CHAPTER 2

What was medieval English?

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Linguistic history, like all history, is written retrospectively.
> Tim Machan, "Chaucer and the History of English"

History is not the only way we can encounter the past, of course, since "what happened" also lies latent for us in all those objects which past activities and ideas made and then left behind.
> Christopher Cannon, *The Grounds of English Literature*

Contexts and contingencies

The simple answer to the question of my title is that medieval English was the vernacular language spoken and written by men and women in the British Isles from the period of the initial Germanic invasions in the fifth century through the rise of the Tudor dynasty in the early sixteenth. While Old and Middle English differed markedly in their vocabulary, sound, and grammar, they share – at least from our twenty-first-century hindsight – features that distinguish them from Modern English: a sound system that made, in particular, the pronunciation of long stressed monophthongs relatively stable until the Great Vowel Shift in the fifteenth century; an initial, and then subsequently dissipating, use of grammatical gender in nouns; an elaborate, and also dissipating, case system; a distinction between the singular and plural (and then informal and formal) forms of the second-person pronoun; a vocabulary descending from the Germanic dialects, augmented by French and Latin after the Conquest; and, finally, a set of literary forms (epic, romance, hagiography, lyric) whose idiom and subject matter distance them from post-Renaissance, post-Reformation imaginative writing.

The more complicated answer is that medieval English was but one of several languages spoken and written during this period: a vernacular that took second place to Latin in the institutions of intellectual debate; that took a back seat to French in the cultures of court and government; but

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that, for some theologians, theorists, and *litterateurs* during these centuries, voiced powerful and personal relationships to God, to man, to woman, and to nation.[1] The narrative of medieval English, too, is not a story of an evolving standard but a tale of many regional and social variations. The dialects of Old and Middle English differed in sound and sense. But they differed, too, in how they represented cultural imaginations. Even the briefest and most superficial survey – from the Northumbrian form of Cædmon's *Hymn*, through the alliterative romances of the Middle English Midlands, through Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*, to Caxton's account of trying to buy eggs in Kent – demonstrates that "medieval English" was far from a uniform mode of expression.

Our definitions of medieval English, like our definitions of all language states or systems, rely on two different criteria of assessment. A history of English written on internal evidence (changes in sound, grammar, and vocabulary) might not necessarily correspond to a history written on external evidence: the stories of migration and invasion, the Norman Conquest, the development of scribal habits of Insular writing, the movements among regional and metropolitan people in response to economic challenge, the Black Death, the invention of the printing press, the assertion of Tudor hegemony. And whether we accept internal *and* external evidence, the linearity of nineteenth-century philological history may no longer apply. Language change does not move towards an identifiable goal. There are no teleologies to linguistic (or to literary or to social) history. The ideals of Neogrammarian sound laws have been challenged, as modern linguists have recognized the influence of allophony and analogy in changing speech forms and have queried, too, the absolute value of orthography in representing phonemic conditions.[2]

My two epigraphs exemplify the ways in which recent scholars have addressed the question "What was medieval English?" from these newer perspectives. Tim Machan's opening avowal to his 2012 *Speculum* article does not simply introduce a reassessment of the place of Geoffrey Chaucer in the history of the English Language.[3] It provokes a new conception of the ways in which that history has been written, taught, and valued. Machan shares with a host of recent writers the position that our periods of English have been defined as much by philological as by ideological and pedagogical criteria. Machan recognizes that "histories of the language risk telling us only about how we have come to frame the limited evidence that we have" (173). Such evidence may include the uses of the second-person pronoun – a set of practices that, as Machan exposes, operate on the blurry lines between the grammatical and the social. In an extended foray into

morphological analysis, Machan shows how the distinctions between *thou*-forms and *you*-forms did not, necessarily in Chaucer, regularly fall along the patterns of French *tu* and *vous*. Scribal variation in the manuscripts undermines just what linguistic "data" may be, and our literary expectations – that Chaucer sustains the distinctions between formal and informal for coherent, social, and dramatic effect – may be unfulfilled by close analysis.

