

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 82:  
A MARRIAGE FOR THE AGES**

**Presented by Kevin W. Stroud**

## EPISODE 82: A MARRIAGE FOR THE AGES

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 82: A Marriage for the Ages. In this episode, we’re going to look at one of the most important marriages of the entire Middle Ages – the marriage of Eleanor of Aquitaine to Henry Plantagenet, son of Empress Matilda. This marriage brought much of northern and western France under Henry’s control. And it was soon expanded to encompass England as well. At its height, the so-called ‘Angevin Empire’ controlled most of northwestern Europe. And England was just a small portion of that massive French realm. As a result, French influences were reinforced in England. This period is sometimes called the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Renaissance. And while it may have been a period of great cultural and academic achievement, it represents one of the lowest points in the history of the English language. The French influence was so great that English essentially disappeared as a written language for several decades. So this time, we’ll explore those developments.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). And you can always reach me directly by email at [kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com](mailto:kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com). I’m also on twitter at englishhistpod. And as always you can sign up to support the podcast at [Patreon.com](https://www.patreon.com/historyofenglishpodcast). Just go to [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com) and link from there.

So let’s turn to this episode. Last time, we looked at love, so this time, we’re going to take that theme to the next level and look at marriage. And we’re going to focus on one marriage in particular – the marriage of Henry Plantagenet and Eleanor of Aquitaine. As I noted, the massive realm they pieced together is sometimes called the ‘Angevin Empire’ because of Henry’s family roots in Anjou.

Now, it wasn’t technically an empire. No one ever had the title of ‘emperor.’ But it was so massive in scope and size, and it encompassed so many kingdoms, and duchies and counties that later historians couldn’t resist calling it an ‘empire.’ That massive realm was forged by conquest, inheritance, and marriage. So before we look at the end of the English Anarchy, and the rise of the Angevin Empire, let’s take a closer look at the state of marriage in 1100s.

First of all, let me note that English-speakers of the 1100s would not have used words like *marry* and *marriage*. Those words were borrowed from French, but the first known uses of those words in English took place about 150 years later around the year 1300. At this point, English speakers would have still used the Old English terms for marriage – words like *æwnung*, *hæmed* or *legerteam*. Obviously, those words have disappeared from the language, but other Old English words related to marriage have survived.

The last time we looked at marriage was back in Episode 38, right at the beginning of the Old English period. And in that episode, I noted that a lot of our terms related to marriage have their origins in Old English. Words like *wed*, *wedding*, *bride*, *groom*, *husband*, *wife* and *betroth* all go back to Old English. The meanings of some of those words have changed over time – but they have Anglo-Saxon roots.

But after the Norman Conquest, Old English got a lot of new words from French. And one of those words was *marry*. So as is often the case, we have two different ways of expressing the same basic concept – ‘to wed’ and ‘to marry.’ *Wed* is the Old English word, and *marry* is the French word. But notice something interesting. The verb forms mean the same thing – *wed* and *marry*. But the noun forms have taken on slightly different meanings over time – *wedding* and *marriage*. Today, the *wedding* comes first, and the *marriage* is what follows.

I should also note that the word *spouse* is another word borrowed from French. So you might have a native-English *husband* or *wife* or a French *spouse*. And even today, *husband* and *wife* seem more intimate and familiar, but *spouse* seems more formal and legal.

At one time, the word *spouse* also had a verb form. The Old French verb *espouser* meant ‘to marry.’ And the noun form *espouse* meant a ‘married person.’ Both words passed into Middle English. Of course, the noun version *espouse* has survived as the word *spouse*. But what happened to the verb form *espouser*? Well, it also survived.

Today, we have it as the word *espouse*, but it has lost its original association with marriage. Originally, *espouse* meant ‘to get married.’ So on your wedding day, you espoused your spouse. So you embraced that person, and you formed a bond with him or her. Over time, the meaning of *espouse* was extended to refer to a situation where you might embrace or adopt an idea or concept, sort of like when we say that someone is ‘married to a particular idea’ meaning that they are attached to it. And that extended use of *espouse* produced the modern sense of the word. Today, if you *espouse* an idea or a cause, you have embraced it and you are promoting it. So *marry*, *marriage*, *spouse*, and *espouse* were all borrowed during the early Middle English period from French.

Now one of the reasons I wanted to discuss marriage in this episode is because I discussed love in the last episode. And we tend to associate love with marriage. But as I’ve noted before, marriages in the Middle Ages were often arranged. And since they were arranged, it is unclear if love played much of a role in medieval marriages.

The surviving records provide some information about the number of people who were married, and even the dates when some people got married, but the records can’t tell us if a particular couple was in love or not. And there are no surviving diaries, or letters, or personal journals to shed any light on the issue either.

