



The English Language in the Fourteenth Century

The Status of English

Geoffrey Chaucer probably spoke French from his earliest age, for when he was born, the custom was still as Ranulph Higden (died 1364) described it a few years earlier:

Children in school, contrary to the usage and custom of other nations, are compelled to drop their own language and to construe their lessons and other tasks in French, and have done so since the Normans first came to England. Also, gentlemen's children are taught to speak French from the time that they are rocked in their cradles and can talk and play with a child's toy; and provincial men want to liken themselves to gentlemen, and try with great effort to speak French, so as to be more thought of.
(Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden monachi Cestrensis . . . ed. Rev. Joseph Rawson Lumby, [Liechtenstein] Krause Reprint, 1965 [Widener: Br 98.86.1].)

This unusual situation, in which the common people spoke one language, and the aristocrats another, was due to the Norman Invasion in 1066. Robert of Gloucester, a late 13th-century chronicler (fl. 1260-1300; his Chronicle ends in 1271) tells how this came about:

**Much sorrow has been often in England,
As you may hear and understand,
Of many battles that have been and men have conquered this land.
First, as you have heard, the emperors of Rome.
Then the Saxons and Angles with battles strong,
And then those of Denmark that held it so long,
At last those of Normandy that be yet here
Won it and hold it yet; I will you tell in what manner:**

**When William the Bastard heard tell of Harold's treachery,
How he had made him king and with such falsehood,
For that land was given to him, as Harold well knew**

...

**Thus came -- lo! -- England into Norman's hands,
And the Normans could not speak anything except their own speech,
And spoke French as they did at home, and their children did also
teach,**

**So that high men of this land that of their blood come
Hold to all that speech that they took of them;
For unless a man knows French, men think little of him.
But low men hold to English and to their own speech yet.
I suppose there be none in all the countries of the world
That do not hold to their own speech, save for England alone,
But yet it is well for a man to know both,
For the more a man knows the more he is worth.**

**(Tr. from *The metrical chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*, ed. William
Aldis Wright. [Liechtenstein] Kraus Reprint, 1965 [Widener: Br
98.41].)**

Chaucer was of the gentle classes and he clearly spoke French from an early age and probably first wrote poems in French, the language of the courts in which he served first as a page in the court of the Countess of Ulster and then as squire in the courts of Prince Lionel and Kings Edward III and Richard II.

The situation was changing in Chaucer's lifetime -- or rather, changes that had been operating since the thirteenth century were beginning to have an obvious effect. The aristocracy used French but most used English as well. King Edward I knew English and even enjoyed English poetry. However, French continued its cultural dominance: The court of King Edward III was French in culture and cultivated French poetry, with French poets such as Jean Froissart and Otho de Graunson, whom Chaucer knew, helping to set the tone. Furthermore the court began speaking Parisian French, an acquired skill, rather than Anglo-Norman, the variety of French used in England, to which earlier nobles had been born. By the time Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* the form of speech brought over by the Normans was still extent only in the provinces, a source of gentle satire in the portrait of the Prioress:

**And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly,
After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
For Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe.
(*General Prologue*, I.124-26)**

By this time, English had replaced French as the language of instruction in the elementary schools. John of Trevisa, who translated Higden's *Polychronicon*, quoted above, says that now, at the time of his writing (1385), the situation has greatly changed:

This manner [of instruction in French in elementary schools] was much used before the first plague [1348] and is since somewhat changed. For John Cornwall, a master of grammar, changed the teaching in grammar school and the construing of Latin into French into English; and Richard Pencrych learned that manner of teaching from him, and other men from Pencrych. so that now, the year of our lord one thousand three hundred four score and five, of the second King Richard after the Conquest nine, in the grammar schools of England children leave French and construe and learn in English, and they have advantage on one side and disadvantage on another. Their advantage is that they learn their grammar in less time than they were accustomed to do. The disadvantage is that now children of grammar school know no more French than their left heel, and that is harmful for them if they should pass the sea and work in strange lands, and in many other cases. Also gentlemen have now much left off teaching their children French.

(Tr. from the edition cited above; for the whole passage from Trevisa's translation of Higden [click here](#).)

English was also becoming the language of government; in 1362 Parliament was opened with a speech by the Chief Justice in English (and by the Chancellor in the next two parliaments), the first time since the Conquest the native language was so used. Also in the Parliament of 1362 the *Statute of Pleading* was enacted. It provided that

All pleas which shall be pleaded in his [the King's] courts whatsoever, before any of his justices whatsoever . . . shall be pleaded, shewed, defended, answered, debated, and judged in the English tongue.