So, too, phenomena such as the Great Vowel Shift and Middle English lengthening in open syllables have recently been reassessed as changes that seem systemic only in retrospect. Matthew Giancarlo, in his wide-ranging *Representations* essay of 2001, demystifies the Vowel Shift, showing it to be a product of Neogrammarian presuppositions: a shoehorning of complex, and at times conflicting evidence into a chain of causes and effects.[4] Giancarlo argues that our codes of language change involve "recasting of data into intuitable forms" (52), and that nineteenth-century philologists "tacitly reduce[d] the English language to a single tradition and a unified dialect that implies a standard language uniting not only the literary tradition but also the entire language itself" (42). Even lengthening in open syllables – something that I was taught to recognize as a real, genuine, datable sound change – has come under renewed scrutiny. Did these changes in vowel length (in the words of Ricardo Bermúdez-Otero) conspire "to optimize syllable quantity according to the position of the syllable in the word," or were they rather "purely compensatory processes," prompted by other changes in syllabic context?[5] From our vantage point, such sound changes look relentlessly teleological, as if they were moving inexorably to historical difference. And yet, from the vantage point of philological revisionism, they may be less laws than legacies. As Bermúdez-Otero puts it, after a long and erudite review of the grammatical and phonological evidence and the arguments of Roger Lass, Donka Minkova, and Paul Kiparsky, our "traditional handbook formulations" may reflect neither the evidence nor the arguments, but instead, may sustain claims now a century old. Karl Luick (the nineteenth-century Austrian linguist) may, in the end, deserve "the credit of having single-handedly manufactured the two most important 'objects' of English historical phonology: the Great Vowel Shift and the ME Length Adjustment" (180).

The single-handed manufacture of the objects of historical phonology may compare, too, with the manufacture of the objects of literary history. Contesting the long-standing fascination with what R. M. Wilson called "the lost literature of medieval England," Christopher Cannon reexamines early Middle English writing to argue that every object of inspection carries

with it an implicit narrative of change.[6] The meaning of the works he studies (the *Ormulum*, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, the *Ancrene Wisse*), much like the meaning of all literary documents, lies in their relationship to what surrounds them. There is a kind of literary allophony to Cannon's analysis, a claim that everything is contingent and relational. "Early Middle English writing," he argues, should be "allowed to exist as a set of consequential things" (10).

I see the history of medieval English as a set of consequential things: a story of languages emerging in relationship to personal pasts, poetic practices, and manuscript transmissions; a world of local prayers, French lives, and Latin literary categories. My goal in this chapter is explore some of the contingencies of medieval English by examining how particular material objects raise questions about multilingualism and media. In the course of my chapter, I will address some exemplary documents – some well known, some newly discovered – to see the personal amidst the philological.

One of the most striking personalities to emerge from this philological history is Abbot Samson, who appears in Jocelyn of Brakelond's early thirteenth-century *Chronicle of the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds*. Matthew Townend, in his chapter "Contacts and conflicts" in the recent *Oxford History of English*, uses Jocelyn's account of Samson's verbal prowess as evidence for "a trilingual culture exemplified within a single person." But it is much more.

> Homo erat eloquens, Gallice et Latine, magis rationi dicendorum quam ornatui uerborum innitens. Scripturam Anglice scriptam legere nouit elegantissime, et Anglice sermocinare solebat populo, et secundum linguam Norfolchie, ubi natus et nutritus erat, unde et pulpitum iussit fieri in ecclesia et ad utilitatem audiencium et ad decorum ecclesie.[7]

> (He was a man eloquent in French and Latin, paying more attention to the meaning of what he had to say than to the ornaments of words. He knew how to read written English most elegantly, and he used to preach in English to the people, yet following the language of Norfolk, where he had been born and raised, to which end he had established a pulpit in the church for the benefit of his congregation and for the beautification of the church.)