Now even though many medieval marriages were arranged, it appears that some were based on personal affection and love. And of course, those two options are not mutually exclusive. It is certainly possible that the parties to an arranged marriage could also love each other.

As a very general rule, the higher up the social ladder you were, the more likely it was that your family owned land, and the more likely it was that a marriage was arranged with a suitable mate whose family members also had land or property. When a couple got married, there was typically an exchange of property or property rights. This was part of the dower and dowry that the spouse’s provided to each other. So if your family had property, you usually married a mate

whose family also had property. That meant that most nobles and land-holding peasants had arranged marriages

But for peasants who had little or no land holdings, those arrangements weren't as essential. So in those cases, it was more likely for a couple to enter into a marriage based on other considerations like love and personal affection. It's difficult to put any numbers on all of this, but in her book, "The Ties That Bound," Barbara Hanawalt concludes that about one-third of young women in Medieval England were able to freely choose their husbands. (p. 201)

Of course, that implies that two-thirds of women didn't have that choice. In fact, in some cases, the woman's family didn't even have a say. If a vassal died with young daughters, his lord would become the guardian of those daughters. And the lord could then arrange the marriages of the daughters as he saw fit.

This was basically what happened to Eleanor of Aquitaine. As we saw last time, when Eleanor's father died, he designated his lord – the King of France – as her guardian. And the king quickly arranged a marriage between his son and Eleanor. So this was quite common among lords and vassals, even at lower levels of society.

Now when the lord arranged the marriage of a vassal's daughter, there was an expectation that he would arrange the marriage with a man of the same general class as her. So Eleanor married the king's son. But that didn't always happen. Sometimes, the lord would try to marry the daughter to a man in a lower class. So he might try to marry the daughter of a duke or count to the son of a lesser noble. There was actually a word for this. The word was *disparage*. It combined the prefix *des-* meaning 'away' and *parage* meaning 'a rank or class.' *Parage* comes from the same root as the word *peer*. The people in your *parage* were your peers. So to '*des-parage*' was to take someone away from their peers or their class, specifically to push them down into a lower class. So a woman who was forced to marry someone in a lower class was *disparaged*, and over time that word has taken on a more general sense. Today, it means to 'belittle' or 'insult' or 'put down.'

So as we can see, arranged marriages were still very much the norm in the 1100s, especially among the nobles and the knightly class. And love probably had little to do with most of those marriages, but as we saw last time, the culture was starting to change in places like Aquitaine. The poetry of the troubadours put a new emphasis on courtly love. And those ideas were spreading out from there into other parts of western Europe. There was a new interest in love and romance, especially among the nobles. So how did they square that with marriage? Was marriage a business arrangement or was it a sacrament between two people in love?

While the nobility were starting to consider these questions, Church officials were also starting to think about the state of marriage. Specifically, they were trying to figure out what constituted a legal marriage in the eyes of the Church. Today, this seems like a more straightforward question because most places require some type of formal licence or formal registration. But that wasn't necessarily the case in the Middle Ages.

At this point in history, people tended to get married in two stages. First, they would agree to get married at some point in the future – what we would call the *engagement* today. But in the Middle Ages, this often involved a formal ceremony called the *betrothal*. At this point, the couple was said to be ‘*betrothed*’ using a term derived from Old English, or they were said to be ‘*fianced*’ using a term derived from French. The verb *fiance* has died out, but the word was later re-borrowed in its noun form as the word *fiancé*.

Now for some peasant couples, this first step was nothing more than a simple engagement. They agreed to get married at some point in the future. But as I said, many couples marked this first step with a formal religious ceremony. So there was an engagement ceremony called the *betrothal*, and then there was a separate marriage ceremony conducted at a later date.

Now all of that was fine in theory. The problem was that many people had the engagement ceremony, and then lived together as husband and wife. Sometimes they even had children together, but they never actually had that second ‘wedding’ ceremony to make it official. And for many peasant couples, they never had any ceremony at all. They agreed to get married. And then they considered themselves married. So in those cases, it wasn’t clear if the couple were legally married or merely engaged.

This was an important distinction. It affected what happened if the couple split up. Could they remarry? Did they need to get an annulment first? Were their children legitimate or illegitimate? And what if one of the parties died? If a husband died, a wife typically received a dower interest in his property? But what if they never had that formal wedding ceremony? Again, the answer wasn’t always clear.

Around the current point in our story in the mid-1100s, the Church tried to lay down some rules to sort out this mess. In the year 1140, a Benedictine monk living in Italy assembled a collection of texts drawn from Church councils, papal edicts, and other sources. His name was Gratian, and the text that he produced was called the ‘*Decretum Gratiani*.’ It was essentially a textbook of Church law, and it addressed this issue what constituted a legal marriage.