Though the statute also specified that the records of pleas were to be kept in Latin (and the parliamentary speeches were recorded in French), by this time English was coming to be regarded as a language suitable for aristocratic literature. In the early fourteenth century English writers aimed for audiences that knew no French. Robert Manning began his *Story of England* (finished 1338) with:

1 Lordinges that be now here,
If ye will, listen and lere *learn*
Al the story of Ingland *history*
As Robert Mannyng written it fand *found*
5 And on Inglysch has it schewed,
Not for the lerned but for the lewed
For tho that in this lande wone *dwell*
That the latin ne frankys cone. *know no Latin or French*

. . . [he lists his sources]

71 As thai haf writen and sayd,
Haf I al in my English layd *could*
In simple speche, as I couthe, *easiest*
That is lightest in mannes mouthe

Robert Manning wrote specifically for the "lewed," the unlearned. His contemporary, the author of the early fourteenth-century *Arthur and Merlin* claims to write for even a noble audience:

**French use these gentlemen,
But everone understands English;
Many a noble I have seen
That could speak no French.**

By the later fourteenth century a demand for English had developed, and literary works in English were wanted not because their audience had no French but because they preferred English. John Gower wrote works in Latin, French, and English -- the latter, his *Confessio Amantis*, written at the request of King Richard himself.

Chaucer, as noted above, probably wrote his earliest poems in French, but none have survived (unless those poems marked with the cryptic "Ch" in the Pennsylvania MS are Chaucer's: see Wimsatt, James I. (ed), *Chaucer and the poems of "Ch" in University of Pennsylvania MS French 15*, Cambridge, [Cambridgeshire]: Brewer ;Totowa, N.J., USA: Rowman & Littlefield, 1982 [PR1911.W56 1982].) He was known rather as an English poet, the most respected of the time, and the respect he received is a measure of the respect English had gained as a literary medium.

Nevertheless, Chaucer remained very much aware of the problem of writing sophisticated poetry in English; it demanded a new form of the language -- a literary language, shaped largely by French and Latin models -- the [high style](#) -- and with a heavy use of [borrowings from Latin and French](#) but built upon the old popular tradition that Chaucer knew as a boy (and fondly pokes fun at in Sir Thopas) and on a keen awareness of actual speech,

which forms the basis of his dramatic style.

For a bibliography of critical and scholarly works on Chaucer's language and style, [click here](#).

MIDDLE ENGLISH DIALECTS

Fourteenth-century English was spoken (and written) in a variety of dialects. Middle English speakers recognized three distinct dialects -- Northern, Midlands, and Southern:

Also, English though they had from the beginning three manner of speech -- Southern, Northern, and Middle speech in the middle of the land, as they come from three manner of people in Germany [*i.e.*, Angles, Saxons, and Jutes].

[Tr. from John of Trevisa, as above.]

Modern scholars distinguish five dialects ([see map](#)).

Chaucer's Parson is a "Southern man" and he claims he can not even understand the alliterative poetry common in the North -- he uses nonsense syllables to describe it:

I kan nat geeste `rum, ram, ruf,' by lettre, (*Parson's Prologue, X.43*).

He may have shared John of Trevisa's attitude toward Northern Speech:

All the language of the Northumbrians, and specially at York, is so sharp, piercing, rasping, and unshapely that we Southern men can hardly understand that language. I suppose this is because they are nigh to foreign men [*i.e.*, Scots] and aliens who speak strangely, and also because the kings of England dwell always far from that country.

The dialect of London, the commercial, intellectual, and political center of power, was becoming the prestige dialect. The idea of "the King's English" underlies Trevisa's comment on the Northern dialect, and it appears

directly in Chaucer's *Treatise on the Astrolabe* for the first time:

God save the king, that is lord of this langage [(*Astr Pro.56-57*)]

By the fifteenth century, London English was firmly established as the dialect spoken by the denizens of power, a fact used for comic effect in [The Second Shepherds' Play](#).

The literary language that Chaucer fashioned become the standard written language of elegant writers and the language of London became the written standard for all formal English. (It is, of course, more complicated than this; for an advanced discussion see: John H. Fisher, "Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century," *Speculum*, Vol. 52, No. 4. (Oct., 1977), pp. 870-89.)

In the late fifteenth century, the printer William Caxton, who greatly influenced what is now Standard Written English complained about the changes in the language since earlier times and its diverse dialects:

[I] took an old book and read therein, and certainly the English was so rude and broad that I could not well understand it. And also my lord Abbot of Westminster had shown to me recently certain evidences written in old English for to translate it into our English now used. And certainly it was written in such a manner that it was more like Dutch than English. I could not translate it nor bring it to be understood.

