

Iamur domos patnas Sallice post aspera gentis
prena lamygeo 20

Where bigynneth the knyghtes tale

Whom as olde stories tellen us
They was a dur p^r highte thesaur
Of atthenes he was lord and govmour
And in his tyme such a conquerour
That gytter was they noon vnder the sonne
fful many a nche contree hadde he wonne
What with his wysdom and his chivalye

he con
Dha
And
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Wit
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lete
And

chaucer's language

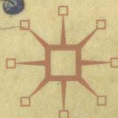
simon horobin

And ees if it nepe to long to heere
I wolde yow haue toold fully the manere
How thowmen was the regne of ffemenye
By thesaur and by his chivalye
And of the grette bataille for the nones
Betwixen atthenes and Amazonas
And how assages was ypolita
The faire hardy queene of cathia
And of the feste p^r was at hir weddyng
And of the tempest at hir hoorn comyng
But al that thyng I moot ad noon forbeie
I haue god boot a large feeld to eye
And wayke been the oye in my plough
The remenant of the tale is long ynough
I wol nat letten eek noon of this joute
Lat enei felawe telle his tale aboute
And lat se noon who shal the copie rhyme
And they leste I wol theyn bigynne

When he was come almost on to the town
In al his wele and in his mooste pyde
He was way as he caste his eye a side
Where that they fued in the weye
I compaignye of ladyes take and take

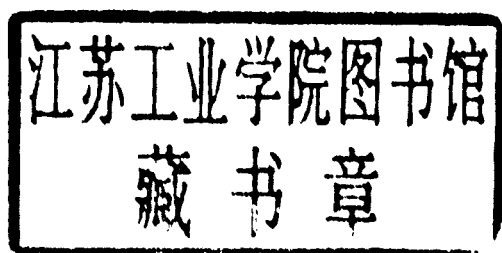


Man nat ..



Chaucer's Language

Simon Horobin



palgrave
macmillan



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For Jennifer

Preface

This book is a guide to the language of Chaucer, intended to be used by students studying Chaucer who have little or no experience of Middle English (ME). As such it does not presume any knowledge of ME and technical linguistic terminology is introduced with appropriate explanation and defined in a separate glossary at the back of the book. When discussing pronunciation, I have employed phonemic symbols for those students with some background in linguistic study, as well as giving representations based on present-day English spellings for those students unfamiliar with such symbols. Quotations from Chaucer's works are taken from Benson 1988.

In addition to its focus on Chaucer's language, this book also aims to situate this particular variety within ME more generally and so will be of use to students whose principal interest is in the linguistic study of ME. As an example of the London dialect of the fourteenth century, Chaucer's language is a particularly important reference point for the student of ME, and for study of the subsequent development of the standard English that descended from this variety. A particular theme of this book is variation, a concept central to modern approaches to language study, such as sociolinguistics, and how Chaucer exploited the variety available to him in his writing. It is only by fully understanding the nature of ME and the diversity of its dialects, especially that of London, that we can fully appreciate Chaucer's skill and the subtlety of his writing.

I am very grateful to my colleagues and my students in the Department of English Language at Glasgow, with many of whom I have had helpful discussions concerning various issues covered in this book. This book has also benefited from suggestions made by anonymous readers for the press and the commissioning editor, Kate Wallis, to whom thanks are also due. I am also grateful to my family for their support and encouragement during the writing of this book, particularly my wife Jennifer to whom this book is dedicated.

SIMON HOROBIN

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Abbreviations

<i>BD</i>	<i>Book of the Duchess</i>
El	Ellesmere manuscript
EModE	Early Modern English
<i>HF</i>	<i>House of Fame</i>
Hg	Hengwrt manuscript
IPA	International Phonetic Alphabet
<i>LGW</i>	<i>Legend of Good Women</i>
ME	Middle English
<i>MED</i>	<i>Middle English Dictionary</i>
MS	Manuscript
OE	Old English
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
OF	Old French
ON	Old Norse
PDE	present-day English
<i>PF</i>	<i>Parliament of Fowls</i>
<i>RR</i>	<i>Romaunt of the Rose</i>
<i>TC</i>	<i>Troilus and Criseyde</i>

I Why study Chaucer's language?

