

Activity 13.3 – Chaucer *Summoner's Tale* & *Reeve's Tale*

Spelling & letter forms

- Letters <u> and <v> are alternative forms of the same letter, in a way similar to the use of capital and lower-case letters like <U, u, V, v>. Each letter represents either sound, the vowel [u] and consonant [v], according to its position in the word. Letter <v> is only used as the first letter in a word (word-initial), as in *verrayly* (consonant) and *vnto* (vowel). Letter <u> is used elsewhere (word-medial or word-final), as in *gouern* (consonant), *quod* or *thou* (vowels).
- Alternative forms of <s> are similarly dependent upon the position of the letter in a word. Long s <ſ> is used word-initial and word-medial; round s <s> familiar to us is word-final.
- Letter <r> has three shapes in the Harley MS. The form like Greek <σ> is generally used following letter <o>. A third form in the Harley MS is the one most commonly used in the Hengwrt MS.
- Letter <i> was not dotted, and so could quite easily be confused when adjacent to minim letters <n>, <m> or <u>, so letter <y> was frequently used as an alternative. In the two manuscript texts we find *wif* and *wyff*, *kisse* and *kys*, *right* and *knyght*, *preching* and *likyng* and a fairly equal distribution of use among other words. As a word-final syllable <y>, <ye> or <ie> were used, but not <i> - *angry*, *bauderye*, *clergie* - though <ie> is the least common.
- Letter <j> was not in use yet as the letter representing the consonant [dʒ]; letter <i> was used, *ioye*, *Iesus*. <j> was used as the final digit in Roman numerals with letter <i>, eg <iij> for <3>.
- In the Hengwrt MS letter <y> is used in words like *yow* and *yong*, in a way familiar to us, but the Harley MS scribe used letter yogh <ȝ>, which had represented the sound in Old English. This tells us that the word *zeue* was pronounced with the initial sound [ʒ].
- Letter thorn <þ> still survived from OE usage, although <th> had begun to be substituted for it soon after the Norman Conquest in the 11th century. It appears in the Harley but not the Hengwrt MS.
- In OE, the pronunciation of words spelt with <sc>, originally pronounced [sk] had changed to [ʃ], as in *scip*, pronounced just as it still is in *ship*. This spelling changed, because French-speaking scribes in the period after the Conquest were not familiar with a sound that did not exist in French, so that in different parts of the country we find different ways of spelling, eg *s*, *ss*, *ssh*, *sch* and *sh*.

Copyists' mistakes

(When both manuscripts are quoted, the Harley MS is first; line numbers refer to the transcriptions of Text 84.)

- 2 Sith I may gouern and chese as me list
- 2 Syn I may chese / and gouerne as me lest

Sith and *syn* are different reductions of the OE *sippen*. Notice how this affects the rhythm of the lines. Editorial choice between the order of *gouern* and *chese* will be determined by the way the Hengwrt version runs more smoothly as a line of verse:

Syn I / may **chese** / and **go** / uerne **as** / me **lest**.

- 17 ffor ioye he hent hir in his armes tuo

The Harley MS scribe appears to have written *in hir armes tuo*.

- 33 He made alway a louryng cheere
- 36 He made alwey / a manere louryng cheere

The Harley scribe has omitted the word *manere*

- 49 I pray ȝow þat noon of ȝow be euel a payd
- 52 I praye / that noon of yow / be ypayd

Neither line is satisfactory. The Harley scribe has probably written a redundant *yow* in the line, *I pray þat noon of ȝow be euel a payd*, while the Hengwrt scribe has omitted *euel*.

This line from the Hengwrt MS,

- 47 To prechyng / and to scole of clergye

lacks a syllable. The <e> of *scole* is not pronounced before the vowel of *of*. This could be a writing error, as the Harley MS has the plural *scoles*, whose two syllables make up a satisfactory verse line.