It was a long-standing Church principle that a valid marriage required the consent of both parties. But it was also common for couples to be forced into arranged marriages. The argument was that there was implied consent in an arranged marriage. But Gratian said that a valid marriage required the active verbal consent of the parties. It couldn’t be implied. There needed to be verbal consent, ideally with an exchange of vows in which each party expressed their desire and willingness to proceed with the marriage.

The words weren’t all that important. It could be an immediate promise to marry like “I hereby marry you.” Or it could be a promise to marry in the future like an engagement. Either way, the marriage was made official when it was consummated. So a simple engagement followed by sexual intercourse was sufficient to constitute a valid marriage. You didn’t need a formal ceremony. You didn’t need witnesses. You didn’t even need to formally announce the marriage. Just consent and consummation.

Gratian's rules were actually revolutionary because, whether it was intended or not, they put an emphasis on love and affection. They also put an emphasis on free consent. A couple in love didn't need the blessing of their family or even the Church. They didn't need a formal ceremony. Technically, they didn't even need to make it public. So Gratian's rules expanded the concept of marriage to include many informal relationships – relationships that were based solely on love and affection. And his rules were widely accepted by many Church officials at the time. Of course, those rules also created their own problems. Some Church officials thought that they were too broad and they blurred the line between a marriage and a casual sexual relationship. So these rules continued to evolve over the next few decades and centuries.

The overall history of marriage within the Church is way beyond the scope of this episode, but I just wanted to note here the definition and idea of marriage was evolving and expanding during this period. And it was happening at the same time that men and women troubadours were singing about courtly love. And at the same time that romantic literature was starting to get underway. So the idea of 'love and marriage' was evolving.

Over time, that initial engagement or betrothal ceremony became less and less common. And increasingly, people just had the wedding ceremony at the time they decided to make the marriage official.

In many respects, marriage ceremonies have changed very little since the Middle Ages, at least those that follow the Christian tradition of western Europe. The vows are even similar. Here are the husband's marriage vows in Middle English. They come from an instruction manual for priests that was translated into English around the year 1400. The vows read:

Here I take thee to my wedded wyf.  
And there-to I plyghte þe my trowþe  
Wyth-owten cowpulle or fleshly dede...

In Modern English, it reads:

Here I take thee to my wedded wife  
And thereto I pledge thee my truth  
without couple or fleshly deed.

Now that phrase "without couple or fleshly deed" may seem a bit odd. It literally means "without copulation." *Couple* actually comes from the same Latin root as *copulation*, but the word *copulation* hadn't been borrowed yet with that meaning. So the more common phrase was 'couple or fleshly deed.' That phrase was included to confirm that the couple were taking each other as husband and wife at that moment, even though they hadn't consummated the marriage yet. And that phrase was sufficient, because Gratian's rules had been changed by that point in the 1400s to allow marriages without consummation. So *couple* and *copulation* are cognate. They come from the same Latin root.

And I should also note something else very interesting. The word *couple* in the phrase ‘couple or fleshly deed’ was the only French word contained in the vows I just read. All the other words come from Old English, except the word *take* which comes from Old Norse.

Now not only did the husband and wife exchange marriage vows, but they also dressed in their nicest clothes. Men wore their best outfit. And women wore their nicest dress or gown. But it wasn’t a wedding dress in the way we think of it today. Today, we tend to think of a white wedding because white symbolizes purity. But in the Middle Ages, blue was generally used to represent purity, so many brides wore blue dresses, and if they didn’t have a blue dress, they wore something else blue like a blue ribbon. And it is widely believed that that Medieval tradition explains the modern rhyme about what brides are supposed to wear on the wedding day: “Something old, something new, something borrowed and something blue.”

Now it was also common during this period for married women to cover their hair with a specific type of head-dress or veil. The most common type was called a *wimple*, and it covered everything but the face. It even extended under the chin and covered the neck. The part that covered the neck was called the *gorget* from a Latin root that had to do with the throat. It’s the same root that gave us the word *gargle*. The French word *gorget* (/gor-zhay/) passed into English as *gorget* (/gor-get/). Over time, the word *gorget* was extended to refer the entire head piece.

Now as the Middle Ages progressed, fewer and fewer women wore the wimple or gorget. It was reserved for special occasions when a woman would get dressed up in her best clothes. And that might include a wedding day. So a woman might wear a wimple or gorget around her head on the day she got married.

