MODERN ENGLISH IN THE MAKING

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PREFACE

The miracle of our land's speech—so known
And long received, none marvel when 'tis shown.

The modern world, Mr. Kipling believes, is too placid in its acceptance of its inherited wealth in language. In this view the present writer concurs. A traditional mode of speech is accepted with too little thought of the time required and the pains bestowed before it reached its present stage of development. The English language, it should be realized, is not a wayside tree that has grown up wild; it is, rather, a highly cultivated plant which has been crossbred with other languages, which has for centuries been grafted and pruned, and which has been forced in its growth in a soil fertilized by classical culture. Surely the stages in its growth and the processes employed in its development deserve to be more widely known.

In the present book attempt is made to show the principal changes that have taken place in the English language since the adoption in the fourteenth century of the East Midland dialect as the standard form of English. Effort is made to show the natural tendencies that have affected its growth and at the same time to exhibit the methods employed in its cultivation. An account is offered of its embellishment under the influence of classical rhetoric, its enrichment by borrowed elements, its molding under the influence of Latin spelling and Latin syntax, and later the more independent cultivation of its native qualities.

Of practical benefit should be a better understanding provided for the language of our own day. The natural speech of Chaucer and the plastic language which Shakespeare molded into artistic form have been succeeded by a more rigid language. Two and a half years of a modern child's school life, it has been estimated, are consumed in the effort, sometimes vain, to bring his language, his spelling, his pronunciation, his use of word and phrase, into conformity with the rigid form which is now accepted as standard. The freedom and naturalness associated with the phrase "the Mother Tongue" have yielded to a form of tyranny suggested by the phrase "the King's English." Only through a knowledge of earlier stages in the history of the language is one enabled to understand this modern government and to estimate properly the authority of its laws.

For the prevalent lack of knowledge concerning earlier stages in the history of English an explanation is easily found. In order to win the attention of the reader to productions in earlier literature, the modern editor has too often felt it necessary to modernize the form. In consequence the reader of our time not only has little idea of the sound of the language of Chaucer or of Shakespeare, but he is left in ignorance of earlier modes of spelling, of earlier grammatical forms, of earlier words and earlier meanings of words.

For this inadequate knowledge of the English of earlier periods it is hoped that the present work may provide a partial remedy. It is hoped that the teacher may obtain a more precise knowledge of the laws governing the modern form of English which he aims to interpret. It is hoped also that not only the teacher but the general reader may find matter for entertainment and even for amusement. In

the history of the language one is able to observe progress in culture and the shaping power of genius. One may observe not only changing social ideals but exhibitions of amusing ignorance, of vain aspiration to culture, of snobbish pretension and pedantic folly. In fact, in the development of a medium for communication may be observed many of the most amusing elements of the human comedy.

There is, perhaps, one general impression deserving special emphasis. The standardization of modern English is not as nearly complete as is sometimes supposed. The language ideal of philosophers like Locke has never been realized. Idealistic efforts like those of Bishop Wilkins in the seventeenth century, of "Hermes" Harris in the eighteenth century, of Goold Brown and Richard Grant White in the nineteenth century, have been only partially successful. The English language has not been subjected to absolute rule like the Sanskrit language governed by the grammar of Panini. In other words, English is not yet a dead language. A distinguished student of jurisprudence has recently expressed a vital truth regarding political law by means of a striking paradox. "Law," says Roscoe Pound, "must be stable and yet cannot stand still." The statement applies with little modification to the case of language. Language, though regulated, is not fixed for all time but must change in company with changing conditions of life. Like human nature, of which it is a mirror, language has imperfections; and like human nature, its prospects of absolute perfection are distant and uncertain.

The debts incurred in the preparation of the present work have been numerous and heavy. Attempt is made in the footnotes to indicate the principal sources of borrowed information and borrowed ideas. The extent of the

borrowing and the great amount of the debt are in part indicated by the number of citations registered in the index. A formal bibliography of earlier works on the English language it has seemed unnecessary to include on account of the recent appearance of the monumental Bibliography by Professor A. G. Kennedy, a work upon which all future workers in this field must rely.

