

# The History of the English Language

**And Latin's influence on it**

# Where does English come from?

- ❖ English “began” when Germanic tribes arrived in England around 449 C.E. (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 51).
- ❖ Their dialects come from Proto-Germanic, a language dating back to roughly 200 BCE. (Horobin, 2018, p. 13)
- ❖ Proto-Germanic comes from a larger language family: Indo-European (Horobin, 2018, p. 13)
- ❖ English language history broken up into four general periods, usually:
  - Old English
  - Middle English
  - Early Modern English
  - Modern English (Durkin, 2015, p. 8; van Gelderen, 2014, pp. 283-284)

# Old English

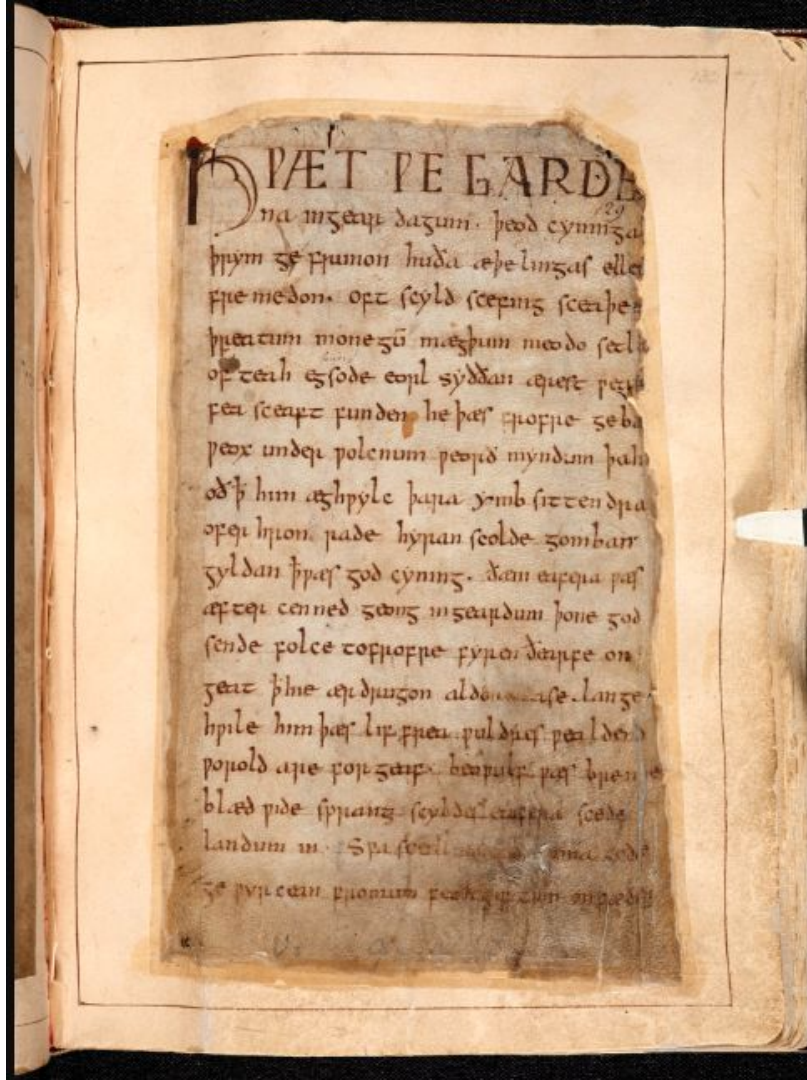
450 CE to 1150 CE

## What do you hear?

Hwæt! Wé Gárdena in géardagum  
þeodcýninga þrym gefrúnon hú ðá æþelingas  
ellen fremedon. (Beowulf)

Listen! We -- of the Spear-Danes in the days  
of yore, of those clan-kings -- heard of their  
glory, how those nobles performed  
courageous deeds. (Beowulf)

So. The Spear-Danes in days gone by and  
the kings who ruled them had courage and  
greatness. We have heard of those princes'  
heroic campaigns. (Heaney, 2001, p. 2)



# Why does Beowulf (and the rest of Old English) sound like that?

- ❖ Old English was a highly inflectional language compared to Modern English.
- ❖ Consequently the word order was freer than it is in Modern English
- ❖ “Nouns have endings depending on whether they are subjects or objects, and they can be masculine, feminine, or neuter in gender” (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 76)
- ❖ Super Germanic vocabulary
  - Some say of the 30,000 words in Old English, only 3% are non-Germanic (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 77)
  - An estimated 80% of this original vocabulary may have been lost (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 77)
- ❖ “The Great Vowel Shift has not taken place yet...” (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 57)