And certainly our language now used varies far from that which was used and spoken when I was born. For we Englishmen are born under the domination of the Moon, which is never steadfast but ever wavering, waxing one season, and wanes and decreases another season.

And that common English that is spoken in one shire varies from another. Insomuch that in my days happened that certain merchants were in a ship in the Thames, for to have sailed over the sea into Zeeland, and for lack of wind they tarried at foreland and went to land for to refresh themselves. And one of them named Sheffelde, a mercer, came into a house and asked for food; and especially he asked for eggs. And the good wife answered

that she could speak no French.

And the merchant was angry, for he also could speak no French, but wanted to have had eggs, and she understood him not. And then at last another said that he would have "eyren." Then the good wife understood him well.

Lo, what should a man in these days now write, "eggs" or "eyren"?

[Tr. from the preface to *Enydos* Caxton's *Eneydos*, 1490. Englished from the French *Liure des Eneydes*, 1483. Ed. by the late W. [read M.] T. Culley ... and F.J. Furnivall, London, a EETS, 1890 [Widener: 11473.57].

Caxton solved the problem by using London English and thus set the standard that other printers would follow.

His puzzlement over the changes English had undergone in his lifetime will stir the sympathy of students first encountering Chaucer's language. But the problem is not all that difficult. The fifteenth century was the time of [The Great Vowel Shift](#), which accounts for the greatest difference between Modern English and Chaucer's English, the Pronunciation of the "long vowels." This is not as difficult as it may seem; use the [exercises provided](#).

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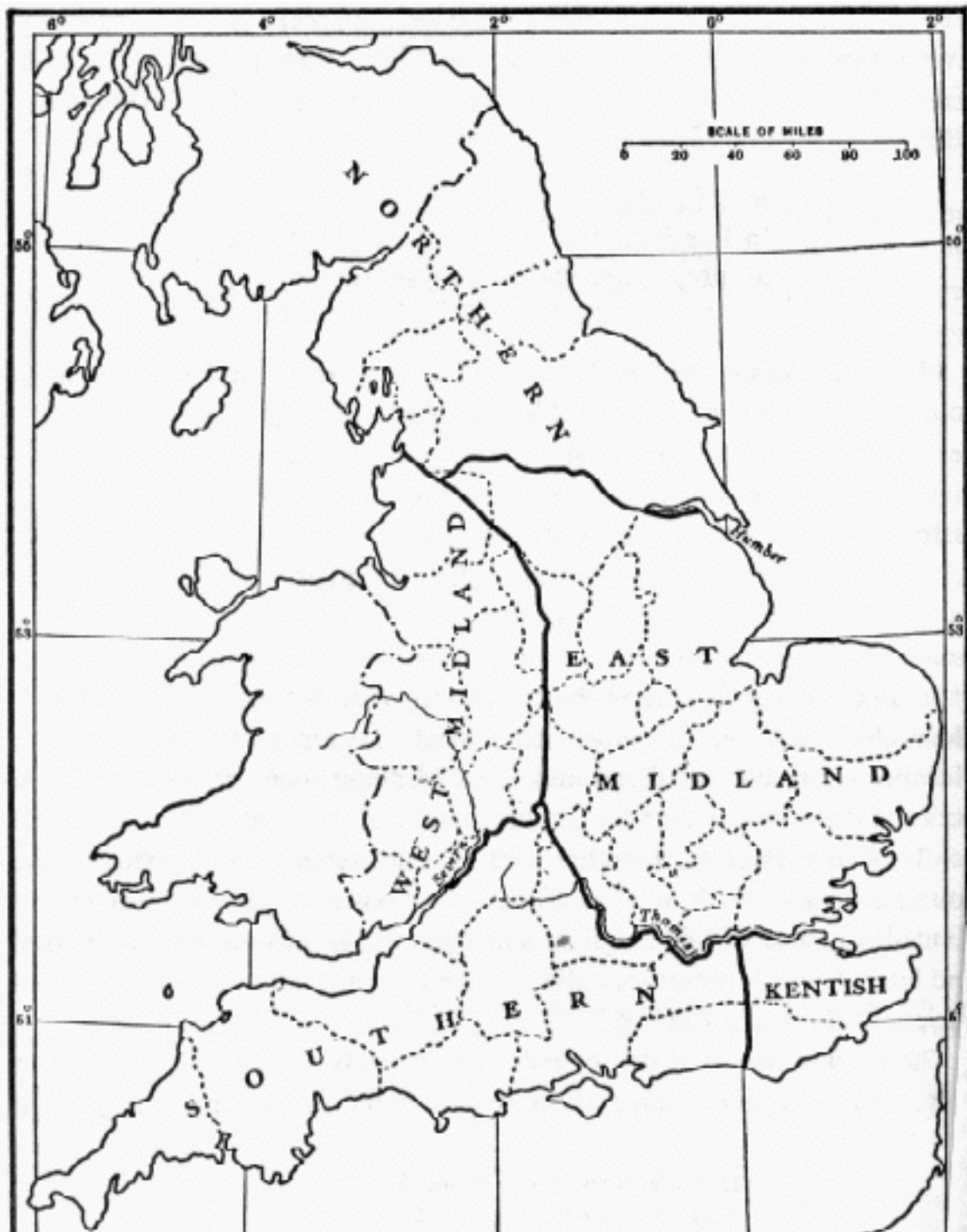
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The Principal Middle English Dialects



