

Activity 14.5 - Cely letters - lexical & grammatical features

Using transcriptions in modernised spelling and punctuation helps to neutralise the “strangeness” of the originals when focusing on lexis and grammar.

Text 97

Right reverent and worshipful father, after all due recommendation pretending, I recommend me unto you in the most lowliest wise that I can or may.

Formulaic opening of a letter:

reverent - = *respectful*

recommendation - the action of recommending oneself to another's remembrance.

pretending - obsolete meaning, *proffering*, *presenting* = *having been given*.

recommend - in the MnE sense of *commend*

most lowliest - double superlative, now nonstandard.

Furthermore, pleaseth it you to understand that I came unto Calais the Thursday after my dep(ar)ting from you, in safety I thank God,

pleaseth it you - subject/verb inversion provides a modal sense = *may it please you*. 3rd person singular verb inflection <-eth>.

unto - the word is archaic in MnE.

and I was welcome unto my friends, for till my brother came to Calais there was none other tidings there but I was dead etc.

there was none other tidings - agreement of verb and complement phrase: MnE usage identifies *tidings* as the head word, and would use *no*, therefore *there were no other tidings*.

The same features occur in the next sentence:

Pleaseth it you to understand there is now none merchants at Calais nor was but few this month,

MnE *were but few*, with *few* as a plural.

and as for any other tidings, I can none write unto you as yet till I hear more,

Word order of *I can none write* obsolete - *I can write none*.

and by the next writing that I send ye shall under(stand) the sale of your fells with more, by the grace of God, who have you and all yours in his keeping, amen.

Understand in the sense of *be thoroughly acquainted or familiar with*.

who have you and all yours - modal sense implied, *may be have you ...*

Writ at Calais the 12th day of March, a(nno) 78.

Writ - a form of the past participle, now obsolete.

Text 98

I greet you well. I let you wit of such tiding as I hear.

let you wit - now archaic, from OE *witan* (*know*), present tense *wot*, past tense *wist*.
tidings - now archaic and only used in the plural form *tidings*; cp *news*.

Thomas Blehom hath a letter from Calais, the which is of a battle done on Saturday last past beside Tirwin by the Duke of Burgundy and the French king,

hath - 3rd person singular of *have*, now *has*.
the which - earlier usage with *the* before the relative pronoun.
done - an active, positive use of the verb *do*, meaning *performed*, *executed* = *fought*.

the which battle began on Saturday at 4 of the clock at afternoon, and lasted till night, and much blood shed of both parties,

4 of the clock - the original form of the reduced MnE *4 o'clock*
at afternoon - archaic use of the preposition *at* - in *the fternoon*

and the Duke of Burgundy hath the field, and the worship.

worship - obsolete sense of *honour*, *distinction*, *renown*, *credit*.

The Duke of Burgundy hath got much ordnance of (the) French king's and hath slain 5 or 6 thousand Frenchmen. Writ on Thursday now in haste.

slain - archaic in MnE (though used in newspaper headlines).

Text 99

There is great romber in the realm.

romber - *rumour*, having the now obsolete meaning of *uproar*, *tumult*, *disturbance*. This sentence is quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* under *rumour*, but there is no reference to Cely's usage. An interpolated bilabial stop [b] or [p] following the bilabial continuant [m] is a not uncommon feature of English pronunciation, sometimes recognised in the spelling, eg *redeem/redemption* and the alternative surname spellings *Thomson/Thompson*, but not consistently. Compare the common pronunciation of *warmth* as [wɔmpθ].

The Scots has done great in England. (The Lord) Chamberlain is deceased in trouble. The Chancellor is disproved and not content. The Bishop of Ely is dead. If the King, God save his life, were deceased. (If) the Duke of Gloucester were in any peril. If my Lord Prince were, God defend, were troubled. If my Lord of Northumberland were dead or greatly troubled. If my Lord Howard were slain.

The Scots has done - with the other examples of *has* this suggests a regularization of the present tense of *have* to *has* with both singular and plural subjects.
disproved - the word's original meaning, *to prove to be false or erroneous*.