# Influences on Old English

## ❖ Celtic neighbors

- Preceded the Germanic tribes in England
- Retained only a little of the Latin left behind by the Roman Empire who withdrew from Britain in the early fifth century (Solodow, 2010, p. 32)

## ❖ Christian missionaries

- First appeared in the south of England in 597 CE (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 98)
- Brought Latin back with them since it was the language of the Roman Catholic Church (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 98)

## ❖ Scandinavians

- May have made the a significant impact on grammar of Old English, not just vocabulary (Horobin, 2018, p. 22)

## ❖ Norman conquest



## Salu! from Normandy

- ❖ William the Conqueror invades in 1066 from the French duchy of Normandy.
- ❖ Brings with him a version of French, sometimes termed “Anglo-Norman”.
- ❖ With Normans in power, Anglo-Norman language is the language of the aristocracy, and Latin is the language of the law.
- ❖ Normans also bring their churchmen with them, again reinforcing Latin in religion.
- ❖ The transmission of Latin and French into the lexicon of Old English is significant.

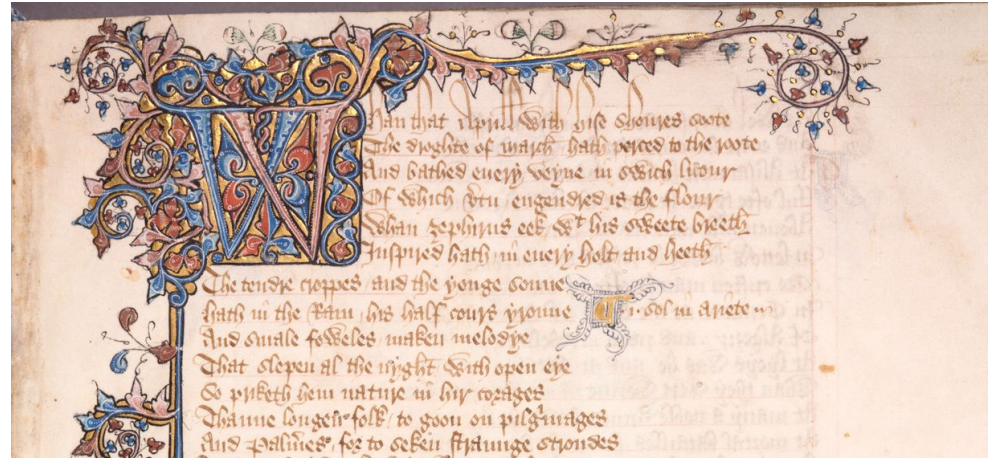
# Middle English

1150 CE to 1500 CE



# What do you hear?

Whan that Aprille with his shoures sote  
The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote... (Chaucer & Skeat)



When April with its sweet-smelling showers  
Has pierced the drought of March to the root... (Chaucer, Interlinear Translation)

# Movement towards a more analytical language

- ❖ Transition from Old English to Middle English
  - Gradual process of reduction of distinct inflectional endings denoting grammatical relations
  - Gradual loss of grammatical gender (Durkin, 2015, p. 8)
- ❖ Word order is still relatively free but with grammaticalization of prepositions, demonstratives and some verbs, stricter order is established (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 132)
- ❖ Estimate of 10,000 loan words from French transmitted into English. (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 104)
- ❖ Influence on grammar by French (and by extension, Latin), not profound. (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 104)

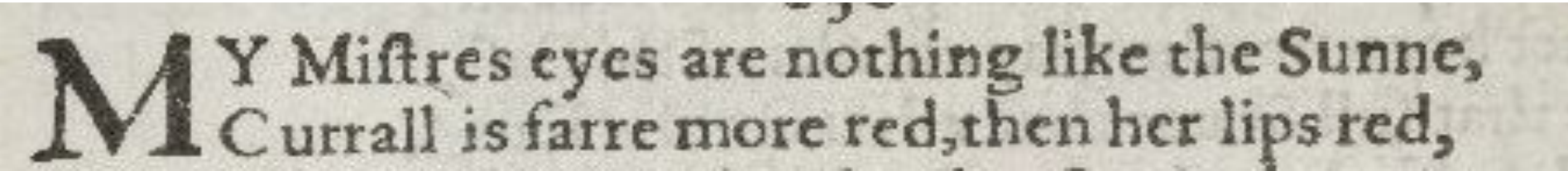
# English's Role in Culture

- ❖ The Normans turn English: by 1244 it is illegal to hold land in both France and England (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 116).
- ❖ First native English speaking English king comes to power in 1399, Henry Bolingbroke -- all his predecessors spoke Anglo-Norman as a first language. Now English is finding a place in the aristocracy, beginning to close the divide between the ruled and the rulers.
- ❖ Status of English begins to change, partially due to social upheaval due to the Black Death, partially due to accomplished English-language writers like Geoffrey Chaucer and his contemporaries (Horobin, 2018, p. 24)