All living languages are subject to change. Linguistic change may happen in various different ways for a variety of different reasons, affecting the pronunciation, grammar or vocabulary of a language. We are often made aware of such changes by the media who lament the corruption and decay of the English language as reflected in such changes as the spread of estuary English, the spelling of text and email messages, and the inclusion of slang terms in dictionaries. Yet all these changes are simply reflections of the fact that languages are in a continual process of flux, adapting to reflect changes taking place in the society within which they are used. So, for instance, the revolution in information technology has led to the coining of new words such as *download* and *email* which have become adopted into English and are thus included in new editions of dictionaries. If we take a broader historical perspective, then we can see that over the past 500 years the English language has undergone numerous changes that have radically altered its structure, making it increasingly difficult for us to read texts written in English of earlier periods. Chaucer was aware of the inevitability of language change and its effects, and he considers these in the proem to Book 2 of *Troilus and Criseyde*:

Ye knowe <u>ek</u> that in forme of speche is chaunge	also
Withinne a thousand yeer, and wordes <u>tho</u>	then
That hadden pris, now wonder <u>nyce</u> and straunge	absurd
Us thinketh hem, and yet thei spake <u>hem</u> so,	them
	(2.22-5)

Linguistic change means that to read Chaucer today we need a good understanding of his language and how it differs from our own. This is most evident in the case of vocabulary, as many of the words

used by Chaucer have since fallen out of use and become obsolete. An example of this is the word *ek* found in the above quotation, where it means 'also'. This is a common word in Chaucer and therefore its meaning needs to be learned, just as today we learn common French words to help us to read texts written in that language. In fact the number of such words is comparatively small and many of the words used by Chaucer are still recognizable to us. So, for instance, in the above extract, the majority of the words are familiar enough that someone with no knowledge of Chaucer's language could probably make some sense of what is being said.

However, while the familiarity of Chaucer's words can be helpful, it can also cause problems. The availability of Chaucer's work in translations into modern English, or modernized versions, encourages the view that Chaucer's work is more similar to present-day English (PDE) than is really the case. The similarity of Chaucer's language to our own is also frequently emphasized by writers on the history of English, often as support for the view that Chaucer was responsible for creating the English literary language that we use today. For instance, in his recent book *The Adventure of English*, Melvyn Bragg describes how, in Chaucer's work, 'English speakers talk directly to us, through skilful stories told by a group of pilgrims' (2003, 69). The suggestion is that Chaucer's characters speak in a language that can be easily understood by a modern reader, thereby ignoring the linguistic divide that separates us from Chaucer's language. This view of Chaucer as a modern writer is further encouraged by current trends in Chaucer criticism that tend to emphasize the similarity between Chaucer's works and modern literature, rather than its difference. This has the effect of de-emphasizing the linguistic differences between Chaucer's language and our own, which may cause problems when it comes to reading his works. While Chaucer's works are indeed relevant to a modern audience, their language differs from that of PDE in a number of ways, and it is important that we are aware of such differences when reading Chaucer to prevent us misunderstanding his meaning.

The most obvious way in which Chaucer's language may appear similar to our own is in the survival of many of his words into PDE. But here we must be careful as a word may have kept the same appearance but have changed its meaning. This becomes apparent if we consider the phrase 'nyce and straunge' in the above passage. On the surface this phrase does not appear to cause many problems as it

is easily recognized as the equivalent of 'nice and strange'. But what does that mean? Can words be described as being 'nice and strange'? So while the apparent familiarity of these words might trick us into thinking that there is no difficulty, we must remember that words that look like PDE words may have had different meanings in Middle English (ME). So, even though the word *nyce* looks familiar, we must check in a dictionary to see how it was used in ME. The *Riverside Chaucer* gives two main senses for this word as follows: (1) foolish; (2) scrupulous. The first thing to notice about this definition is that neither of these meanings is the same as the main meaning in PDE of 'agreeable, pleasant, satisfactory'. So whenever we encounter the word *nyce* in Chaucer's works we must be careful not to give it our PDE meaning.