This carefully constructed piece of rhetoric characterizes what medieval English was for someone of its time. It is a statement about the skills of speaking and reading. It is a statement about not simply the "language" of England but the *languages* of England: the French, Latin, and varieties of regional vernacular that enabled social eloquence. England, as we have long known, was a trilingual society for the better part of three centuries, but men such as Abbot Samson in the late twelfth or John Gower in the late

fourteenth century may have been unusual in their imaginative uses of three languages.[8] And yet, to understand what it meant to be eloquent in medieval England is to understand what it meant to live in a polyglot world. English, by Jocelyn's time, was both a vehicle for preaching to the *populi* as well as a medium of writing to the *literati*. Such a medium may well have differed from the medium of speech. That Samson preached in "linguam Norfolchie," where he was born and raised, evokes a language marked by human history. And, if this is a passage about individual verbal skill and social expectation, it is a passage, too, about the aesthetics of rhetoric and performance, about the relationship between the surface and the substance. Words such as *ornatui*, *elegantissime*, and *decorum* all point to the expressive life of words on the page, in the mouth, and in the built world of the church.

None of this is truly new for the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Throughout the pre-Conquest period, English was a language among others, and one capable of aesthetic evaluation. In his *History of the English Church and People*, Bede could avow that English was one of no less than five languages in Britain ("quinque gentium linguis"): English, British, Irish, Pictish, and Latin.[9] In later centuries, contact and conflict with Scandinavian-speaking peoples shaped life in English, even at a time when Ælfric was advancing a notion of school instruction "in utriusque linguae" (in both Latin and the vernacular).[10] Throughout this time, as well, the "ornaments of words" illuminated speech and writing. Asser's *Life of King Alfred* famously recalled how, as a young boy, Alfred was drawn to learning by the beauty of the initial letter in a book of English poetry: "et pulchritudine principalis litterae illius libri illectus."[11] And rhetorical prowess – whether on the field of battle or the pulpit of the church – gave immortality to everything from *The Battle of Maldon* to the *Sermo Lupi ad Anglos*.

For four hundred years after the Conquest, French, English, and Latin interlarded manuscripts of history and literature. By the early fourteenth century, the narrator of the macaronic poem beginning *Dum ludis floribus* in the famous text of London, British Library, MS Harley 2253, could conclude:[12]

> Scripsi hec carmina in tabulis:
> Mon ostel est enmi la vile de Paris.
> May Y sugge namore, so wel me is:
> Yef Hi deʒe for loue of hire, duel hit is.
>
> (I have written these verses on a tablet.
> My lodging is in the middle of the city of Paris
> I cannot say any more. I feel such joy:
> If I die for her love, it is a pity.)

The language of schoolroom notation is Latin; the streets of his lodging ring with French; but the poet remains a speaker of an English (to appropriate Jocelyn's words), "ubi natus et nutritus erat." And yet, when we see this poem not in a modern edition but on its manuscript page, we see it sharing space with poems in English and in French – as if the trilingualism of this final stanza invites us to look back, not just at the life of a single writer, but at the culture of the manuscript as a whole.

All of these examples (and there are many others) point to a set of shared environments that extend beyond the confines of traditional, linguistic periods defined by phonological or morphological change. English is not an absolute or essential category but a relational term. English defines itself against what is not English, and within the vernacular itself, there may be regional or social variations that take on the status of a "language" defined as the idiom of "ubi natus et nutritus erat."

English lived in the mouths of its speakers, but it survived in the hands of its writers. Historical linguistic evidence lies almost wholly in the written documents of men and women. But such documents are not transparent vehicles. They are physical objects whose appearance, arrangement, ornamentation, and social use all contribute to their personal and cultural value. If the recent fascination with "the history of the book" has taught us anything, it is that literary and linguistic meaning are embodied in letter shapes, textual organization, and codicological form.[13] Old English literature emerges from this recognition: from the young Alfred's fascination with the beauty of a letter, to the Exeter Book Riddle's praise of the physicality of a biblical codex.