# **Early Modern English**

## **1500 CE to 1700 CE**

## What do you hear?



My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun;

Coral is far more red than her lips' red... (Shakespeare, n.d.)

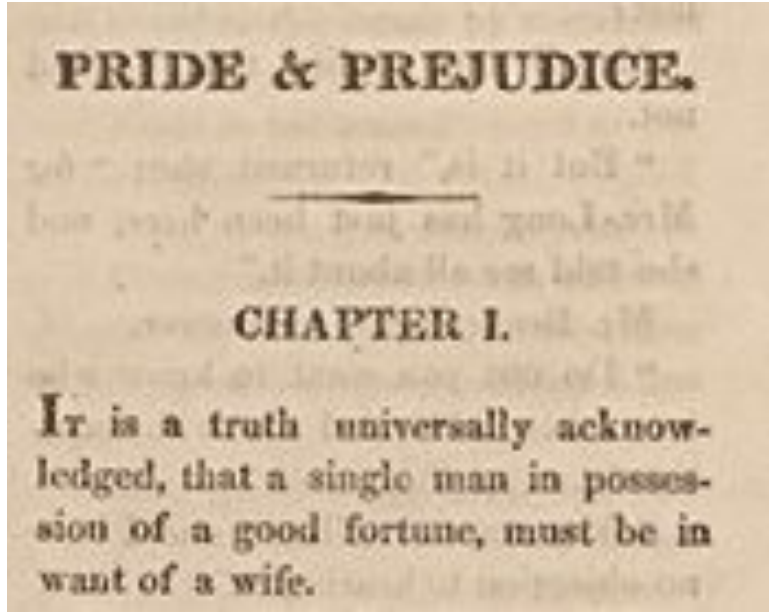
## In the depths of the Great Vowel Shift

- ❖ Need for “spelling regularity” is debated throughout this period, in part due to introduction of printing press in 1476. (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 183)
- ❖ In the early part of the Early Modern English period, grammars are “not very prescriptive in the 16th century: they take usage into account and do not provide the arbitrary rules based on Latin grammar that we currently still have.” (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 187)
- ❖ The period of the biggest impact of Latin upon English -- direct consequence of rediscovery of classical learning during the Renaissance (Horobin, 2018, p. 26)
- ❖ Between 1500 and 1660, some estimate nearly 27,000 new words enter English (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 179), many coming from Latin and Greek.
- ❖ “By 1700, the Great Vowel Shift is more or less complete...” (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 159)

# **Modern English**

## **1700 CE to Today**

# What do you hear?



It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife. (Austen, 1813)



# Shoehorning Latin Grammar

- ❖ Fewer major language internal changes compared to earlier periods (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 207)
- ❖ The beginning of this era coincides with the Enlightenment as well as Industrial revolution, both of which will have an impact on the language. (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 208)
- ❖ Focus on prescriptive grammar is heightened in this period
- ❖ Robert Lowth applies Latin Grammar to English in his “Short Introduction to English Grammar” (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 228)
- ❖ By 1850s, spelling has become fairly standardized although there are attempts at spelling reform (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 210)
- ❖ English begins to spread around the world in a serious way during this period, due to colonialism and imperialism (van Gelderen, 2014, p. 236)

## In short...

If we're talking about the three major influences of Latin on the history of the English language, we can simplify and point to three events:

- ❖ The Norman Conquest
- ❖ The Renaissance
- ❖ The Enlightenment

Latin has had a major impact on the vocabulary of English -- especially in the academic and formal registers of English -- but it has not had quite as much of an impact on the grammar of the language.

## Questions:

What is the value of understanding the history of the English language for a present day English teacher? What can we gain from learning about the English language as far back as Middle English and Old English, if it's largely unintelligible to even native English speakers?

Was there anything that particularly surprised you about the history of English?

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