Some scholars think that this led to the word *gorgeous*. When a woman wore her gorget, she was dressed in her nicest clothes, and that was the original meaning of *gorgeous* when it first appeared in the late 1400s. It meant that someone was dressed in beautiful and brightly-colored clothing. And it was later extended to mean that someone was beautiful regardless of their clothing. So a bride was often ‘*gorgeous*’ on her wedding day because she wore her nicest clothes, including her gorget.

Now I should note that many scholars agree with this etymology, including Merriam-Webster’s Book of Word Histories, among others. But the Oxford English Dictionary remains unconvinced. The OED simply says that the etymology of *gorgeous* is “uncertain.”

Of course, the *wimple* and *gorget* have largely disappeared from modern western dress, except within the Church where it was retained as part of the nun’s habit.

But notice, that many modern brides still wear a veil when they get married, and that is based on this ancient tradition of brides covering their heads. And in fact, that tradition pre-dates the Middle Ages.

Now even if a bride didn’t wear a wimple or gorget, she would have worn a nice dress or gown, but an English bride would not have called her clothing a ‘*dress*’ or ‘*gown*.’ At least not in the



1100s and 1200s. That's because *dress* and *gown* are French words, and they hadn't been borrowed yet. Instead, they would have probably used the native Old English word for a dress, which was *hrægel*. And on her wedding day, a bride may be described as 'hrægel-gefrætwodness.' It meant elegantly dressed.

And when the bride and groom exchanged vows, it was a common tradition for the couple to take a portion of the bride's dress and tie it to the groom's jacket, or cape or cloak. It was symbolic of their union. This was actually a tradition in many different cultures, and some scholars think that it is the origin of the phrase 'to tie the knot' as a euphemism for getting married. Again, not everyone agrees with that etymology, but it seems to be the most widely accepted theory. Regardless of the ultimate source of the phrase, it is very possible that it was in use in some form during the 1100s.

The first known use of an English phrase along the lines of 'tie the knot' to refer to a marriage occurs in a Middle English text from the early 1200s. And as we'll soon see, there were very few English documents produced in the late 1100s. So the phrase may have been around for a few decades before it was finally captured in an English document.

So that's the early medieval marriage. And as we've seen, the institution of marriage was changing the 1100s. There was an increased focus on consent and personal affection, but most nobles still had arranged marriages. From the time they were born, the children of nobles knew that their future spouses would probably be selected for them. And that was certainly the case for the two prominent women who we've looked at over the past few episodes.

Down in France, Eleanor of Aquitaine was forced to marry the king's son, Louis. And it wasn't a happy marriage at all. Up in Normandy and England, Matilda had two arranged marriages. First to the Holy Roman Emperor, thus her title of 'Empress Matilda.' And then when the Emperor died, she was married to Geoffrey of Anjou, also known as Geoffrey Plantagenet.

That second marriage was intended to forge an alliance between Anjou and Normandy, which had been traditional enemies. And that marriage was also an unhappy marriage. Matilda and Geoffrey never got along very well, and they even separated for a while. They did produce three children, but that wasn't unusual for political marriages. Wives were expected to produce a male heir. Geoffrey and Matilda's eldest child was named Henry, and he will soon emerge as a VERY important figure in our story.

Now as we know, Matilda fought her cousin Stephen for control of England. And that led to civil war and anarchy. But notice something very interesting about those events. Matilda went to England to claim the throne, but her husband Geoffrey didn't. He stayed behind in France. Part of the reason for that may have been because Geoffrey was such a disliked figure in England. He was an Angevin – a traditional enemy of the Normans. And that is also why Matilda had problems getting all the barons to join her cause.



But there was also another reason why Geoffrey stayed behind in France. Because the Normans were right. Geoffrey did want to control Normandy. And when Matilda's father died, he saw his opportunity. Matilda went to England, but Geoffrey stayed behind and invaded Normandy. His wife was the rightful heir, so he felt he had a legitimate right to invade.

Stephen couldn't really fight Matilda in England and Geoffrey in Normandy, so he chose to focus on England where he held the title of king. And in the process, Normandy was allowed to slip away. Over time, Geoffrey seized more and more castles in Normandy.

While Stephen was losing territory in Normandy, he was able to hold his own against Matilda in England. When we last looked at Matilda's campaign there a few episodes back, she was on the run. She had been chased out of London, and then a short time later, she was besieged at a castle in Oxford. She fled the castle in the middle of the night. And according to some accounts, she made her escape in part by wearing a white cloak so she would blend in with the snow on the ground.