To make the case for medieval English, then, is to make the case for the environments that shaped its self-conception. Thomas Hahn wrote, in his chapter for the *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, that, for authors such as Laȝamon and Orm, "each attempt to put pen to parchment forced a reconsideration of the resources and possibilities of literacy," and that our review of such attempts generates an "extraordinary impression that every act of writing requires a reinvention of vernacular literacy."[14] I would extend this observation to the range of medieval English writing. One way of answering what medieval English was would be to say: it was the period when every act of writing required a reinvention of vernacular literacy, when every attempt to put pen to parchment necessarily involved a reconsideration of the resources of dialect, of spelling, grammar, form, and social expectation. The English of the Middle Ages compelled each speaker to assess the worlds in which he or she was born and raised and mark them against the audiences they needed

to address. You know, Chaucer addressed his readers in Book 11 of *Troilus and Criseyde*, that in the course of history the forms of speech have changed, and words which once were powerful and meaningful may seem, to us, foolish and strange. And you know, too, he notes at that poem's conclusion, that every act of writing carries the potential of miswriting, and that people from the provinces may recast his English into local forms.[15] At these moments, Chaucer, as much as Jocelyn of Brakelond, voices a conception of medieval English as the tongue of people living with diachronic change and synchronic variation.

Old English at the margins

English inhabits the material and the multilingual from the start. Some of the earliest examples of Old English are glosses: interlinear and marginal translations of historical or holy Latin. Whatever information they may give us about lexis, morphology, or phonology, the real lesson they bequeath is that the English language was both heard and seen amidst another tongue. What is perhaps the most iconic of early Old English poems – Cædmon's *Hymn* – survives in its early Northumbrian form in manuscripts of Bede's Latin *History*. Of the four texts of this Northumbrian version, three of them have the poem in the margin or the foot of the page, while the fourth has it on the final page of its manuscript. When Bede's *History* came to be translated, in the Alfredian period, Cædmon's *Hymn* appeared in the body of the text (and Bede's own remarks about the problems of rendering the English into Latin paraphrase were, of course, eliminated). As Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe had argued, this history of the *Hymn* represents a "promotion from margin to text proper,"[16] and a shift from regional Northumbrian to the aegis of Alfredian West Saxon. Surveying the entire tradition of copying, reception, and translation of the poem, O'Keeffe concludes that "The differing level and nature of extralinguistic cues in Latin and Old English implies that Cædmon's *Hymn* was read with different expectations, conventions and techniques than those for the Latin verses with which it travelled" (46). Certainly, this is true of Cædmon's poem. But I think it may be true, as well, for other texts, traditionally thought of as "non-literary," where the lines blur between the linguistic and the extralinguistic.

One of the most visually stunning, if critically under-analyzed, documents of Old English is the inscription surrounding the Chi-Rho page of the Codex Aureus. The Codex remains one of the great legacies of early Anglo-Saxon religious book art. Along with the Lindisfarne Gospels and

the Book of Kells, it represents the brilliant Insular tradition of inscription
and illumination. Written in the mid eighth century, most likely in
Canterbury, this book of Gospels disappeared in the Viking raids of the
late ninth century, only to be ransomed back by a certain Aldorman
Ælfred. On folio 11r of the Codex – the page that re-initiates the Gospel
story with Matthew 1:18 and, like similar pages in Lindisfarne and Kells,
offers a stunning Chi-Rho Christogram of its own – Ælfred records the
story of the book's capture, ransom, and return. In vivid, personal Old
English prose, his story surrounds the Latin text: starting at the top of the
page, finishing at the bottom, and signed with the names of himself, his
wife, and his daughter along the right-hand margin.

