The Style of the Prioress and the Wife of Bath: French Borrowings in the Field of Fashion in Chaucer's "General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*

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The impact of French on the English language is irrefutable; according to some sources, approximately 45% of the English vocabulary comes from French ("Why Study French?"). Among those there are numerous words connected with fashion that were in use already during the Middle English period. The aim of this essay is to discuss French borrowings used by Geoffrey Chaucer to describe the appearance of two characters: the Prioress and the Wife of Bath in "General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales*.

Background History

The Battle of Hastings (October 14, 1066), during which King Harold's army was defeated by French-speaking followers of William, Duke of Normandy, marked the beginning of a new period in the history of England, and also that of the English language. This military conquest had not only social, economic, cultural, and political consequences but also linguistic ones. However, the changes did not occur immediately. By the late 11th century, the French speaking foreigners from Normandy represented less than 10% of the English population (Berndt 24).

Yet, quite soon England became a bilingual country. Normans, who settled in England, continued to speak a dialect of French. Their attitude towards the English language was rather indifferent – some understood it, but they did not have to use it for everyday communication. It is worth mentioning that until the 13th century the kings of England did not speak English fluently. French was not only the language of aristocracy, but also of the literature. Consequently, it was considered more prestigious and useful in business than English. At the same time, many members of the clergy made serious attempts to learn English as they realized that was the only way to reach ordinary people and attract them to the Church.

Some years after the Conquest, the English society got used to the situation and the two nations started to interact socially and politically. Instances of mixed marriages were quite frequent, so children were often brought up in a bilingual environment. The French-English bilingualism was no longer connected with purely racial division, but rather with the social one. In general, this phenomenon can be summarized as follows: (a) French was the everyday language of the Norman aristocracy and representatives of the middle class; it was used by the English in dealing with Normans, while (b) English was spoken by the English society on a daily basis on all occasions and Normans used it only in interactions with the native Englishmen.

The loss of Normandy to France in 1204 during King John's reign had a profound impact on the political, social and linguistic situation in England. It was especially difficult for the members of feudal aristocracy, as they had to decide whether they wanted to give up their Norman possessions and stay in England or not. However, the loss of Normandy did not stop the migration of people from the continent. Many of these people were given high state positions or offered church dignities. This caused the arousal of opposition and national feelings in Englishmen and native aristocracy. The outbreak of Barons' War (1258-65) forced the aliens to leave England, and, as a consequence, King Edward I offered all the important state and church offices to the natives. It highly increased patriotism within society and made a significant contribution to the wider use of English. The context for the everyday use of French, even by noblemen, disappeared. By 1300, French had become a foreign language and from then on it was taught and studied at schools or during private lessons. The best evidence for this is the fact that the first phrase book for learning French was written by Gauter de Biblesworth around 1250.

As the interests of England and France were different, soon the antagonistic feelings between the two countries resulted in open military confrontation, which is known as the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453). Three remarkable English victories at Crécy (1346), Poitiers (1356), and at Agincourt (1415) resulted in the arousal of even more intense feelings of nationalism in English society.

Despite wars and other military conflicts, the process of urbanization of English cities began and the economic situation was improving. Surprisingly though, the socio-economic situation was boosted even more as a consequence of the Black Death (1348-50). The language of a new, now strong middle class had always been English. This contributed to a better perception of the language, which acquired more prestige. After 1250, English became the native language of the nobility and soon after began to be used as the official language of important

documents. By the 14th century, English kings understood English and could speak and use it publicly (Berndt 23-30, Fisiak 61-75).

English also overpowered French as the language for giving instructions in all schools by the year 1385 (Fisiak 76). In the next century, the ability to speak French was considered extraordinary, and only few people knew the language.

French Borrowings into English

Borrowing is the process of taking over words from other languages (Yule 54). For centuries it has been one of the most common sources of new vocabulary in English. When trying to understand the causes of word borrowing in any language, one has to avoid oversimplification – words are not borrowed only when a native language lacks a suitable word or expression. In fact, they are borrowed even more often when a language has its own, native item of the same meaning since the use of words from another language is often a marker of fashion and prestige (Alexander 79, Berndt 57, Fisiak 68).

The Middle English period witnessed a great flood of borrowings from French. Suddenly, French lexical items entered English by the thousands, at least in the written or literary language. Around 20% of words borrowed between 1350 and 1400 were of French origin; slightly over half of Chaucer's vocabulary is not native, but mainly French (Alexander 79). This is not surprising if we take into consideration the fact that French was the official language of the country for at least three centuries after the Norman Conquest.