The clerks in the Reeve's Tale are from Strother, in the Northern dialect area (north of the river Humber, which divides the Northern from the East Midland dialect area). The Reeve himself is from Norfolk, in the northern East Midlands.

Chaucer is from London, on the Thames, which divides the Kentish and East Midlands dialect areas; it is a distinct area on its own.

The Parson says he is a "Southern man," from the area south of the Thames; but he speaks in the London Dialect.

For some details on Middle English dialects, see the [note on dialects](#).

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The Great Vowel Shift

The main difference between Chaucer's language and our own is in the pronunciation of the "long" vowels. The consonants remain generally the same, though Chaucer rolled his r's, sometimes dropped his aitches, and pronounced both elements of consonant combinations, such as "kn," that were later simplified. And the short vowels are very similar in Middle and Modern English. But the "long" vowels are regularly and strikingly different. This is due to what is called The Great Vowel Shift.

Beginning in the twelfth century and continuing until the eighteenth century (but with its main effects in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries) the sounds of the long stressed vowels in English changed their places of articulation (i.e., how the sounds are made).

Old and Middle English were written in the Latin alphabet and the vowels were represented by the letters assigned to the sounds in Latin. For example, Middle English "long e" in Chaucer's "sheep" had the value of Latin "e" (and sounded like Modern English "shape" [e] in the International Phonetic Alphabet [IPA]). It had much the same value as written long e has in most modern European languages. Consequently, one can read Chaucer's long vowels with the same values as in Latin or any continental European language and come pretty close to the Middle English values.

The Great Vowels Shift changed all that; by the end of the sixteenth century the "e" in "sheep" sounded like that in Modern English "sheep" or "meet" [IPA /i/]. To many it seemed that the pronunciation of English had moved so far from its visual representation that a new alphabet was needed, and in the sixteenth century we have the first attempts to "reform" English spellings, a movement still active today. In 1569 John Hart (in his *Orthographie*) went so far as to devise a new phonetic alphabet to remedy what he considered a fatal flaw in our system of language. (His alphabet and the work of other language reformers provides us with our best evidence for the pronunciation of English in his time).

To understand how English changed (not why; no one knows) one must first note that vowels are articulated in particular parts of the mouth; we make the sound in Modern English "deep" [dip] with our tongue forward

and high in the mouth, and the sound in Modern English "boat" [/bɔt/] with our tongue lowered and drawn toward the back of the mouth and the jaw relatively low (open). Say "ee" (or "beet") and "o" (or "boat") in succession and you may be able to feel the movement of your tongue from front to back.

This chart roughly represents the places where the "long vowels" are articulated:

	FRONT	CENTER	BACK
HIGH	/i:/ [Modern "beet"]	.	/u:/ [Modern "boot"]
MID	/e:/ [Modern "bait"]	.	/o:/ [Modern "boat"]
LOW	/æ:/ [Modern "bag"]	/ɑ:/ [Modern "father"]	"au" [Modern "bought"]

[The "au" representing the low back vowel above is there because I cannot find a way to print a backward c, the usual means of representing this sound.]

The Great Vowel shift involved a regular movement of the places of articulation: The front vowels each moved up a notch, except for /i:/, which formed a diphthong. Likewise the back vowels moved up, except for /u:/, which formed another diphthong:

Position	.	Middle English	Modern English
FRONT VOWELS	HIGH	/i:/	---> /ai/
.	MID (CLOSED)	/e:/	---> /i:/
.	LOW (OPEN)	/æ:/	---> /e:/ (later --> /i:/)
CENTRAL VOWEL	LOW	/ɑ:/	---> /e:/
BACK VOWELS	HIGH	/u:/	---> /au/
.	MID (CLOSED)	/o:/	---> /u:/
.	LOW (OPEN)	"au"	---> /o:/

To hear the sounds [Click here](#). Then [Click here](#).