Students today can find many reproductions of this page: in
Christopher de Hamel's beautiful *History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, for
example, or online at many websites, such as that of University of
Southampton English Department, where it sits above the text in Old
English and a Modern English translation.[17] I first encountered its Old
English, however, as I am sure generations of students did, in the section
towards the end of *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse* titled
"Examples of Non-West-Saxon Dialects." There, it follows an edition of
Cædmon's *Hymn* in its Northumbrian dialect, Bede's Death Song, the
Leiden Riddle, Mercian Hymns, Kentish Charters, and Aldorman Ælfred's
Will. Following the text of the Codex Aureus inscription, Sweet printed a
Suffolk Charter, a Kentish Psalm, and Late Northumbrian and Mercian
Glosses.[18]

In this environment, the Codex Aureus inscription becomes a document
of regional dialect and history: a piece of writing relegated to the marginal-
ity of gloss and oddity, whose value lies in its "linguistic interest" and in its
"side-light on the Viking ravages." But such a presentation understates this
document's importance for a broader understanding of what medieval
English was. The inscription is a first-person narrative of vernacular
eloquence. It is a voiced text whose drama emerges from its physical place
on the manuscript page – a page whose Latin stands in a dialogue with the
Old English.[19]

> **+** *In nomine Domini nostri Ihesu Christi.* Ic Aelfred aldormon ond Werburg
> min gefera begetan ðas bec æt hæðnum herge mid uncre clæne feo; ðæt
> ðonne wæs mid clæne golde. Ond ðæt wit deodan for Godes lufan ond for
> uncre saule ðearf[e], ond for ðon ðe wit noldan ðæt ðas halgan beoc lencg in
> ðære hæðenesse wunaden, ond nu willað heo gesellan inn to Cristes circan
> God to lofe ond to wuldre ond to weorðunga, ond his ðrowunga to
> ðoncunga, ond ðæm godcundan geferscipe to brucen[n]e ðe in Cristes

circan dæghwæmlice Godes lof rærað; to ðæm gerade ðæt heo mon arede eghwelce monaðe for Aelfred ond for Werburge ond for Alhðryðe, heora saulum to ecum lecedome, ða hwile the God gesegen hæbbe ðæt fulwiht æt ðeosse stowe beon mote. Ec swelce ic Aelfred *dux* ond Werburg biddað ond halsiað on Godes almaehtiges noman ond on allra his haligra ðæt nænig mon seo to ðon gedyrstig ðætte ðas halgan beoc aselle oððe aðeode from Cristes circan ða hwile ðe fulwiht [s]t[on]da[n mote].

(**+** *In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.* I, Earl Ælfred, and my wife Werburg procured these books from the heathen invading army with our own money; the purchase was made with pure gold. And we did that for the love of God and for the benefit of our souls, and because neither of us wanted these holy works to remain any longer in heathen hands. And now we wish to present them to Christ Church to God's praise and glory and honour, and as thanksgiving for his sufferings, and for the use of the religious community which glorifies God daily in Christ Church; in order that they should be read aloud every month for Ælfred and for Werburg and for Alhthryth, for the eternal salvation of their souls, as long as God decrees that Christianity should survive in that place. And also I, *Earl* Ælfred, and Werburg beg and entreat in the name of Almighty God and of all his saints that no man should be so presumptuous as to give away or remove these holy works from Christ Church as long as Christianity survives there.)

Ælfred begins with a statement in Latin. But the modern transcription of this statement belies its symbolic import. He does not spell out "Ihesu Christi" (this is an editorial expansion), but instead abbreviates the name with his own version of the Chi-Rho Christogram. Ælfred's small, Insular minuscule *xpi* stands as a little, local echo of the great gold image that begins the page. Much like the young King Alfred, this aldorman is captivated by the beauty of the letter, and the richness of its decoration – its gilded initial and its capitals, set on blue vellum – demands a richness of ransom. Aldorman Ælfred tells the story of how he and his wife bought the book back from the heathens with their own, hard currency: their "clæne feo" and their "clæne golde." Their gold was unalloyed, but the choice of adjective here is as much a matter of ethics as it is of assay. Their purity of funds matches their purity of heart, for they bought the book back for the love of God and the benefit of their souls: to bring these books (notice the plural here, most likely referring to the manuscript as the collection of Gospels) out of "hæðenesse" and "inn to Cristes circan," for God's glory and worship and in gratitude for his suffering. Notice this phrasing in the Old English: "to wuldre and to weorðunga, ond his ðrowunga to ðoncunga." The alliterative pairings here resonate with the prosody of the religious verse and pulpit homily. God's words should be read out,