Armed with the *Riverside Chaucer*'s definition, we can now return to our passage and see which of these two senses is the more appropriate in this context. Clearly the intended sense here is 'foolish', although we might prefer to gloss this particular example as 'ridiculous' or 'absurd'. So by looking the word up in the glossary, we are able to determine the correct meaning of this word in this particular context. However, there are other examples of the word *nyce* that may cause us further problems. For instance, later in Book 2 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, Pandarus makes the following appeal to his niece Criseyde:

'Wel,' quod Pandare, 'as I have told yow <u>thrie</u> ,	thrice
Lat be youre nyce shame and youre <u>folie</u> ,	folly
And spek with hym in esyng of his herte;	
Lat nycete nat do yow bothe smerte.'	

(2.1285–8)

In this example neither of the definitions given by the *Riverside Chaucer* seems particularly appropriate. 'Foolish shame' might seem the most fitting translation, although this would make the following noun *folie* 'folly' seem redundant. In this case we need a more comprehensive definition, as provided by the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED). Instead of the two senses offered by the *Riverside Chaucer*, there are four major senses listed for this word in the MED; these can be summarized as follows: (1) foolish, frivolous, absurd; (2) sluggish, weak, timid; (3) fastidious, fussy, dainty; (4) extravagant, self-indulgent. Given this greater range of meanings, it

becomes apparent that sense 2, not given in the *Riverside* glossary, is the most appropriate meaning for the example given above. Pandarus is instructing Criseyde to put aside her timid shame rather than her foolish shame, which would imply a much more judgmental and dismissive attitude.

This example has shown us that we need to be wary of words that may seem familiar to us because their meanings have often changed. We also found that we should not rely entirely on the single-word glosses provided by editors, but turn to a more comprehensive dictionary, such as the *MED*, for a detailed definition of a word. The greater range of definitions provided by the *MED* means that we have to work harder to determine the correct meaning for a particular use of a word, forcing us to analyse the context more closely. This might seem like an unnecessary amount of extra effort, but it is extremely important if we are to appreciate fully Chaucer's writing.

There are many other words like *nyce* which have survived into PDE with similar spellings but with different meanings. Another good example is the word *buxom*, as in the following rhetorical question in the Merchant's Tale: 'For who can be so buxom as a wyf?' (E 1287). It would be easy to view this as a reference to a woman's physical appearance, reading *buxom* according to its present-day meaning 'plump' or 'busty', but this meaning is not recorded before the sixteenth century; the ME meaning of the word is concerned with moral behaviour and means 'obedient' or 'submissive'. Such distinctions are clearly important as they radically alter our perception of attitudes to women in the Middle Ages. While physical appearance, and especially youth, is clearly important to the lecherous old bachelor in the Merchant's Tale, he is primarily looking for obedience and subservience in his future bride.

Another word that survives into PDE with a different meaning is *sely*, which is PDE *silly*, meaning 'foolish'. However, in ME the word can mean 'holy', as in the description of the saintly heroine in the Man of Law's Tale as 'this sely innocent, Custance' (B1 682). It can also have the meaning 'simple' or 'innocent', as in the Host's reference to 'sely men' who are at the mercy of the deceit and trickery of women. There is clearly a link between the meaning 'simple' or 'innocent' and the PDE meaning 'foolish' and it is easy to see how the modern meaning has developed from the ME one. In fact, there are instances in Chaucer where the word seems to be used in a similar way to that of PDE *silly*. For example, in the Reeve's

Tale the two students who are tricked by the miller are described as being 'sely clerkes'. We could read this sympathetically as 'innocent' but the tone seems more critical, while the ridiculous image of the students charging round the fens trying to catch their runaway horse makes the sense 'foolish' seem more appropriate.

In the case of *silly*, it is apparent that in some instances the PDE meaning is appropriate, while in others, senses found only in ME are correct. This situation forces us to be particularly alert to the subtle shifts in meaning and connotation that can only be gauged from a close reading of the immediate context. Another good example of this is the ME word *corage*, which can be used with the PDE sense 'courage' as well as 'spirit' or 'temperament'. But in ME it can also refer to 'sexual desire', as in the reference to Walter fulfilling his *corage* in the Clerk's Tale (E 907). It is important to be aware of this range of meanings so as not to attribute the wrong meaning to a particular instance, such as the 'ful devout corage' with which Chaucer and his fellow travellers set out on the Canterbury pilgrimage (A 22). In most cases the correct meaning can be determined by a careful analysis of the context, although in some instances it is not so simple. For example, in the Merchant's Tale we are told that, in his old age, January had 'a greet corage' to get married. The intended meaning here is probably 'inclination', although the fact that he wants a young and beautiful wife makes the sense 'sexual desire' seem equally appropriate. This example shows how a good knowledge of Chaucer's vocabulary helps us to appreciate the range of meanings available to Chaucer, and the ambiguities and subtle distinctions in connotation that he was able to exploit. If we are unaware of such distinctions, we are likely to miss many of the nuances and ironies that are central to a true appreciation of Chaucer's work.