Note that the change affects only long, stressed vowels. The "y" in Middle English "my" was affected because it has primary stress, and we say

/mai/; the "y" in a word like "only" was not affected (the primary stress is on the first syllable and -ly lacks stress, so we say /li:/, making the -ly of "only" rime with "see."

The change is not as neat as is shown; /æ:/ ("open e," as it is called in most discussions) did not complete the movement from /æ:/ to /e:/ to /i:/ (contrast Mod. Eng. "break" and "beak"). Moreover, when Middle English "e" represents /æ:/ and when the spelling "o" or "oo" represents the open vowel often can be determined only by the etymology of the words. Modern spellings offer a clue: as a general rule, where modern English uses "ea" (as in "read") or "oa" (as in loaf), the Middle English equivalent was the open vowel sound. ("Open" and "close" or "closed" refer to the jaw -- lowered for "open" and raised for "close" vowels.)

There are other, more exact but more complex, ways of representing the change. (There is also an excellent presentation -- [See and Hear the Great Vowel Shift](#) on [The Great Vowel Shift](#) site maintained by Melinda Menzer at Furman University.) Moreover, our best attempts at recovering Chaucer's pronunciation can be only approximations. Nevertheless the following chart will provide a guide to the pronunciation of Chaucer's "long vowels":

Middle English	Sounds like Modern
y, i "myne, sight"	"meet"
e, ee "me, meet, mete" (close e)	"mate"
e "begge, rede" (open e)	"bag"
a, aa "mate, maat"	"father"
u, ou "hus, hous"	"boot"
o, oo "bote, boot" (close o)	"oak"
o "lof, ok" (open o)	"bought"


To hear the sounds [click here](#).

See any history of the English Language (e.g., A.C. Baugh, rev. Thomas Cable, *A History of the English Language* [PE 1075 .B3]) for further details. A full account of Chaucer's pronunciation is in the section on language, by Norman Davis, in *The Riverside Chaucer*

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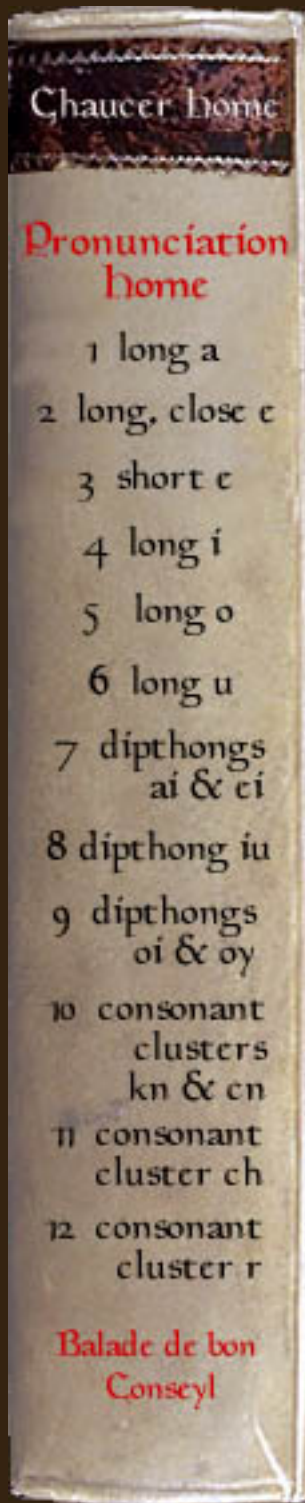
Chaucer's Pronunciation, Grammar and Vocabulary

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Some Notes on Chaucer's Language (Elizabeth Rehfeld)

There are fifteen sections to this tutorial -- thirteen focusing on Chaucerian pronunciation and two which look at Grammar and Vocabulary. To the left, you will see a long narrow window, or frame, with section headings running down the spine of a medieval codex or book. When you click on the section you want to study, the section will appear in the main window, which is the area you are reading this text from right now. In order to return to the Chaucer home page, click on "Chaucer Home".





The High Style

**Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures,
Keepe hem in stoor til so be ye endite
Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write.
Speketh so pleyn at this tyme, we yow preye,
That we may understonde what ye seye. (CIPro IV.16-20)**

Harry Bailey does not much appreciate the high style, but many of Chaucer's contemporaries and successors regarded works in that style his finest accomplishment. His younger contemporary, [John Lydgate](#), hailed Chaucer as the first to "distill and rain the golden dew-drops of eloquence" into the English tongue. The "aureate" diction of poets in the next century (including Lydgate himself in such works as [The Epithalamion for Gloucester](#) and Lydgate's admirer, [Benedict Burgh](#), whose work seems almost a parody of his master's technique) was an attempt to imitate Chaucer's "golden" style.