monthly, for the salvation of Ælfred and his family: his wife Werburg and his daughter Alhthryth. He wants this book to stay where it is, as long as Christianity lasts here. His word for Christianity is the word for baptism, "fulwiht" – a word he had used in his own will precisely in this way, and which must function here as something of a metonymy for faith expressed through a sacrament. And if "fulwiht" seems to us a verbal feint, so too must "gefera" (companion) – the word Ælfred uses to describe Werburg and which, as Sweet has commented, "seems the only instance of the use of the word as 'wife.'"[20]

Ælfred's inscription offers an eloquent, intensely self-aware example of medieval English. Though in the Kentish of the late ninth century, it may exemplify Thomas Hahn's vision of the writer putting pen to parchment, requiring "a reinvention of vernacular literacy." The force of that vernacular reinvention comes from its place on the Chi-Rho page: not only in its echoing of the Christogram, but in its own narrative of family genealogy running parallel to that of Jesus: "Christi autem generatio sic erat: cum esset desponsata mater ejus Maria Joseph, antequam convenirent inventa est in utero habens . . ." On a page about the birth of Jesus, next to a sentence speaking of the Holy Family, this all-too-earthly English family records their names and gift. Reading down from the top of the right margin, Ælfred's name comes first, and then, just alongside the word "mater," is Werburg; finally, on the last line, finding what was in the mother's womb, there is the name of Alhthryth, their daughter. The cleanness of this family's wealth remains untainted by heathen sin, and the return of the book – now read in the full context of this page – comes off not simply as the ransoming of an object, but as a saint-like romance of exile and return. God is to be praised here, but he is praised in the alliterations of the vernacular. And while the inscription bids others to read from the book aloud, it is Ælfred's own "ic" that echoes as a *vox clamantis* in our ears. His statement, much as Jocelyn's account of Samson, is a story about speaking and writing, about local dialect and universal faith, about the ornaments of eloquence and the *decorum ecclesie*. This is not just a text but a performance, as much a piece of what O'Keeffe had called "visible song" as Cædmon's *Hymn* may be in its multiple literacies.

I have sought to move the Codex Aureus inscription out of the marginality of Sweet's "non-West-Saxon." At the same time, I have sought to restore it to its own margins and to see its physical condition as a bearer of its broader social and linguistic meaning. But, in addition, I have tried to show that even the most straightforward, historically bound of texts may offer figurative expression. Ælfred aspires to imagination: in his uses of

alliterative homiletics, in his metonymic terms for faith and marriage, and in his visual arrangement of the names on the margin.

The emergence of Middle English verse

One could write a history of medieval English along these beautifully blurry lines between the vernacular and the Latin, the literal and the figurative, the side and the center. Some of the earliest post-Conquest texts survive on the margins of the masters, and their first-person voices read as powerful assertions of vernacularity. What Carleton Brown once called "the earliest example of the secular lyric" in Middle English survives scrawled out as prose along the top of a late twelfth-century theological manuscript.[21] Re-edited and lineated by Peter Dronke, it reads:

> Ic an witles fuli wis
> Of worldles blisse nabbe ic nout
> For a lafdi þet is pris
> Of alle þet in bure goð
> Seþen furst þe heo was his
> Iloken in castel wal of stan
> Nes ic hol ne bliþe iwis
> Ne þriuiinde mon
> Lifþ mon non bildes me
> Abiden 7 bliþe for to bee
> Ned efter mi deað me longgeþ
> I mai siggen wel by me
> Herde þet wo hongeþ
>
> (I am completely without sense,
> Of the world's bliss, I have nothing,
> On account of a lady who is valued
> Above all others who walk in the bower.
> Since she first was his,
> Locked up in a castle wall of stone,
> I have been neither whole nor happy,
> Nor a thriving man.
> There is not a man alive who does not advise me
> To wait and be happy,
> But it is my death that I long for;
> I can say truthfully that
> Woes hang terribly on me.)