A sound understanding of the full range of meanings associated with Chaucer's vocabulary is particularly important when dealing with certain key terms. For instance, the adjective *gentil* and the related noun *gentillesse* occur frequently throughout Chaucer's works, representing a complex network of moral and social qualities. It is therefore important that we have a good understanding of the range of applications of these terms, especially as the word *gentle* has changed its meaning significantly since the Middle Ages. In PDE, the word signifies 'soft', 'mild' or 'tender', but these meanings are not found in Chaucer's usage. For Chaucer the word signified

rank or status, indicating that someone belonged to a noble family. By association with this meaning, it is also used to describe qualities generally associated with the well-born, such as 'courteous', 'noble' and 'generous'. A good example of this usage is found in Chaucer's description of the knight in the General Prologue, whom he calls a 'verray, parfit gentil knyght' (A 72). Given the long list of military battles and conquests Chaucer has just described, it would be odd to label the knight 'soft' or 'tender'; here the word signifies both his rank and the noble qualities associated with it. The use of this word to signify degree and rank has not survived into PDE, except in the term *gentleman*, although the original meaning of this term is no longer recognized. We might contrast this development with that of the adjective *lowely*, which is used to describe the knight's son, the Squire (A 99). In PDE this word tends to signify low status, whereas here it signifies humility and modesty.

Another key term in Chaucer's writing is the adjective *fre*, as in the Franklin's concluding question to the issues raised by his tale: 'Which was the mooste fre?' (F 1622). To begin to answer this question we need a detailed definition of the word *fre*. The *MED* gives the following main senses for this word: (1) free in rank or condition, having the social status of a noble or a freeman, not a slave or serf; (2) noble in character; gracious, well-mannered; (3) generous. Despite the obvious differences between these three senses, they overlap in complex and subtle ways. For instance, someone who is of noble birth is likely to act in a noble way, and generosity may well be part of this behaviour. People of noble birth may do ignoble acts, while it is also possible that someone who is of a low social status may act nobly in spite of their rank. This distinction is also complicated by those who belong to neither the noble nor the peasant classes, as well as those who are born peasants but who achieve noble status through the acquisition of wealth and social status. All these interlocking issues are raised by the Franklin's Tale, so that it is apparent that the Franklin is invoking each of these senses of the word when posing his final question.

Another aspect of a word's meaning and use that we need to be aware of when reading Chaucer is its connotation. Connotation is much harder to define, and it is an aspect of a word which cannot be determined simply by looking in a glossary or a dictionary. As speakers of English, we are aware of a complex network of associations for individual words that cannot be gleaned from a dictionary

entry, but require an understanding of the cultural setting within which a word is used. For instance, the words *truth* and *veracity* have similar meanings, although their connotations are quite different, with *veracity* appearing only in formal contexts. Similarly *lie* and *fib* have similar meanings, but *fib* is limited exclusively to colloquial usage. Such distinctions existed in ME as well, although it is much harder for us to reconstruct the connotations words had for native speakers of ME.

One way of determining the connotations associated with a particular word is to examine all instances of its use, taking note of a range of contextual factors, such as whether it appears in a piece of high style description in the Knight's Tale, or in direct speech uttered by a person of low social standing in one of the fabliaux. This type of analysis helps us to understand why Chaucer should use a particular word instead of another with a similar meaning. For instance, there are many words in ME with the core meaning of 'noble', raising the question of why Chaucer should select a particular one in a certain context. If we examine the distribution of some of the words meaning 'noble' used by Chaucer, we find a number of restrictions which help to isolate factors conditioning their use. For instance, the words *hende*, *joly* and *gent* are only ever used to describe characters whose nobility is decidedly dubious, suggesting that, for Chaucer, these words belonged to a lower register than others such as *digne*, *free*, *gentil*, *noble*, *riche*, *worthy*, which are frequently used to describe genuinely noble characters.