- 60 Is to ben a fals flateriŋg lymytour
- 64 It is / to be a flateriŋge lymytour

In this corresponding pair, the Hengwrt version is satisfactory, but the Harley line does not run smoothly and seems to have been miscopied.

- 74 And eek of many anoþer cryme
- 75 Which neediþ not to reherse at þis tyme
- 65 And of / many another maner(e) cryme
- 66 Which nedeth nat rehercen / for this tyme

The first observation to make on these pairs of lines, is that they appear at different places in the manuscripts, and both make sense. Without being able to refer to other manuscripts, there is no way to judge which is the “right” version or which scribe may have transposed the lines originally. The Harley MS line *And eek of many anoþer cryme* is deficient in two syllables, so it looks as if the scribe omitted *manere*. Of the two second lines, the Hengwrt version runs more smoothly as verse, because the Harley line places a stress on the first syllable of *reherse*. In the next pair of lines, it is the Harley version which sounds right,

- 73 Of contractes and of lak of sacraments
- 83 Of contractes / and eek of lakke of sacramentz

The writing of the word *conūtre* in *Whilom þer was duellyng in my conūtre* looks like a straightforward mis-writing for *countre*.

Text editing

Your choice of which text to use in an edited version depends upon a number of features.

The pronunciation of final <e>

Lines which would require a final <e> to be pronounced as a suffix are listed below, with a comment where it seems useful. (Both versions are quoted only when there is a significant difference between the corresponding lines.)

- 6 This is to say 3e boþ e fair and good
- 7 I pray to god þat I mot sterue wood

The Hengwrt line has the older infinitive inflection <en> *I pray to god / that I mote **steruen** wood*. This is evidence of the process of **reduction** operating at a different pace in different dialects, so that both *steruen* and *sterue* could be heard, with the final <e> of *sterue* still pronounced. In time it was completely omitted, and infinitives in present-day English consist of the base form of the verb only, with no inflection. The sequence, from OE to MnE, would have been *steorfan* - *steruen* - *sterue* - *starve*. The pronunciation of *starve* is a later development (cp *person/parson*).

Another interesting contrast is between the corresponding lines,

- 12 That is bitwixe thest and eek þe west
- 12 That is bitwix the Est / and eek the West

in which vowels of *the* and *est* are assimilated to form a single syllable, which requires the final <e> of *bitwixe* to be pronounced in the Harley version, whereas the Hengwrt line has two-syllable *bitwixt* and *the Est*.

- 16 ffor ioye he hent hir in his armes tuo
- 17 His herte bathid in a bath of blisse
- 20 And sche obeyed him in euary þing
- 21 That mighte doon him pleisauns or likyng
- 22 And þus þay lyue vnto her lyues ende
- 24 Housbondes meke 3onge and freissche on bedde
- 29 God sende hem sone verray pestilence

These quotations should be sufficient illustration of the need to pronounce a final <e> only on certain words, in order to maintain the metre of the verse, so other identical lines in the two texts will not be quoted.

The following lines show how either a pronounced <e> suffix or a one-syllable word may be alternative choices:

- 35 No vileyns worde 3it to him spak he
- 38 No vileyns word / as yet to hym spak he
- 37 Dame quod he . god 3iue 3ow good lyf
- 40 Dame quod he god yeue yow right good lyf
- 53 Our oste spak a sir 3e schold been heende
- 56 Oure hoost tho spak / a sire ye sholde be hende

- 56 Tell e 3our tale and let þe sompno^t be
- 59 Tell eth youre tale / and lat the Somno(ur) be
- 65 Tell eþ forþ 3our tale my maister deere
- 70 Tel forth your tale leeue maister deere

In the last quoted pair, the Harley line must begin with a stressed syllable in a nine-syllable line, which is not an uncommon variation.

Word forms and grammar

The texts produce only limited evidence for a description of the grammar of Chaucer's English, and may not contain examples of certain features. Chaucer's educated London dialect is relatively easy for us to read because it eventually became Standard English, and has much in common with the English we speak today.