In the eighty years since Brown published this poem, we have come to realize that terms such as "earliest," "secular," and "lyric" are all contingent

categories. On the one hand, the string of first-person directives, its complex rhyme scheme, and its blend of desire and description all locate this text as a Middle English lyric. On the other hand, however, its imagery of confinement and control, its direction towards death and the grave, and its almost completely Anglo-Saxon vocabulary point back towards the elegies of late Old English: to the *First Worcester Fragment*, *The Soul and the Body*, *The Grave*, and *The Latemast Day*. And in its one identifiable, non-Anglo-Saxon loanword – the *castel* in which the beloved is locked away – the poem deploys the same strategy of verbal and material displacement as the poem on the death of William the Conqueror had done in the 1187 entry in the *Peterborough Chronicle*. "Castelas he let wyrcean," that poem began, as if the one thing that William had left behind was a new built environment of dressed stone, of a monumental legacy distilled into a loanword.

This little poem hovers on the margins of its manuscript and well as its linguistic history. But it is far from unique. A more powerfully canonical example might be *The Owl and the Nightingale*, whose assertive first-person beginning, its lithe dialectic, and its attentive descriptions of the natural landscape have long elevated it to an ideal of post-Conquest vernacularity.[22]

> Ic was in one sumere dale;
> In one suþe diȝele hale
> Iherde ich holde grete tale
> An Hule and one Niȝtingale.
>
> (I was in a summer valley,
> In a secret, hidden nook,
> I heard a great debate held
> Between an Owl and a Nightingale.)

The Owl and the Nightingale is many things, but it may well be the first, sustained English poem written out in lineated couplets: the form of continental verse. Such European, intellectual associations of the poem are affirmed, too, in the heading it receives in the Jesus College Manuscript: "Incipit altercacio inter filomenum et bubonem."[23] But when we read its words aloud, we hear not the polysyllables of Latin but the short words of Old English. Is this an English poem, written in the manner of a European *altercacio*? Or is it a continental poem that happens to be written in English? Such questions may be complicated by the version of the poem in the Cotton Caligula Manuscript, where it appears unaccouterred by a Latin title or by a concluding "Explicit" and segues, immediately, into verses of unquestionably Insular didactic force.

Ah hu heo spedde of heore dome
Ne chan ich eu namore telle
Her nis na more of þis spelle
Non mai longe liues wene
Ac ofte him lieð þe wrench...

(And how they fared in their judgment
I can tell you no more;
There is no more of this story.
No man may hope to live for long
But that often some trick may lie before him [i.e., no one
    can hope to live for a long time without something messing him up].)

The Owl and the Nightingale ends, in this manuscript, with the poem we now call "Death's Wither-Clench." That poem had, in fact, appeared in the Jesus Manuscript, but folios away. Here, in Cotton, it stands as a kind of closing moral, reasserting the poem's nativeness, grounding the reader in the earth after avian flights of eloquence. As the coda to a debate poem full of misdoings and misunderstandings, where final human judgment playfully suspends itself, "Death's Wither-Clench" offers an unmistakable *deme*. After a story celebrating two birds singing in green meadows, "Death's Wither-Clench" reminds the reader: "Al schal falewi þi grene" (Everything that is green will fade). After *The Owl and the Nightingale*'s initial characterization of the bird's debate, "þat plait was stif 7 starc 7 strong," "Death's Wither-Clench" asserts, "Nis non so strong ne sterch ne kene / þat mai ago deaþes wiþer-blench [*sic*]" (There is no one so strong nor powerful nor keen that will not undergo death's savage trick). And after a story in which one bird has accused the other of subsisting on a diet of spiders, flies, and worms, "Death's Wither-Clench" reiterates the inescapable fact that in the end, all of us "wormes fode . . . shald beo" (shall be food for worms).