A related problem concerns words which are borrowed from French. Students tend to make the assumption that all words of French origin were of high status, and that any passage making use of French vocabulary was intended to be high style. While it is broadly true that French words were stylistically marked, it is certainly not the case that all French words belonged to a higher register. To determine which French words were elevated and which were less marked is a complex process and requires more than a simple check of a word's etymology in a dictionary. As well as knowing its etymology, we also need to be aware of its history in ME and its use, both in Chaucer and in other ME works. This is because a French word that was borrowed early on in the ME period, sometime in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, is likely to have been assimilated into the English language by the time Chaucer used it in the late fourteenth century. A similar situation is

found in PDE, where we are more aware of the French origins of words like *milieu*, *apropos*, *chaise-longue*, which still retain their French pronunciations, than of words like *problem*, *place*, *uncle*, which have become fully assimilated so that we think of them as English words.

So a true understanding of the status of Chaucer's vocabulary demands a sensitivity to the connotations of the individual words that goes beyond the simple fact of their etymologies. This is particularly important when reading Chaucer, as one of Chaucer's achievements as a poet was to exploit the connotations of words by using them in original and unusual contexts.

So far I have focused entirely on vocabulary, as this is the level of language that is likely to cause most problems of interpretation for students with no knowledge of ME. But there are also differences between the grammar of ME and PDE that it is important to be aware of when reading Chaucer. For example, students are often confused by the frequent switching between the present and past tenses in Chaucer's work, as in the following extract:

The moone, whan it was nyght, ful brighte shoon,	
And Absolon his <u>gyterne</u> hath ytake;	cittern
<u>For paramours</u> he thoughte for to wake.	because of love
And forth he gooth, jolif and amorous,	
Til he cam to the carpenteres hous	
A litel after cokkes hadde <u>ycrowe</u> ,	crowed
	(A 3352–7)

This is a piece of narration in the past, although the verb *gooth* is in the present tense. Many students fail to recognize such switches into the present tense and so translate the passage as if it was consistently in the past. But, having identified this switching between tenses, they remain uncertain as to why Chaucer should do this. In PDE, switching between the past and present tense is not generally found in written English, although it is common in speech, as in an example like, 'A chap went into a bar and says to the barman ...'. It is easy to assume that the same rules apply in ME, and that switching between tenses in writing is evidence of colloquial usage. This seems a logical explanation of the above example, especially given the frequent use of colloquial language in the Miller's Tale. However, this explanation does not account for the switching

between present and past tenses in passages written in high style, such as the following example taken from the Knight's Tale:

The sesoun <u>priketh</u> every gentil herte,	incites
And maketh it out of his slep to sterte,	
And seith 'Arys, and do thyn <u>observaunce</u> .'	duty
This maked Emelye have remembraunce	
To doon honour to May, and for to ryse.	

(A 1043–47)

So how do we explain these frequent shifts between the present and past tenses? One reason for the shift from the present to the past tense is to indicate a move from continuous to completed action, as in the above example from the Knight's Tale. The switch from the past tense to the present, as in the example from the Miller's Tale, serves to quicken the pace of the narrative, giving it greater immediacy as well as highlighting the beginning of a new stage in the story's development. The present tense may also be used within a piece of past narration to mark a statement that has a significance which goes beyond the limits of the story. So the comments on the joys of marriage in the introduction to the Merchant's Tale are in the present tense, and read like a set of pronouncements made by a character within the tale, although they are not in fact in direct speech:

And certainly, as <u>sooth</u> as God is kyng,	true
To take a wyf it is a glorious thyng,	
And <u>namely</u> whan a man is oold and <u>hoor</u> ;	particularly; grey
Thanne is a wyf the fruyt of his tresor.	

(E 1267–70)

Another possible explanation for the switching of tenses concerns metre. For example, the choice between *maketh* and *made* affects the metre, so that Chaucer may decide to employ the present tense when he needs a form with two syllables, or the past tense when one syllable is required. Whatever the reason for such switching, it is clear that we cannot judge such passages by modern standards, but need a good understanding of Chaucer's own practices in order to be able to appreciate all the stylistic implications of such details.

Applying modern notions of correct grammar to Chaucer's text can cause us many other problems, prompting us to misjudge