The style was partly a matter of diction, with a heavy use of [Latin and French borrowings](#) and partly a matter of versification, including the elegant [rime royal](#) stanza, which became the standard for elegant verse in the centuries that followed. But even more important was the skilled use of the arts of a matter of "rhetoric," which was understood to be not the art of persuasion as we usually define it today, but the art of producing elegantly-adorned verse. Thus Petrarch, the Italian poet, is regarded as a "rhetor," and rhetoric is regarded as the art of great poetry:

**"Fraunceys Petrak, the lauriat poete,
Highte this clerk, whos rethorike sweete
Enlumyned al Ytaille of poetrie,
As Lynyan dide of philosophie. (CIPro (IV).31-34)**

Rhetoric, as Chaucer and his contemporaries understood it, was an art developed in classical times, mainly by [Cicero](#) ("Tully"): the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, attributed to Cicero, was his best known rhetorical work. It had a heavy influence on the twelfth and thirteenth-century "rhetoricians;" authors of handbooks on how to apply the techniques of late-classical rhetoric to the composition of ornate Latin verse.

Basic to the doctrine was the concept of decorum; of the necessity to suit the style to the subject. As Harry Bailey says, the "high style" was suitable for writing to kings, or to writing about them: the medieval rhetoricians illustrated this with the "wheel of Virgil," which assigned the high style to *The Aeneid*, the medium to works of instruction such as the *Georgics*, and the low (plain) style to the pastoral poems; thus a writer who intends to treat the doings of kings and the fates of nations should use the high style, while one who is to write about the doings of the lower classes should use the low.

The handbooks of rhetoric paid little attention to the middle and low stylistic registers; rhetoricians such as Geoffrey of Vinsauf (fl. 1200) in his *Poetria Nova*, the "New Poetry," concentrated their attention on the high and elaborate style. Chaucer knew that work and its author, whom he addresses in an elegant rhetorical *apostrophe* in the Nun's Priest's Tale:

O Gaufred, deere maister soverayn,
That whan thy worthy kyng Richard was slayn
With shot, compleynedest his death so soore,
Why ne hadde I now thy sentence and thy loore,
The Friday for to chide, as diden ye? (NPT VII.3347-51)

The *apostrophe* -- an address to a character or to an absent or imaginary person -- is a frequent mark of Chaucer's high style. It can be extended to things as well as humans (*conformatio*, *personification*):

O brotil joye! O sweete venim queynte! (MerT IV.2061)

And it may be used along with *exclamatio*:

Alas, that Chauntecleer fleigh fro the bees!
Alas, his wyf ne roghte nat of dremes! (NPT VII.3339-40).

For one of the most elaborate uses of these dedvices in medieval literature, see Geoffrey of Vinsauf's [Lament for King Richard](#), to which, as noted above, Chaucer alludes in The Nun's Priest's tale.

An almost invariable mark of Chaucer's high style is the *occupatio* (or *praeteritio*) -- a refusal to describe or narrate (see note by Vincent Di Marco

in *Riverside Chaucer*, n. 875-88, pp. 828-29). This is often used to supply a good deal of specification of a subject under cover of omitting it:

But it were al to longe for to devyse
The grete clamour and the waymentynge
That the ladyes made at the brennyng
Of the bodies, and the grete honour
That Theseus, the noble conquerour,
Dooth to the ladyes, whan they from hym wente;
But shortly for to telle is myn entente. (KnT I.994-1000).

It is also used as a simple "refusal to narrate":

His felawe wente and soughte hym doun in helle --
But of that storie list me nat to write. (KnT I.1200-01).

And it is sometimes combined with *dubitatio* -- doubting what to say or how to say it:

Who koude ryme in Englyssh proprely
His martirdom? For sothe it am nat I;
Therefore I passe as lightly as I may. (KnT I.1459-61).

This last example may be an instance of the "affected modesty" or "humility topos," the protestation that the author is unworthy or incapable of doing justice to his subject. For an extreme example see Benedict Burgh's Letter to Lydgate, where the protestation of ignorance of rhetoric is the occasion for an elaborate display of rhetorical devices. More briefly:

To smal is bothe my pen and eke my tonge,
For to descryven of this mariage. (MerT IV.1735-36).