There remains the pleasant duty of recording personal obligations to friends and colleagues. M. O. Percival has read with critical observation large sections both in manuscript and in the proof sheets. Other sections have been read by C. E. Andrews, E. H. McNeal, and J. W. Markland. The grateful acknowledgment here expressed, however, should not inculpate these friends in any of the sins of omission or commission which will doubtless be found in this book.

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CHAPTER I

CHAOS

THERE has recently come from China a charming bit of comedy-romance turning on the language situation in that disorganized country. A young man from Canton and a young woman from Shanghai fell in love with each other. But a difficulty arose. They were confronted, not in this case by parental objections, but by an inability to communicate their sentiments owing to the difference between the language spoken in Canton and that in Shanghai. The situation was not an unusual one in China with its variant forms of local speech. Fortunately this story has a happy ending. These Chinese young people found a way out of their difficulty through use of a foreign language, English, which they had learned in the schools.

A parallel situation is inconceivable among educated English-speaking people of the modern world. A standardized form of English makes communication possible, not only between the millions of educated people in England or in the United States, but among English-speaking people in the most distant parts of the world. And yet there was a time when the language situation in England was not unlike that in modern China, when for communication be-

tween people of different parts of England resort must be had to a foreign language, either to French or to the universal learned language of that period, Latin. Going back about six centuries to the early fourteenth century, one finds the Midland writer, Robert Mannyng of Brunne, remarking that:

> Many hear good English rhymes
> Who their sense know not oft-times

and in another place, speaking of the English romance, *Sir Tristrem,* saying:

> 'Tis in such strange speech, I wis
> Many know not what it is.[1]

Later in the same century one learns from John de Trevisa that, "som useth straunge wlaffrynge chiterynge harrynge and garrynge grysbitinge." By these strange terms he expresses the uncouth effect produced by the sounds in dialects not familiar, much as in an earlier age the Greeks had expressed their feeling for the sounds in foreign speech by inventing for these sounds the imitative word *barbarous.* Trevisa in another place is more specific. He says that "Al the longage of the Northumbres and specialliche at York is so sharp slittynge and frotynge and vnschape, that we southern men may that longage vnnethe ['hardly'] vnderstonde."

From these words of a contemporary writer one may gain an impression of the diversity in the English used in different parts of England in the fourteenth century, a diversity which persists today in the dialectal speech of England. Not only were men from the North unintelligible to men of the South in oral speech, but literary works composed in one part of the country had to be translated in order to be understood in other parts. There is preserved

[1] Modern rendering by J. L. Weston.

one cycle of sacred poems, of the school of Richard Rolle of Hampole, which, according to one manuscript, is "translated out of northern tunge into southern, that it schulde the better be vnderstondyn of men of the selue ['same'] countreye." On the other hand, one version of the legend of the Assumption was translated from Southern to Northern English:

> In sotherin englis was it draun ['composed']
> And turnd ['translated'] it haue i till our aun
> Langage o northrin lede ['people']
> That can nan other englis rede.[2]

Only six centuries ago the English language was apparently in as chaotic a state as the oral language of China today. In the ensuing centuries, however, there has been developed a common form of English which education makes available in all parts of the English-speaking world. It is the development of this common standard of English speech which forms the subject of the present book.

For the purpose in mind we are not concerned with the remote origins of the English language. A search for origins would conduct one to the continent of Europe whence the Angles and Saxons brought the English language to Great Britain in the fifth century A.D. It would lead back to the common Teutonic language from which descended not only the language of the Angles and Saxons, but the modern languages of Holland and Germany and the Scandinavian countries. It would lead still farther back to the Indo-European language from which descended not only the Teutonic languages, but the language of the Romans, that of the Greeks, that of the Celtic races, that of the Slavic races, and the ancient languages of Persia and India. Such remote origins are not of present concern.

Nor are we immediately concerned with the earlier stages

[2] *Cursor Mundi*, 2061-64.

in the history of the English language in Great Britain. The development of the English language was considerable before the Norman Conquest. But during this period the cultivated form of speech was the Southern English of Alfred's kingdom of Wessex, the kingdom which had not London but Winchester for its capital, a form of English which was later degraded to use as the clown dialect of the Elizabethan dramatists and in our own time is confined to the use of rustics in Southern England. During this early period the form of English that has developed into the literary language of today was still a minor dialect.