Given that she escaped wearing a cloak, she didn't really escape – not in the original sense of the word *escape*. Now you're probably wondering what I'm talking about, so let me explain the history of the word *escape*. It is a French word, and it goes back to Late Latin. And in Latin, it was a combination of the word *ex-* meaning 'out of' and the word *cappa* meaning a 'cape' or 'cloak.' So '*ex-cappa*' literally meant 'out of the cape.' And at a time when most people wore some type of cape or cloak, it was used to refer to a situation where someone was seized by the cape, and he or she managed to get away by quickly unfastening the cape. Since the fleeing person was 'out of the cape, they were *ex-cappa*, and that produced the word *escape*. So if Matilda did indeed flee in the night wearing a white cloak. she wasn't technically *ex-cappa*, but she did manage to get away in a daring escape.

Matilda's escape from the castle in Oxford took place in December of 1142. And at that point, it looked like Matilda's claims to throne were slipping away. It didn't look like she could defeat Stephen, and it didn't appear that she was going to be able to rally any more of the major barons to her cause. But even though things were looking bad for Matilda in England, her husband Geoffrey continued to plug away in Normandy.

Over the next couple of years, Geoffrey inched closer and closer to the Norman capital at Rouen. Finally, in the year 1144, Geoffrey was able to capture Rouen, and that essentially completed his conquest of Normandy. For the first time since Normandy was founded, it had fallen to a foreign leader – an Angevin.

This was actually good news for Matilda. It meant that Normandy was now in her camp – under her husband's control. And it meant that Stephen's could no longer call on troops from Normandy.

As it turned out, the loss of Normandy was a crucial step in bringing an end to the Anarchy. The Anglo-Norman realm was once again divided. And that was a big deal. As we know, most of the prominent barons held lands in both England and Normandy. So they preferred that the two

regions remained together. If the regions became divided, the barons had to choose sides. And remember, this was the feudal system. They held their lands through the king or the duke. And they had a duty to support the king or duke in exchange for those lands. And they had to provide a certain number of knights to help defend the realm. As long as the king and the duke were the same person, there was no conflict, but when the king of England and the duke of Normandy were different people, the barons had to maintain their loyalty to one and break their oath to the other. If they sided with the English king, they risked losing all of their lands in Normandy. And if they sided with the Normand duke, they risked losing all of their lands in England. Up to this point, Stephen had technically been both the King of England and the Duke of Normandy. So there was no problem. But now, Stephen was only the King of England. He had lost Normandy. So you can imagine how the barons started to squirm.

The barons who had spent a decade fighting each other, now realized that they needed to find a way to settle their differences and reunify Normandy and England. But that was easier said than done.

As I noted Matilda had been discredited. She had been forced out of London, and many of the barons resisted having a woman as the head of state. And many of the Norman barons hated her husband Geoffrey, especially now that he had taken control of Normandy. So Matilda and Geoffrey were out. And Matilda's supporters considered Stephen to be a usurper – someone who had seized the throne without a rightful claim. So he couldn't unify the barons either.

The barons started to look around for other options. And one option that stood out was Matilda and Geoffrey's son Henry. Yes, he was his father's son, so he was half-Angevin, but he was also Matilda's son. So he was half-Norman. He was also the grandson of Henry I. And Matilda's claims would eventually pass to Henry anyway. So he was essentially the heir in waiting. He had a legitimate claim to the throne. He was also a man, albeit barely a teenager at this point. So for those who opposed Matilda because she was woman, they might accept her son Henry. Henry started to emerge as the best option for those who wanted to re-unite England and Normandy. But Stephen was still in control of England, and he also had a couple of sons. And he intended to leave the crown to them, specifically his eldest son Eustace. So for now, there was no immediate resolution.

Matilda held on in England for a while. And with her husband in Normandy, she relied on the support of her brother, Robert of Gloucester. You might remember that he was Matilda's most important ally in England. But in the year 1147, Robert died. And apparently, that was the breaking point for Matilda. With a stalemate in England, and now with the death of her brother and her most important ally, Matilda basically gave up. A short time later, she left England and returned to Normandy.

At first glance, this may seem like a great victory for Stephen. But remember, the barons didn't want a divided realm. And Matilda's departure seem to confirm that the Normandy and England were destined to be permanently divided. The barons realized that a large portion of their land holdings were now in serious jeopardy, so many of Matilda's supporters in England continued to hold out, and they shifted their support to her son Henry, who was now about fifteen years old.

They saw him as the last real opportunity for a re-unified realm. Matilda was basically pushed into the background. Henry actually made a couple of trips to England and made some half-hearted attempts to challenge Stephen, but nothing ever came of those attempts.

The problem for Henry was that he didn't actually rule anything yet. He didn't even have a title. His father ruled Anjou and Normandy, and Henry was merely the heir to those regions. It was tough to rally the English barons around an heir. They needed an actual head of state.

