that resemble those images.

So words like *antique* and *antic* are words that were borrowed into early modern English, but they refer back to events in the classical era. And I guess that’s appropriate for a word like *antique*. These were new words that looked back in time. And the study of history itself emerged in schools throughout Europe during the Renaissance, and it was also a new course of study that looked back in time. That was one of the great ironies of the Renaissance. It ushered in the modern era by looking back to the ancient past.

And as we’ve seen, that era also ushered in a lot of new words. It’s estimated that somewhere between 10,000 to 12,000 Latin and Greek words entered English from the late 1400s through the early 1600s – the period generally encompassing the Renaissance. [*SOURCE: A History of the English Language, Baugh and Cable, p. 232.*] The majority of those loanwords were nouns, which reflect the specialist terminology of the period. [*SOURCE: From Dialect to Standard: English in England 1154-1776, Hans Frede Nielsen, p. 176-7*]

But as important as those changes were, the changes were not without controversy. As we’ve seen, in the early 1500s, English writers embraced and encouraged those new loanwords because they thought that English wasn’t up to the task. It was ‘rude’ and ‘rusty.’ But by the mid-1500s, many English writers started to push back. There was a sense that the borrowing had gotten out of control. Writers deplored all of those elaborate terms, which they felt made English books unreadable. Most English speakers didn’t know what many of those words meant. By making English more Latinate, those scholars were inevitably making it less English.

Those critics hated most of the new loanwords, and they called them ‘inkhorn’ terms. An inkhorn was a vessel that held the ink used by scribes and writers. And there was a sense that those writers were using up the all the ink in those inkhorns by writing out all of those long elaborate words – words like *etymologization*. The critics insisted that English writers should strive to use familiar English words when describing new ideas, not fancy new loanwords. This created one of the great linguistic debates in English history – the so-called ‘inkhorn’ debate. Again, this debate really broke out in the mid-1500s, so I’m not going to explore it in any detail here. I’ll cover it in a future episode, but it is important to note at this point that there was eventual push-back against all of these fancy new loanwords.

But that push-back ultimately failed. Most of those new words became a part of the language. And by the end of the 1500s, they had changed English so much that the perception of English had completely changed by that point. At the end of the century, most English writers were writing about how great the English language was – how flexible its terms were and how expansive its vocabulary was. Rather than describing English as ‘rude’ and rusty,’ they now declared it to be every bit the equal of Latin and Greek. Having adopted so many of those words, and having established a third register within the language, they felt that English was capable of expressing just about any concept or idea, and it was able to do so with different shades of meaning that were impossible to render a century earlier. And it probably isn’t surprising that that period in the late 1500s and early 1600s was also the period of William Shakespeare. Shakespeare was one of the first writers to take that new expanded English out for a test drive – and to push it to its limits. He happened to live at a time when English was reaching its maximum potential.

And I mention those future developments because, as we start to delve in the 1500s, I want you to realize how important this upcoming century really was. It was during this period that English evolved from a functional medieval vernacular into the diverse modern language that we have today. And much of that progress began with these early developments associated with the Renaissance.

Next time, we’ll turn our attention to another important event of this period that is closely associated with the Renaissance. That’s the Reformation – the Protestant break with the Catholic Church. We’ll also look at the beginning of the reign of Henry VIII and his first marriage to Catherine of Aragon. And as you may already know, those two developments were destined to collide with explosive consequences.

So next time, we’ll explore those developments, and we’ll see how they impacted the English language. Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.