Nouns - (a) Plural and possessive inflections

Most of the plural nouns in the texts are marked with the <s> or <es> inflection of MnE, which derived from the OE <as> plural - *armes, wyues*. They include French words which were fully assimilated into English and so were marked with English inflections - *auctoritees, contractes, ffreres, lecchours* etc., and also Old Norse words - *housbondes*. But some plural nouns of French origin in the texts are marked with a <z> inflection - *mandementz, sacramentz, testamentz*. These are relatively uncommon legal terms. Spelling the plural with <z> copied a French convention, but did not survive.

The irregular MnE plurals like *men, women, geese, mice* derive directly from OE through ME, eg - OE *menn, wifmenn; ges, mys*; ME *men, wimmen; ges, mis*; MnE *men, women, geese, mice*, but there are no examples in the texts.

There had been a very common plural suffix <an> in OE which only survives in three words today, *oxen, children* and *brethren*. More of them had survived in southern dialects of ME, but only a few are found in Chaucer's writing, like *bosen, assben, eyen* and *oxen*. He used both forms of plural, <s - es> and <en> in some words, eg *bees - been, toos - toon, shoos - shoon*.

An <es> inflection, identical to the plural, had become normal to mark the possessive by 1400. It derived unchanged from OE <es>, and most words with another common OE possessive inflection <a> had adopted <es>. In the texts we have *her lyues ende, at euery tounes eende, no vileyns worde, in goddes name* and *þe ffreres tale* (31)

Nouns - (b) Possessive structures

The structure of the title *The Wife of Bath's Tale* is of interest. This form of possessive in present-day English, in which the <'s> inflection is a suffix to the whole noun phrase *The Wife of Bath* is known as the **group genitive**. The Hengwrt MS has *þe Wyues tale of Bathe*, a form which occurs often in ME in which the possessive inflection is a suffix on the head noun, *Wyues*, with its post-modifier *of Bathe* following *tale*. The Harley MS has *þe Wif of Bathe hire tale*, a form of possessive using a pronoun, which survived into the 17th century.

Pronouns - (a) Personal pronouns

Most of the personal pronouns occur in the texts. In OE, all the personal pronouns began with <h>, and in ME texts there is much variation in the forms. The spelling <he> for example was used in

different dialects for both *he*, *she* and *they* (in OE *he*, *heo*, *hi*). So the development of *sche/she* for the feminine pronoun, used by Chaucer, was also part of a useful distinction.

Pronouns - (b) Relative pronouns

Both *þat* and *which* were used as relative pronouns, and there is a single example of each:

hem þat we wedde (25), which neediþ not to reherse (75)

Chaucer did not, however, use *who* as a relative pronoun. This usage developed later.

Verbs - (a) Infinitives

OE infinitives were marked with the suffix <an>, which in ME was successively reduced to <en>, then <e>, and finally lost altogether, as in MnE. All living languages are in a state of change, so that different forms of word, inflection or structure may be in use at the same time. The texts show evidence of infinitives at various stages of change, with different choices for the same word in either text - *be/ben/been*, *speke/speken*, *steruel/steruen*, *tell/telle*. The infinitives of the verbs of French origin have <en> - *quyten*, *rebercen* but also *reherse*.

Verbs - (b) Other verb inflections & (c) strong and weak verbs

Past tense regular (weak) verbs

The regular past tense suffix today is <d - ed>, derived from part of the suffixes of what linguists call “weak verbs” in OE - *answerd/answerde*, *made*, and also applied to verbs from French - *obeyed*. Regular past participles are identical in form - *bathid*, *touchid*, *gouerned*, sometimes spelt with <id>, presumably to match pronunciation.

Present tense regular (weak) verbs

The present tense of weak verbs in Chaucer’s dialect took various suffixes. With 1st person singular *I*, a former <e> inflection has now been lost,

I bold it best / I wol be / I pray to god / I say

There are no examples in the text of the 2nd person singular suffix <-st ~ est>, but they can be easily found elsewhere,

Thow seyst / thow wolt preise / thow shalt nought / thow liknest

The 3rd person singular present tense was marked with the suffix <-th ~ eth>,

endith / byg̃neth / it comeþ / vs needeth nat

There is a single example of the plural suffix <-en>, as *we ryden*.