Closely linked to the "humility topos" is the "inexpressibility topos" ("topos" means "commonplace"), the common protestation that no one could do justice to the wonders of which the narrator tells:

So fair a gardyn woot I nowher noon.
For, out of doute, I verrailly suppose
That he that wroot the Romance of the Rose
Ne koude of it the beautee wel devyse;
Ne Priapus ne myghte nat suffise,
Though he be god of gardyns, for to telle
The beautee of the gardyn and the welle
That stood under a laurer alwey grene. (MerT IV.2030 -37)

Such devices seem to be means of compressing the narrative, but they serve rather as means of expanding statements, the dilation that that is the

main aim of the rhetorician. Geoffrey of Vinsauf illustrates the basic aim of the rhetorician, in his discussion of "circumlocution," by quoting the opening lines of Virgil's *Aeneid*:

Thus Virgil puts circumlocution in his *Aeneid*:

I sing of arms and the man who first from the coast of Troy, driven by fate, came to Italy and the Lavinian shores; much buffeted on sea and land by violence from above, through Juno's unforgiving wrath, and much suffering in war also till he should build a city and bring his gods to Latium, whence came the Latin race, the lords of Alba, and the walls of lofty Rome.

This means nothing more than "I shall tell of Aeneas."

Geoffrey means this as high praise. He would have had little patience with the modern unadorned style of a Hemingway, which aims for lean and straightforward statements; the true literary artist, Geoffrey believed, was one who could dilate two words ("Describo Eneam") into seven lines.

Among the methods the rhetoricians recommended for a dilating a narrative is the *chronographia*, the specification of time by reference to the astronomical state of the sky. The opening lines of *The Canterbury Tales* provide the most famous example, one often imitated by Chaucer's followers. The fifteenth-century Scots poet, Robert Henryson, begins his *Testament of Crisseid*, a "continuation" of Chaucer's *Troilus* with an elaborate astrological specification of time:

A dismal sessoun to ane care-full ditty
Should correspond and be equivalent
Right so it was when I began to write,
When Aries, in middes of the Lent,
Showers of hail did from the north descend,
That scarsly from the cold I might defend.

Yit nevertheles within myne study
I stood, when Titan had his beams bright
Withdrawn down and sailed under cover,
And fair Venus, the beauty of the night,
Uprose and set unto the west full right
Her golden face, in opposition
Of God Phebus, direct descending down. (Test. Cr., translated)

Other obvious marks of the high style are the elaborate [rhetorical](#)

[descriptions of characters](#), which Chaucer employed in early works like *The Book of the Duchess* and uses as a kind of referential frame for some of the descriptions in *The General Prologue*, the use of catalogues, such as the long list of trees in *The Knight's Tale*, and (in English works) a heavily latinate diction.

See the notes to the *Knight's Tale* and *The Book of the Duchess* for examples of other rhetorical devices and for more detailed discussions consult the following:

Charles Sears Baldwin, *Medieval Rhetoric and Poetic*. New York, 1928 [Widener ML 9 28].

Edmond Faral, *Les arts poetiques du xiie et du xiiie siecle*. Geneva, 1982 [PN1035.F3x 1982].

Ernest Gallo, *The Poetria Nova and Its Souces in Early Rhetorical Doctrine*. The Hague, 1971 [WIDENER MLv 210].

Margaret F. Nims, tr. *The Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*. Toronto, Pontifical Institute, 1967 [PA8442.V5 P613].

James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages*. Berkeley, 1974 [PN173.m8].

James J. Murphy, *Three Medieval Poetic Arts*. Berkeley, 1971 [PN185.M8].

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Chaucer's Romance "Borrowings"

Until Chaucer's time French and Latin were the languages of sophisticated literature (See the section on the [The Middle English Language](#) in the pages on Language and Linguistics). In his lifetime English displaced French as the language of aristocratic literature. Chaucer's own works had a powerful influence on this development, so much so that later writers, such as Spenser, regarded him as the founder of the language itself, the "well of English undefiled." Browsing through the Oxford English Dictionary (which lists the first recorded uses of its entries) might convince one that Spenser was right; scores and scores of words "borrowed" from Latin or French are recorded as first appearing in Chaucer's works.

However, scholars now recognize that the language we speak today would have developed pretty much as it did if Chaucer had never written. But Chaucer did have an important influence on the language of English literature; he shaped the language of aristocratic literature for the poets who followed (and often revered) him.

He greatly expanded the language of poetry -- partly because he greatly extended its subject matter, bringing into poetic discourse philosophy, science (alchemy and astrology), trade (mainly as represented by the pilgrims), and everyday life (drawing upon everyday language of the sort that had never been used in English literature).