French borrowings are present in many semantic domains of English. A vast amount of political and law terms is of French origin, cf. *parliament, crown, reign, counsellor, judge, prison, heritage, divorce* and many more. Although *king, queen, knight, lady* and *lord* are native words, most titles were borrowed from French: *emperor, prince, gentleman, duke*. As Normans imposed their military system on England, words connected with war entered the vernacular, e.g. *peace, war, armour, navy, soldier, battle, conquer, warrior*. Also, due to the fact that monastic life was influenced by French clergymen, many words connected with Christian doctrine came from French: *clergy, preacher, confession, faith, prayer, glory, virginity, devotion, virtue, salvation*. French items are also found among abstract terms, connected with emotions and personality, e.g. *delight, grief, arrogance, desire, doubt, envy,* those pertaining to literature and science: *art, science, philosophy, romance, story, author, grammar, geometry*, as well as the words connected with trade, cf. *barber, butcher, carpenter, tailor*.

As French was the language used by nobility, words connected with their lifestyle and favourite pastimes were quickly transferred into English. Hence items from the domain of food and cooking, e.g. *to boil, to fry, to roast, to mince, flour, sugar, spice, juice, cream*, those related to courtly activities, cf. *falconry, dance, melody, tournament, feast, festival* as well as fashion, including terms of clothing and ornaments. The word *fashion* itself comes from French, as do *cloak, garment, gown, robe, cotton, brooch, jewel, button, lace, fur*, etc.

Still, it is impossible to categorize all borrowings from French as the list of words of that origin is extremely long. Also, numerous items are used on a daily basis, and therefore they are hard to classify into semantic categories, cf. *age, air, beauty, company, example, face, marriage, pencil, to achieve, to arrive, to blame, to change, to deserve, to finish, to fail, to perform* (Berndt 57-63).

Geoffrey Chaucer and *The Canterbury Tales*

Geoffrey Chaucer (c. 1343-1400) probably would not have become the Father of English literature, as he is often referred to, had it not been for his own father and childhood. He was the son of a wine merchant and therefore had a possibility to meet people from different countries and hear them speak various languages. As a child he became fluent in French. His father decided to place his young son as a page in the aristocratic household of the countess of Ulster, which was believed to be one of the greatest in England. The aim was to prepare Chaucer for a career in the service of the ruling class.

Chaucer's biography would itself be a gripping story to read. Apart from being the first legitimized author and poet to write in the vernacular, he also achieved fame as a philosopher, translator, bureaucrat, prominent diplomat, justice of the peace and knight of the shire. As a member of King Edward's court, he took part in diplomatic missions to Spain, France, and Italy. These journeys, especially those to Italy, had a profound impact on Chaucer's literary development. During his stay in Florence (1378), he had close contact with the works by Dante, Petrarch, and Boccaccio, which greatly influenced his own writings (David and Simpson 190).

Chaucer's first major work and original poem is *The Book of the Duchess*, an elegy for Blanche of Lancaster, the first wife of his dear friend, John of Gaunt. Then, influenced by Italian authors, their styles and modes of representation, he composed *The House of Fame*, a dream vision. The next writing, and again a dream vision, was *The Parliament of Fowls* – a description of a birds' meeting on Valentine's Day to choose their mates, and at the same time a metaphor of the

human idea of love and relationships. The tragic love story entitled *Troilus and Criseyde* is Chaucer's longest completed poem. Another poem in the previously mentioned form of a dream vision is the unfinished *Legend of Good Women,* a collection of 10 "legends" about virtuous and courageous women. Besides, Chaucer wrote moral and religious works, which were mainly translations from French, Italian and Latin. His prose translation of *The Consolation of Philosophy* was highly popular during the Middle Ages.

Although he did not live as a commoner, due to his service to the Crown and contact with aristocracy, Chaucer understood that he did not belong to this social class either. His ability to understand both worlds was of utmost importance while writing his major work and one of the most influential works of English literature – *The Canterbury Tales*.

The Canterbury Tales is a collection of stories, 22 of which are complete, built around a frame tale and written mainly in iambic pentameter. Chaucer began writing the tales in 1396, when he was living in Greenwich, where from his windows he might have seen pilgrims travelling towards the shrine of Thomas Becket. The sight and sound of people telling tales to one another to entertain themselves during the journey might have inspired Chaucer to write his stories. Contrary to common belief, there is no evidence that *The Canterbury Tales* were influenced by Boccaccio's *Decameron* (David and Simpson 192). Such collections of stories were popular and widespread in later Middle Ages.