Past tense irregular (strong) verbs

The clearest difference between what we call “irregular verbs” today and regular verbs is that the past tense of irregular verbs is marked by a change of vowel, as in *sit/sat*, *come/came*, *ride/rode*, *fight/fought* etc. Examples in the texts are (infinitive first),

queþen/quod, *sen/saugh*, *seggen/sayd*, *speken/spak*

(d) Perfect aspect

There are two examples,

ze han her touchid ... (38) ze han sayd ... (40)

(e) Passive voice

There is one example,

That wil nought be gouerned after her wyues

(f) Impersonal contructions

The construction of *as me list* and *What so him list* may be literally translated as *as to-me (it) pleases* and *What so (it) to-him pleases*, which are not, of course, grammatical today. There is no subject noun or pronoun in either clause, so we understand *it* as the subject, which is used as an impersonal pronoun, and *me* and *him* are in the dative case in ME, meaning *to me* and *to him*. Therefore *what is pleasing to me* and *what is pleasing to him* would be an acceptable translation into MnE. The forms *what I please* and *What he pleases* are now the usual way of saying what Chaucer's impersonal construction says. Other examples are, *Doth by my lyf right euen as 3ow lest*, - *as (it) pleases you*, or *as you please* in MnE. *Vs needeþ nouȝt but for to speke of game* translates literally as *To us (it) needs not only to speak of pleasure*, but the double negative of *nought* with *but only* is no longer acceptable in Standard English, and we have to paraphrase to make a reasonable translation, *We ought to speak only of amusing things*.

The clause *But if it like to þis companye* illustrates the impersonal construction using *it* as the subject of *like* and *to* to mark the indirect object noun phrase.

(g) The verb be

This common verb has eight different forms today - *be, am, is, are, was, were, being* and *been*. It has been a most irregular verb from OE times, and is today a clear marker of dialectal variants - *I were, we was, her be, we'm, I are* etc.

(h) The verb do

The function of *doon* and *did* in *That mighte doon him pleisauns* and *lecchours did he grettest woo* is as a causative, that is, it implies a cause - *that might cause him to have pleasure* and *he caused the greatest woe to lechers*. This was a common function of *do* in ME.

gan

Another different usage of a common verb can be seen in the line *A thousand tyme on rowe he gan hir kisse*, the verb *gan* is used as an auxiliary verb marking a form of past tense, meaning simply *he kissed her*, not *he began to kiss her*.

Negatives

OE used the particle *ne* before the verb to make it negative. In ME *nought/nat/not* was sometimes placed after the verb, and was a "reinforcing negative" - *I ne wil not ...* Eventually *ne* was dropped from the negative construction. It was still the normal negative in Chaucer's English, although the negative verbs in our texts show that it was now possible to drop *ne* - *That wil nought be gouerned after her wyues* and *Vs needeþ nouȝt but for to speke of game*. Examples of Chaucer's use of *ne* with other negative words are easy to find, for example, from the *Friar's Tale*,

- Stomak **ne** conscience **ne** knowe I **noon**
- And yet **ne** wan I **nothyng** in this day
- **Ne** was I **neure** er now wydwe **ne** wyf
- **Ne** **neure** I **nas** but of my body trewe

nas = **ne** was

This reinforcing function of the negative produces a construction called the multiple or double negative, which is no longer acceptable in Standard English today, although very widespread still in all the regional dialects.

but

The word *but* was often used with the meaning like *except* or *unless*. This usage is now less common, though it survives in expressions like *No one but me was able to do it*.

Order of indirect object pronouns

The word order in *ihū crist vs send ...* and *I schal him telle* is no longer acceptable. The indirect object pronoun must now follow the verb - *I shall tell him*.