This is when Henry's father Geoffrey stepped in. Geoffrey saw the writing on the wall, and he realized that he had an opportunity to position his son as the future King of England. So he decided to give Henry the boost that he needed by making him the Duke of Normandy. It was actually a brilliant political move because Geoffrey didn't really have a legitimate claim to Normandy anyway. He had conquered the region by force, but his son Henry did have a right to claim the title through his mother Matilda. So by giving the title to Henry, Geoffrey could effectively rule Normandy while letting his son have the title. And that title boosted Henry's position against Stephen.

Now there was one problem with all of this. That problem was the King of France, Louis VII, husband of Eleanor of Aquitaine. Initially, Louis was quite happy that Normandy had been conquered and separated from England. Normandy was his biggest rival in northern France, so he had no problem when Normandy fell to the Angevins. But over the past couple of years, Louis had been away fighting in the Second Crusade. And as we saw last time, that entire mission had been a military disaster. Now Louis returned to Paris to lick his wounds, and when he returned, he suddenly realized that Normandy had this new young Duke, and that Duke was planning to reunite Normandy and England. And that was not good for Louis.

So Louis refused to recognize Henry as Duke, and then he tried to invade Normandy to overthrow Henry. But the attack failed. Louis and Henry soon worked out their differences and reached an agreement. Louis was given the disputed region known as the Vexin, and in return, he agreed to recognize Henry as the Duke of Normandy.

The treaty was put in writing, and Henry and his father Geoffrey headed to Paris to sign the deal. And it was there that young Henry met Louis's wife Eleanor of Aquitaine. Virtually nothing is known about that meeting, but it was the first meeting between two people who were about to shape the future of western Europe.

Eleanor was the queen of France, but her days as queen were numbered. She desperately wanted out of her marriage to Louis. And by this point, the details of the separation were already being worked out. So while Louis was busy negotiating a peace with Henry, he was also negotiating a separation from Eleanor.

After the meeting in Paris, Henry and his father Geoffrey headed back home. But then something unexpected happened. Henry's father Geoffrey started to run a fever, and a short time later he was dead. That meant that Anjou and all the lands under Angevin control passed to young Henry as the heir. So literally within a matter of a few days, Henry was formally recognized as the

Duke of Normandy and then he inherited all of the lands associated with Anjou. Almost overnight, he went from an heir in waiting to one of the most powerful leaders in France.

By the way, if you're wondering where all of these places are located, just go to Episode 82 at the website – [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). Louis Henwood has prepared a map for this episode, so you can see how all of these regions fell into Henry's lap like dominos.

So now Henry was the ruler of Normandy, Anjou, and the satellite regions of Maine and Touraine. Six months later, the marriage of Louis and Eleanor was formally annulled. And Henry saw an opportunity to add the massive duchy of Aquitaine to that list.

Eleanor was entitled to keep Aquitaine under her father's Will, so after the annulment, she returned there as the Duchess. She was the richest heiress in Europe, but apparently Eleanor like being a queen. And if she couldn't be the Queen of France anymore, she might be able to be the Queen of England. By this point, everyone knew that Henry was positioning himself to go after the English throne to complete his mother's mission there. So just eight weeks after Eleanor returned to Aquitaine, Henry paid a visit. Henry needed Eleanor, and Eleanor needed Henry. It was the ultimate political marriage. They didn't need anyone to arrange it for them. They arranged it themselves, and they weren't really supposed to do that.

Technically, Henry held his lands as a vassal of King Louis. And Eleanor also held her lands as a vassal of Louis, so they were supposed to get Louis's permission. But there was no way Louis was going to let his ex-wife marry his biggest rival in France. And there was no way he was going to let Henry become the most powerful man in France, even more powerful than Louis himself.

So Henry and Eleanor ignored Louis. They made their own deal. And according to the new rules of the Church, that was good enough. They might have breached their loyalty to Louis, but what could Louis do about it?

Well, he could go to war with Henry, which is actually what he did. But by that point, Henry and Eleanor were too powerful. They could call on troops from throughout their combined realms. And Louis couldn't manage to defeat them.

A few months earlier, Henry didn't even have a title. Now, through gift, inheritance and marriage, he controlled a majority of France. He had so many titles, nobody could keep track of all of them. And he was looking to add one more title to that list – King of England.

In January of the following year, Henry finally turned his attention to England. He amassed a fleet of about thirty or forty ships and crossed the channel.

Stephen was expecting an invasion, so he assembled his forces and planned to take on Henry to decide the fate of England once and for all. But when Henry landed, Stephen's forces refused to fight. The civil war had raged on and off for nearly twenty years. And the barons were exhausted and tired of fighting. They also knew that Henry could now call upon much of France for

reinforcements if he needed them. And as we've seen, they really wanted to find a way to reunify England and Normandy to secure their lands on both sides of the Channel. So Stephen's forces stood down, and Stephen faced the real threat of a mutiny.