What is unique about Chaucer's text is the speakers, as the pilgrim narrators come from different social classes and have a wide range of occupations. It is unlikely that such a group could ever travel together and that its members would have communicated with each other on relatively equal terms. The tales are not assigned at random; the style, genre, values and plots of each tale correspond to its speaker's character and social status. The tales, in general, have their own logic and each of them could easily stand on its own.

It is evident that *The Canterbury Tales* were very popular in late Medieval England. There are more than eight manuscripts of the poem, but none from Chaucer's lifetime. Ellesmere and Hengwrt manuscripts are believed to be the most faithful ones.

The part of *The Canterbury Tales* that is of particular interest in this essay is the "General Prologue". The aim of this passage is to introduce the pilgrims. The descriptions are very detailed and written in such a way that, although they focus mainly on the appearance and personal achievements, they also present the personalities of the characters. The "General Prologue" can as well be treated as an overview of the late-medieval society – its structure and condition. What makes

Chaucer's prologue exceptional is the narrator, who is not afraid of making judgements or admiring the accomplishments of particular characters.

French Borrowings in the Field of Fashion: The Prioress

The Prioress, the 4th pilgrim introduced in "General Prologue", is described as an elegant and sophisticated woman who knows how to behave at a table and is full of delicateness and sensitiveness.

What is worth noticing is her name – Eglantine. It is a borrowing from Old French *aiglentina.* The word still exists in English and is the name of a species of Eurasian rose with fragrant leaves and flowers (its other name is *sweet briar*).

The description of the Prioress includes seven words of French origin, which belong to the field of fashion. Four of them are adjectives: *simple, coy, tretis, fetis*, and three are nouns: *cloke, coral,* and *brooch*.[1]

(1) *That of hir smiling was ful* **simple** *and* **coy** (GP, l.119)[2]

The adjective *simple* is an Old French borrowing that entered English in the 12th century. In this line it can be translated as 'humble', but generally it could (and still can) be used to describe modest, plain clothing. The other French adjective used in that line, *coy,* is its synonym. However, unlike the word *simple*, *coy* was rather used to describe a person, now especially a girl or a young woman.

(2) *Hir nose* **tretis***, hir yen greye as glas,* (GP, l.152)

The word *tretis* is an Old French adjective, typically translated as 'slender, graceful, well-formed'. However, the word itself is no longer used. The spelling of the word given here is present in MS *Cambridge*, whereas in MS *Hengwrt* it is *tretez* and in MS *Ellesmere* – *tretys*. What is surprising is the fact that in MS *Petworth,* MS *Harleian,* MS *Lansdowne* and MS *Corpus* the Prioress's nose is described with the word *straight*, which is a native word.

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[1] The sources for the analysis of all borrowings in both chapters 5 and 6 are *OED Online* and *Middle English Dictionary*.

[2] For brevity's sake, I have assumed a following format of giving reference to the lines in the text of the "General Prologue" and "Pardoner's Tale". (GP, [lines]), in which 'GP' stands for "General Prologue", (PardT, [lines]), in which 'PardT' stands for "Pardoner's Tale". All the quotes have been taken from Chaucer's "General Prologue" and "Pardoner's Tale", cited after *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* vol.1, 9th ed., 2013.

(3) *Ful **fetis** was hir **cloke**, as I was war;* (GP, l.157)

The adjective *fetis* could be applied both to things and people. In its first sense it denotes 'cleverly fashioned, neat, elegant, well made', whereas in the second 'shapely, handsome, pretty, neat'. Later on, in other texts it was spelt *featous*, but nowadays the word is obsolete. Chaucer also used this word in *The Pardoner's Tale* to describe dancing girls:

(4) *And right anoon thanne comen tombesteres,*
*   **Fetis** and smale, and yonge frutesteres,* (PardT, l.189-90).

The noun *cloke* had the same spelling both in Middle English and Old French. It entered the language c. 1300, although there were several native words with similar meaning, cf. *rift, hackle, reaf, cope* (which are all obsolete). In Modern English and back in Chaucer's times it referred to a type of a loose outdoor garment.

(5) *Of smal **coral** aboute hir arm she bar*
*   A paire of bedes, gauded all with greene,* (GP, l.158-9)

The word *coral* entered English via Old French in the 14th century. However, it is a word with a bit longer history: in Latin it was known as *corallum*, whereas in Greek it was *korallion/kouralion*.