The history of the cultivation of modern standard English has its beginning in the fourteenth century. In that century came the restoration of English to its natural place as the official and the literary language of England. In that century also came about the elevation of one of the English dialects to rank as a standard for cultivated use, and from that time begins the cultivation which has been continuous through the ensuing six centuries. The circumstances explaining these beginnings of modern standard English, however, are to be found in the chaotic language conditions prevailing during the Middle English period, that following the Norman Conquest.

The effect of the Norman Conquest on the English language had been shattering. A language which had belonged to official life and to the use of nobles and peasants alike, in which had been composed literary work of enduring worth, was reduced in station and limited to the domestic use of the lower classes. The French language became the language of the higher classes of whatever racial descent. "Vor bote a man conne Frenss, ne telth of him lute," ['For unless a man knows French, he is held of little account,'] says Robert of Gloucester writing in 1298. "Also gentil men ['noblemen's'] children beth Itaught forto speke

frensche from the tyme that they beeth Irokked in here cradul and kunneth speke and play with a childs broche and oplondisshe ['country'] men wil likne hem self to gentil men and fondeth ['try'] for to speke frensche forto be Itold of." Thus writes Ralph Higden about 1350. When one recalls further that French was the language used in the Parliament of the period and in the law courts and that French was the language used in the instruction of the grammar schools, one can readily realize the necessity of a knowledge of French for anyone of consequence, for anyone who acquired learning, for anyone who had property rights to defend, for anyone who cared to participate in public affairs. The situation of the English language, for the most part confined to the use of the uncultivated classes, in its relation to French was in many ways like that of the native Irish language in relation to English in the Ireland of today. A parallel even closer perhaps is to be found in the relation of Welsh to English in modern Wales. In the relation of the native English to the foreign languages, French and Latin, one is again reminded of the present-day situation in China.

In this period in England, as in other countries of Europe, Latin was the language of learning. In Latin were composed the works for the clerk, or scholar. But French was the language used in the composition of works intended for the entertainment of the chivalrous society of the period. The literary use of English in the two centuries following the Conquest was confined to compositions, few in number and largely religious in nature, intended for the edification of people of humble station.

> For lewde ['uncultivated'] men y vndyrtoke ['undertook']
> On englyssh tunge to make thys boke

writes Robert of Brunne in his *Handlyng Synne* (1303).

Is this romaunce of freyns ['French'] wrou3t
That mani lewed ['uneducated'] no knowe nou3t.

. . . . . .

This lewed no can freyns non
Among an hundred vnneþe on ['hardly one'].

Thus writes the English translator of a French romance of about the same period.

The gradual rise in importance of the English language, however, may be traced from about the middle of the thirteenth century on. In the struggle of the barons against the power of the king in the course of that century there grew up a popular hostility to the use of the foreign language. Matthew of Westminster, writing concerning the year 1263, says that "whoever was unable to speak the English language was considered a vile and contemptible person by the common people." It should be recalled that Edward I, who came to the throne in 1272, was the first king since the Conquest to bear a Saxon English name. During his reign, and particularly during the reign of his grandson Edward III, there was a remarkable rise in English national feeling associated with the wars against the French and the glorious victories of Edward III and his famous son, the Black Prince. This national feeling is reflected in a remarkable rise in the prestige of the native tongue. Its use was adopted even among the nobility.

Many noble ich haue ysei3e ['I have seen']
þat no freynsche couþe seye ['could speak']

writes the English translator of the romance of *Arthur and Merlin*. By the middle of the fourteenth century the English language had been in part restored to use even in royal circles. This may be inferred from the words of the English translator of the romance of *William of Palerne* (about 1350), who calls upon the reader to say a paternoster for

the Earl of Hereford, Sir Humphrey of Bowne, grandson of Edward I, who

> First caused the fair tale to translate
> In ese of englysch men in englysch speche
>
> . . . . .
>
> He let make this mater in þis maner speche
> For hem that knowe no frensche ne neuer vnderston.