Stephen quickly realized that he had no other option but to negotiate with Henry and work out a deal. Throughout the first half of 1153, the barons on each side negotiated with other. But then, in August, Stephen's son Eustace died. It was completely unexpected. And with Stephen's son and primary heir out of the way, Stephen finally gave in and agreed to a settlement with Henry.

It was agreed that Stephen would continue to rule England for the rest of his life, but when he died, the kingdom would pass to Henry, thereby re-uniting England with Normandy and all of Henry's other lands in France. In December, a formal agreement was signed, and Henry was named as the official heir to the English throne. The agreement also stipulated that Stephen's foreign mercenaries would be sent back home. And many of the castles that had been built illegally would be torn down. Stephen and Henry actually worked together to implement the agreement and to return peace and order to England.

So Henry was now the heir to the throne, and as it turned out, he didn't have to wait long for his inheritance. Ten months after that settlement agreement was signed, Stephen died of fever in October of 1154.

Henry was actually in Normandy at the time, so when he got the news that Stephen had died, he put his Norman affairs in order. By that point, he was so confident in the security of his position in England that he actually waited six weeks before crossing the Channel. During that period, England was without a king, but the country remained at peace. Everyone simply waited for Henry's arrival.

In December, Henry and Eleanor finally arrived in England. At Westminster, Henry was crowned as the new King of England. He became Henry II – great-grandson of William the Conqueror, but also son of Geoffrey Plantagenet. And thus, with Henry, a new family dynasty came to rule England – the Plantagenets. At the same ceremony in which Henry was crowned as king, Eleanor was crowned as Queen. Together, they now ruled England and most of France. Henry was the most powerful European leader since Charlemagne.

Now in terms of the history of England, it is difficult to overestimate Henry's influence. If you asked most scholars to name the most important kings and queens of England, most would put Henry II near the top of that list. He oversaw a return to peace and prosperity in England. He reformed the bureaucracy and legal system. He created much of the legal framework for what we know today as English common law, and that is still the basis of most legal systems in the English-speaking world. He also continued to expand his realm. By the time he was done, he had direct or indirect control over most of the British Isles. And thanks to Eleanor, his reign brought the culture and sophistication of the southern French court to England.

Eleanor brought her courtiers with her. She continued to patronize troubadours and other poets. As we'll see, many poems and other works of literature were dedicated to her during this period.

Those dedicated works included poems and stories composed in the brand new style of romance with its focus on love and chivalry and courtly life. But there's one problem with this great cultural revival in Henry and Eleanor's new court. None of that new literature was composed in English. Henry's reign ensured that the French language and French culture would continue to dominate England. If any of that influence has started to fade under the Normans, that trend was reversed when Henry and Eleanor came to England. Their's was a massive realm, and most of it was located in France, so it was really a French court with strong influences from Aquitaine. And throughout his reign, Henry spent the majority of his time in France.

As we've seen before, this was already a dark age for English. At least we had the Peterborough Chronicle – the last surviving chronicle being maintained in English. But as soon as Henry and Eleanor came to power, that chronicle came to an end.

The Peterborough Chronicle was really just a continuation of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that had been started several centuries earlier during the time of Alfred the Great. It was part of Alfred's plan to promote English as a way of unifying the Anglo-Saxons.

But now in the year 1154, England was merely a small part of a larger French realm, and Alfred's English chronicle officially came to an end. The Peterborough scribe recorded his final entry for that year. And as far as we know, outside of a few fragments, no other major document was produced in the English language for the remainder of Henry's 25 year reign – at least no document that had survived the centuries. So English essentially ceased to exist as a written language.

So the year 1154 was an important year. It was out with the old and in with the new, so I thought it might be interesting to note this passing with a closer look at that final entry in the Peterborough Chronicle. The entry for the year 1154 summarizes the events that year. It begins with Stephen's death. It reads:

'In this year died the King Stephen; and he was buried where his wife and his son were buried, at Faversham; in a monastery they made (or founded).'

"On þis gær wærd þe king Stephne ded 7 bebyried þer. his wif 7 his sune wæron bebyried æt Fauresfeld. þæt minster hi makeden."

The scribe then notes that Henry was in France when he got the news. The scribe refers to Henry as the *earl* because English scribes didn't tend to use the words *duke* and *count* yet. So the according to the scribe:

'When the king died, then was the earl beyond the sea; but no man dared do anything other than good for the great awe or fear of him.'