So far as his admirers and imitators were concerned, Chaucer's greatest contribution to the literary language was his invention of the High Style. This style is characterized by a heavy use of "borrowings" from the romance (Latin and French) languages, and in his works many romance words appear in English for the first time. Note how heavy is the use of romance words (in bold face type) in these opening lines of the General Prologue:

Whan that **Aprill** with his shoures soote

The droghte of **March** hath **perced** to the roote,
And bathed every **veyne** in swich **licour**
Of which **vertu engendred** is the **flour**;
Whan **Zephirus** eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The **tendre** croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half **cours** yronne,
And smale foweles maken **melodye**,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So priketh hem **Nature** in hir **corages**),
Thanne longen folk to goon on **pilgrimages**,
And **palmeres** for to seken **straunge** strondes,
To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;
And **specially** from every shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful **martir** for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

An interesting exercise is to look up each of these romance words in the Oxford English Dictionary to see when each of them first first appeared in English. (Unfortunately, the OED is available on line only to subscribing libraries; you may have to consult the printed edition available in most college and many public libraries.) Words that are familiar to us were often new to Chaucer's first audiences, lending his "high style" passages a tone and force hard for us to recapture today, and they help define the tone of works such as The Knight's and Man of Law's Tales.

However, no work is all "high" or "low" in style. Chaucer is well aware of the medieval dictum that a thing is defined by its opposite:

By his contrarie is every thyng declared.
For how myghte evere swetnesse han ben knowe
To him that nevere tasted bitternesse?" (Tr 1.637-39).

Thus, though the General Prologue begins with a touch of the high style, it also has passages with no trace of the learned, latinate style. Here is the beginning of the portrait of the Miller:

The MILLERE was a stout carl for the nones;
Ful byg he was of brawn, and eek of bones.
That **proved** wel, for over al ther he cam,
At wrastlyng he wolde have alwey the ram.
He was short-sholdred, brood, a thikke knarre;
Ther was no dore that he nolde heve of harre,
Or breke it at a rennyng with his heed.
His berd as any sowe or fox was reed,
And therto brood, as though it were a spade.
Upon the cop right of his nose he hade
A werte, and theron stood a toft of herys,

Reed as the brustles of a sowes erys;
His nosethirles blake were and wyde. (GP 545-57)

There is but one word of French derivation in this passage. It would not be surprising if there were more, for French greatly influenced even spoken English, and for some words there were no native equivalents. Thus, in the rest of the portrait, there are a good many French words:

A swerd and a bokeler bar he by his syde.
His mouth as greet was as a greet **forneys**.
He was a **jangler** and a **goliardeys**,
And that was moost of synne and **harlotries**.
Wel koude he stelen corn and tollen thries;
And yet he hadde a thombe of gold, **pardee**.
A whit cote and a blew hood wered he.
A baggepipe wel koude he blowe and **sowne**,
And therwithal he broghte us out of towne. (GP 558-66)

The bold-faced romance words are words common in the language (and most probably did not seem foreign in any sense to Chaucer's hearers. The opening of the Knight's Tale has a much more elevated tone:

Whilom, as olde **stories** tellen us,
Ther was a **duc** that highte **Theseus**;
Of **Atthenes** he was lord and **gouvernour**,
And in his tyme swich a **conquerour**
That gretter was ther noon under the sonne.
Ful many a **riche contree** hadde he wonne;
What with his wysdom and his **chivalrie**,
He **conquered** al the **regne** of **Femenye**,
That whilom was ycleped **Scithia**,
And weddede the queene **Ypolita**,
And broghte hire hoom with hym in his **contree**
With muchel **glorie** and greet **solempnytee**.
And eek hir yonge suster **Emelye**.
And thus with **victorie** and with **melodye**
Lete I this **noble duc** to **Atthenes** ryde,
And al his **hoost** in **armes** hym bisyde. (KnT 859-74)

The classical names, the invocation of authentic history (*olde stories*), and the heavily romance vocabulary lend the passage an elevated tone. More obvious even are lyric passages in the "high style," such as this stanza from the Prologue of the Prioress's Tale:

Lady, thy **bountee**, thy **magnificence**,
Thy **vertu** and thy grete **humylite**
Ther may no tonge **expresse** in no **science**;
For somtyme, Lady, er men **praye** to thee,

Thou goost biforn of thy **benyngnytee**,
And getest us the lyght, of thy **preyere**,
To **gyden** us unto thy Sone so deere. (ProPrT 574-80)

The abstractions, lent additional weight by their position in rime, are all romance borrowings, bringing to the style an eloquence that English verse had not previously achieved. This heavy use of romance words is one of the most important aspects of the "high style" that Chaucer's contemporaries and followers so much admired.

By far the best study of Chaucer's use of romance (French and Latin) vocabulary is Christopher Cannon's *The Making of Chaucer's English: A Study of Words* (1998) [PR 1940 C36].

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