The restoration of the English language to its natural place was a slow and gradual process. The restoration, however, was practically completed in the decade 1360-70. In the year 1362 Parliament was opened by the Chancellor's address in the English language. In the same year it was decreed by royal statute that English should be the language used in English law courts. About the same time came a change of equal significance, the replacement of French by English in English schools. Ralph Higden in his Latin *Polychronicon,* written about 1350, speaks of the use of French in English school instruction. His English translator, John de Trevisa, writing in 1385, inserts in his translation an original note in which he informs the reader that the use of French in English grammar-school instruction continued down to the year of the first visitation of the Plague (1349), but that John Cornwaile introduced the use of English, a practice which was followed by Richard Pentrych, so that by 1385, the date of writing, "in all the grammar schools of England, children have abandoned French and construe and learn English." He recognizes in this change a loss, since, as a result, "children in grammar schools know no more French than does their left heel" and are in consequence at a disadvantage when they "cross the sea and travel in foreign countries."

Trevisa makes also the interesting remark that "gentil men ['noblemen'] have in great part given up the practice

of teaching French to their children." The significance of this remark must not be lost sight of. Among the nobility the use of French was firmly intrenched. French literary fashions had persisted at the English court. The distinguished French poet Jean Froissart found a generous patron in the English queen Philippa, wife of Edward III, and spent a number of years at the English court serving as her secretary. Later in life, when he revisited England, he brought as a gift to the king, Richard II, a handsomely bound volume of French verse. The literary career of the English poet John Gower is also significant. In his earlier years he followed the contemporary fashion and wrote in French a number of *ballades*, and a long work entitled *Mirour de l'Omme,* or *Speculum Meditantis.* Later in life he composed a second ambitious work, the *Vox Clamantis,* this time using the Latin language. Only in his later years did he conform to changed conditions and in his third long poem, the *Confessio Amantis,* use his native English.

That English was firmly established in royal circles in the last decades of the fourteenth century is certain. Gower in his English *Confessio Amantis* informs the reader that the work was undertaken by direct commission from King Richard II. Even more significant is the fact that Richard's young queen, the foreign-born Anne of Bohemia, acquired the English language. The Archbishop of Canterbury in preaching her funeral sermon said "that it was more joye of here than of any woman that ever he knewe. For she, an alien borne, hadde *in englisshe* all the IIII gospels with the doctours upon them"

John of Gaunt, too, uncle of the King and a dominant figure in the national life of his time, on one occasion of which there is record came to the defense of the English language A bill had been introduced into Parliament to "adnulle" the Bible translated into English with other

English books in exposition of the Gospels. This anti-Wycliffite measure John of Gaunt violently opposed, and he declared: "We will not be refuse of all other nacions; for sythen they have Goddes law whiche is the lawe of oure belefe in there owne langage, we will have oures in Englishe whosoever say naye." And this, we are told, "he affermyd with a great othe."

By the end of the fourteenth century the position of the English language was assured. Henry IV, who came to the throne in 1399, was the first English king since the Conquest to whom English was the mother tongue. The opening of his reign was marked by the official use of English in Henry's formal challenge for the crown and his thanks to Parliament, also in the speech of the Chief Justice announcing the deposition of Richard II.

The relative positions of the three languages, Latin, French, and English, at the end of the fourteenth century is made clear in the words of Thomas Usk in his *Testament of Love* written about 1385. After discussing vain attempts of Englishmen to write French and of Frenchmen to write English, Usk concludes. "Let than clerkys endyten in Latin, for they have the propertee of science, and the knowinge in that facultee; and let Frenchmen in their Frenche also endyten their queynt termes, for it is kyndely to their mouthes; and let us shewe our fantasyes in suche wordes as we lerneden of our dames tonge."

But the task of reëstablishing the English mother tongue in cultivated use, of making it an effective medium for literary composition, was not a simple one. It must be held in mind that for three hundred years following the Norman Conquest there was no literary production in English by a literary artist of prominence or by a thinker of world influence. This does not mean that for three centuries England was entirely barren in culture. The noble