"Þa þe king was ded. þa was þe eorl beionde sæ. 7 ne durste nan man don oþer bute god for þe micel eie [*'awe'*] of him."

‘When he came to England, then was he received with great worship, and blessed to king in London on the Sunday before midwinter day.’

“Þa he to Engleland com. þa was he underfangen mid micel wurtscipe. 7 to king bletcæd in Lundene on þe sunnen dæi beforen midwinter dæi.”

‘And there held he a full court.’

“7 held þær micel curt.”

By the way, that word *court* – or ‘*curt*’ – was the first known use of the word in the English language. But more notably, it is the first French word in the entry for the year 1154. That shows how much the scribe tended to use traditional Old English words. He occasionally threw in a French word, but he mostly relied on native English words.

I’ve noted before that many scholars consider these final entries in the Peterborough Chronicle to be first examples of Middle English. But not everyone agree with that assessment because the language remained overwhelmingly Old English.

The argument that these entries are Middle English lies more in the grammar and syntax than the vocabulary. As I’ve noted, there are a few French words and a few Norse words, but what really stands out about these passages is the structure of the language. The word order is closer to Modern English. Many inflectional endings have disappeared. Grammatical gender is gone. The generic article *the* is now in place. With the loss of inflectional endings, there is an increased use of prepositions. Without inflections, speakers needed new ways to indicate possession, location and context, so we see an increased use of words like *by*, *from*, *at*, *of* and *mid* – or ‘with.’ So inflectional endings are increasingly replaced with prepositional phrases.

But again, the vocabulary is still overwhelmingly from Old English. And I wanted to make this point because there is a tendency to think of Middle English as Old English with a lot of French words added in, but that isn’t really the case. As we can see here, the basic structure of the language was changing before those French words started to arrive in massive numbers. And that’s why it is difficult to pinpoint exactly when Old English became Middle English.

So the change from Old English to Middle English really took place in two steps. The structure of the language started to change first – up to the mid-1100s. And then after the mid-1100s, the French words started to pour in. So right now, at the current point in the story, we’re right in the middle of those two steps. The flood of French words about to happen. And it really happened during the reign of Henry II when English was pushed into the background and English essentially disappeared as a written language.

Even when English writing did start to reappear a few decades later, it returned as poetry or verse. It didn’t really return as prose or normal conversational speech. In fact, there won’t be another account of the history of England written in English prose like the Peterborough Chronicle for another 300 years. There will be some poetic accounts, but not normal spoken



English. So if we want to trace the way the common people actually spoke – not just the poets – we’re really at a loss after the year 1154.

The final part of the Peterborough entry for 1154 provides some clues about what was soon to come. After noting that Stephen died and Henry became king, the scribe notes that the abbot in charge of Peterborough was too sick to attend Henry’s first court. The scribe notes that the abbot died a short time later, and the monks immediately chose a new abbot. He writes:

‘the monks, within the day, chose another among themselves’

“te munekes innen dæis cusen oþer of heom sælf.”

The new abbot’s name was William de Walteville. That’s a French name, and it appears that he was a Frenchman, and presumably spoke French as his native language. The scribe notes that the new abbot went to Oxford to meet the new king Henry. The scribe writes:

‘And soon the chosen abbot, and the monks with him, went to Oxford to the king. And the king gave him the abbey.’

“7 sone þe cosan abbod ferde 7 te muneces mid him to Oxenforde to þe king 7 he iaf him þat abbodrice”

A short time later, King Henry paid a visit to Peterborough. The scribe writes the following about the visit:

‘And the king was received with great worship at Peterborough, in full procession.’

“7 sithen was underfangen mid micel wurtscipe at Burch. mid micel processiu.”

So England had a new king and queen, and Peterborough had a new abbot, but it appears that none of them had much use for English. That was the last entry composed by the Peterborough scribe.

Next time, we’ll explore the linguistic situation in England during the reign of Henry II. We don’t really have any significant English texts, but we do have Latin and French documents. And those documents shed some light on the state of English during that period. So next time, we’ll explore the relative positions of English, French and Latin in late 12th century England.

Until then, keep in mind that you can support this podcast at [Patreon.com](https://Patreon.com). Over the past few episodes of the podcast, we’ve looked at knights, wives, brides and grooms. All of those words came from Old English, but they also have something else in common. They came from the original common Germanic language, but they don’t appear to have Indo-European roots. They came from somewhere else. They are part of that significant number of Germanic words that have mysterious origins. In the next bonus episode at Patreon, I’m going to explore some of the theories about the possible origins of those words. And that bonus episode should be up in a few

days. A \$5 monthly donation gets access to all of the bonus content. You can just go to [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com) and link to Patreon from there.

So be sure to check that out if you're interested. And until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.