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MIDDLE ENGLISH VOCABULARY

The vocabulary of Middle English is considerably more varied in its origins than that of Old English. This variety has two main causes: the influence of Scandinavian languages, and the combined influence of Latin and its vernacular derivative, French. These influences operated in different ways. French or Latin words might be adopted or 'borrowed' wherever English people used those languages, which could be anywhere in the country; but Scandinavian loan-words appeared at first only in those northern and eastern regions where Danish or Norwegian was spoken. Although many such borrowings from Scandinavia eventually came into general use, they had, to begin with, a distinctively regional distribution.

Scandinavian or 'Viking' raids on Anglo-Saxon England led to settlements whose southern and western limit was defined roughly by a line drawn from London to Chester in a treaty of about 886. To the north and east of this line lay the Danelaw. Large parts of this area were settled by the immigrants, as is still shown by place-names with Scandinavian elements such as '-by' and '-thorpe' (Grimsby in Lincolnshire, Milnthorpe in Cumbria). In these circumstances, Scandinavian words naturally found their way into the speech of the native English who came into contact with the settlers, and also into the speech of the settlers themselves as they came to abandon their own Danish or Norwegian and speak the language of their adopted country – a process evidently complete by the twelfth century.

Many such Scandinavian loan-words have continued throughout their career in English to be regional or 'dialect' words. Thus the borrowing from Danish, *kay* meaning 'left' [4, 29], survived as a Cheshire dialect

word into modern times, but never achieved general currency. Chaucer attributes several such words to the two Northumbrian students in his Reeve's Tale, as part of a humorous imitation of their Northern speech: e. g. *lathe* for 'barn' (Old Norse *hlaða*). It should be remembered, however, that local users of such words, in Cheshire or Northumberland, would not have regarded them as 'dialectal', still less have used them with any special intention of local colour – in the absence, that is, of any recognized national standard vocabulary with which they might be contrasted.

But Scandinavian influence upon English vocabulary is by no means confined to areas of the Danelaw. By a process of secondary, internal borrowing, many loan-words came to be used in other, and often in all, parts of the country. In this way such very common words as 'die', 'knife', 'law', 'skin' and 'take' early established themselves in the mainstream of English, and so formed part of the normal vocabulary of Southern writers such as Gower or Chaucer. This process of adoption continued throughout the Middle English period. Thus the word 'ill', from Old Norse *illr*, used in *Sir Gawain* [4, 33], had not yet penetrated to London by 1400: Chaucer attributes it to his Northern students. The most remarkable case is that of the pronouns of the third person plural, modern 'they, their, them'. It is rare for a language to borrow pronouns from another; but in the course of the Middle English period, these Scandinavian forms in 'th-' gradually replaced native forms beginning with 'h-' (Old English *hie, hiera, him*). The first to be replaced were the nominative forms derived from Old English *hie*, which had become easily confused with the third person singular forms such as *he* or *hi*. By 1400, the Scandinavian 'they' had been adopted practically everywhere; but 'their' and 'them' are found only sporadically south of a line from the Wash to the Severn. Thus Chaucer and Gower have a mixed set: *they, here, hem.*

Since Scandinavian languages were a branch of that same Germanic family to which English also belonged, many of the settlers' words were similar in form and meaning to kindred ('cognate') native words. So in Middle English we find Scandinavian forms such as *kyrk* (Old

Norse *kirkja*) and *gyfe* (Old Norse *gefa*) in more northerly texts [6, 41], where southerly writers will use the equivalent native forms *chirche* (Old English *cirice*) and *yive* (Old English *giefan*).

Neither English literature nor the English language, as they developed in the years 1150-1400, can be understood without appreciating that there were in England throughout this period not one but three languages in active use: English, French and Latin. Latin was especially the second (or third) language of the scholar or 'clerk', who learned it in the Grammar course, which formed the first part and foundation of the common medieval school syllabus (the Seven Liberal Arts). It was spoken – since women more rarely had the opportunity of learning Latin – mostly by men: monks preaching, diplomats negotiating, philosophers disputing. It was also the common written language of official documents, chronicles, the liturgy of the Church, theological treatises, and the like. Many native poets, too, wrote their verses in Latin. French and English were both in more general use. Norman French had been the first, maternal language of the Norman conquerors. For how long French continued to be the first language of the aristocracy and royalty of England is a matter of considerable dispute. King Henry IV is said to have been the first post-Conquest English monarch whose maternal language was English. Many other English people, especially among the gentry, spoke and wrote French; but for them it was generally a second, acquired language, more or less familiar but increasingly recognized as foreign. It remained, however, an acknowledged medium of administrative, legal and polite discourse, used and understood throughout the country – though not, usually, by the common people, whose sole language was most often English. This was the language which, according to one mid-fourteen-century writer, everyone knew, learned and ignorant alike: 'Bope lered and lewed, olde and 3onge, / Alle understonden English tonge' [3, 57].

Nowadays 'literature-in-England' forms only a small part of 'literature-in-English'; but in the period 1150-1400 the opposite was the case. Literature-in-English was only a part of literature-in-England. So, the early thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* [8, 107] was written first in English

for a community of anchoresses in Herefordshire; but it was soon translated into French and into Latin for the benefit of other readers – perhaps more noble in the one case and more learned in the other – who had devoted themselves to the religious life. Layamon's *Brut* – also early thirteenth-century [10, 75] is an English version of a French poem by the Jersey poet Wace, who wrote, or so Layamon reports, for Eleanor of Aquitaine, wife of the English king Henry II. Wace's *Brut*, in turn, is a version of a Latin chronicle of the kings of Britain written by another subject of the English crown, Geoffrey of Monmouth, in the 1130 s. John Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, written in the late fourteenth century, is, for all its Latin title, a poem in English; but Gower also wrote a long poem in Latin, the *Vox Clamantis*, and another in French, the *Mirour de l'Omme* – though this last effectively marked the end of Anglo-Norman literature [5, 34].

Old English had already borrowed words from Latin, and in Middle English direct borrowing from Latin continued, but still on a fairly modest scale. Even such an evidently clerical work as *St Erkenwald* [6, 86] has only four clear cases of post-Conquest Latin borrowing: the administrative terms *commit* and *deputate*, and the ecclesiastical *martilage* ('martyrology') and *pontificals*. In the whole of the more popular romance *Sir Orfeo* there are none at all. Direct borrowing from the Latin becomes more extensive in the work of fourteen-century translators of learned Latin treatises, such as John Trevisa [9, 137]; but these translators mark only the beginnings of the long process by which English was to supersede Latin as the language of learning and adopt much of its specialized terminology accordingly.

Like all Romance languages, French derives from the spoken language of the Roman Empire; but medieval French also borrowed direct, in both England and France, from the Latin known to and used by the scholars of the time. Thus, the medieval French word *processioun* did not come down in the vernacular from Roman antiquity: it was borrowed from the medieval Latin *processio(nem)*. The Middle English *processioun* reflects the form of the French word; but it is difficult – and unnecessary, so far as stylistic values are concerned – to distinguish between

Latin and French sources in such a case. Perhaps it would be better to say that *–ion* and *–ation* words and many other similar are 'Latin-French'.

Given the co-existence of these three languages, it is natural that words and idioms should have been carried over from one to another by bilingual users. Thus, French borrowed learned terms from Latin, and Latin drew on both French and English for various contemporary terms of technology, law, and the like. But English was the chief 'borrower', partly because it was for long the language of least prestige, and partly because, as it came to share and eventually take over the functions of French and later of Latin, it took over their vocabulary for the purpose.

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