(6) *An theron heeng a **brooch** of gold ful sheene,* (GP, l.160)

The noun *brooch* (other forms: *brouche, bruche, bruch*) originally meant 'bodkin' or 'skewer'. As an ornament it was originally used as a safety pin or mounted on one. Later its meaning was broadened to any such ornament as necklace, bracelet, amulet, pendant, and, eventually, narrowed again to the meaning known today. Although there was a native word available with a similar meaning - *preen*, now used chiefly in Scotland and in the regional variants of English in the North, Chaucer used a borrowing in this text.

To sum up, only two from the seven words discussed are obsolete: *tretis* and *fetis*. The words *simple, coy, cloke, coral,* and *brooch* are still used by English speakers. Although English contained words that were synonymous to *cloke, brooch, tretis,* and *fetis*, Chaucer preferred to use French borrowings. Only one

word, *coy*, is used at the end of the line, which suggests that it might have been employed in order to form the rhyme.

French Borrowings in the Field of Fashion: **The Wife of Bath**

The Wife of Bath is presented as a resourceful and courageous woman. Having had five husbands, she is described as an expert on love and relationships. Her appearance and clothes perfectly correspond with her strong personality.

The presentation of the Wife of Bath in the prologue contains six French borrowings in the field of fashion. The words *coverchief, scarlet, bokeler, targe,* and *mantel* are nouns, and there is only one adjective, *moiste*.

(7) *Hir **coverchiefs** ful fine were of ground* – (GP, l.455)

The noun *coverchief* comes from the Old French *cuevre-chief*. It denotes a woman's headcloth or veil, or a number of cloths worn as a headdress. It could be richly ornamented with jewels. Back in Chaucer's times, there were two native words available for that: *headcloth* and *headrail*; both had been formed within English by compounding. The word *coverchief* has been obsolete since the 16th century, except for its use in historical sense.

(8) *Hir hosen weren of fin **scarlet** reed,* (GP, l.458)

The word *scarlet* was both a noun and an adjective. In the former function this borrowing from Old French (attested OF forms: *escarlate, -lette, eskerlate*) meant a cloth of scarlet, while as an adjective it carried the sense of red colour.

(9) *Ful straite yteyd, and shoes ful **moiste** and newe.* (GP, l.459)

The adjective *moiste* (other form: *moste, moyste*) except for meaning 'moist' or 'wet', in the case of shoes translates as 'new' or 'supple'. In this sense the word is considered obsolete.

(10) *Ywimpled wel, and on hir heed an hat
As brood as is a **bokeler** or a **targe**,* (GP, l.472-3)

Although the words *bokeler* (ModE buckler) and *targe* are used only as a simile here, they are worth mentioning. Both are types of small shields. While the

noun *bokeler* is simply a borrowing from Old French (OF forms: *boucler, bucler*) that entered English around 1300, the case of *targe* is more complex. There were two words: *targa* (masculine) and *targe* (feminine) in Old English, but the assumption is that they were reinforced in Middle English by Old French targe (*OED online*).

       (11) *A foot **mantel** aboute hir hipes large,* (GP, l.474)

The history of the word *mantel* is similar to the aforementioned word *targe*. Generally meaning 'a sleeveless cloak', worn especially by women, in this particular example it can be translated as 'a riding skirt'. This word existed in Old English (OE *mentel*) as an early borrowing from Latin *mantellum*, but in Middle English it was reinforced by Old French *mantel*. Note that, bearing in mind its ModE form (*mantle*), this word is an example of the process called metathesis, whereby two sounds were reversed (*mantel → mantle*) (Yule 188).

To sum up, four words discussed here are still present in English: *scarlet, bokeler, mantel,* and *targe,* whereas the word *coverchief* is obsolete. The adjective *moiste* is used by English speakers, but no longer in the sense mentioned above. Only the word *targe* is used by Chaucer in a rhyming position. Native synonyms were available for words *coverchief, bokeler, targe,* and *mantel,* but Chaucer preferred to use borrowings. And, as the data show, not only for the sake of rhymes.

Conclusions

The purpose of this essay was to present the problem of English-French bilingualism in the Middle English period, the impact of French on English, and the variety of French borrowings, especially words connected with fashion. After taking a closer look at Geoffrey Chaucer's biography and works, particularly the "General Prologue" to *The Canterbury Tales,* we reach a conclusion that French borrowings were numerous in English during medieval period due to the political and social situation. Moreover, Chaucer willingly used them in the descriptions of the Prioress and the Wife of Bath, their appearance and clothing, even though in several cases he had the possibility to use a native word. This proves that French borrowings were widely used and often replaced native items.

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