   These are the landscapes of medieval English, where the line between the Old and Middle – whether drawn by language or by literature – shifts verbally and visually. Such texts subvert our textbook needs for demarcations between periods. They undermine our affirmations of linguistic or literary innovation. They ask us to consider the place of voice (whether it be historically human or imagined avian) in the world of the document. And they ask us, too, whether those writings can be trusted. If there is one thing in which we still wish to believe it is that, for the bulk of medieval English writing, orthography follows pronunciation. This is, of course, not to say that every single piece of writing represents the lived speech of the writer or the reader. But it is to say that, by convention, forms of spelling

largely represented sounds, and in the study of Middle English dialects in particular, those spellings are the primary sources of evidence for such sounds.

Reading, writing, and the ends of medieval English

Much of this relationship changed towards the close of the medieval period, as writing standards evolved keyed to institutional practice and official regularization. The rise of the so-called "Chancery Standard" exemplifies the ways in which a spelling system emerged, unmoored from the speech of scribes. Chancery preserved what might be called historical spellings even in the face of changed pronunciation (for example, *high*, *ought*, *slaughter*, *right*, *though*, and *nought*). By contrast, at least some of Chancery's scribes came from the North of England, and these trans-planted men brought their own regional preferences to spelling and morphology: for example, the Northern form-*ly* rather than the Midlands form-*lich*; the ending-*s*, instead of-*eth*, for the third-person singular; and certain forms of the verb "to be." Such regionalisms became part of a standard. When William Caxton came to print the literary canon of the previous century (Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate), he adopted Chancery-style spellings and word forms. His remarkable innovation was to adapt a form of writing developed for official, non-literary texts to imaginative works of literature. In so doing, he contributed to what we (retrospect-ively) may see as the "modernization" of English.[24]

In so doing, too, he contributed to what (as much as sound change or grammatical development) may distinguish medieval English from its later forms. John Hurt Fisher has argued for the great importance of Chancery in the establishment of a modern, standard English, and he has argued that "the most important development of the [fifteenth] century was the emergence of writing as a system coordinate with, but largely independent from, speech." During the fifteenth century, a written, official standard seems to have emerged, leading Fisher to conclude that by the century's end, "speech is not writing." This split between the voice and hand (or the typesetter) had become so great, that by 1569 John Hart lamented in his *Orthographie*:

> In the modern and present manner of writing there is such confusion and disorder, as it may be accounted rather a kind of ciphering, or such a darke kind of writing, as the best and readiest wit that euer hath bene could, or that is or shal be, can or may, by the only gift of reason, attain to the ready and perfite reading thereof, without a long and tedious labour.[25]

Medieval English may mark its end with an attitude towards speech and writing: a recognition that the English of the page is no longer the English of the voice.

Of course, the rigorous distinction between voice and script did not crystallize at once. In spite of Chancery ministrations, or the work of early printers, English men and women often wrote as they spoke well into the seventeenth century – long after anything approaching "medieval English" could be said to have survived. But it is true, however, that in the rise of both aristocratic and bourgeois household and school education, writing masters of the late fifteenth and sixteenth century did help to regularize literate vernaculars, and it came to be understood, throughout the Tudor period, that the mark of an educated man or woman was the skill at letter-formation and (at least some) consistency of spelling.

Nonetheless, documents survive that attest to earlier linguistic forms in everyday use and that show how medieval English lasted well into the period we would like to believe was modern. Mine has been, here, a history of language written on the blurry lines between vernacular and Latin, material and metaphorical, the margin and the center. In offering one final case of medieval vernacular eloquence, I turn to the sixteenth-century annotations I discovered in a book of hours now held in the San Diego Public Library.[26] This little volume, produced in the Low Countries in the late fifteenth century for English export, holds marks of prayer and possession from an identifiable Norfolk family. On historical, linguistic, and paleographical grounds, these annotations can be dated from the 1490s through the 1550s, and in what may be its chronologically last, extended piece of personal writing, one of the owners has inscribed a prayer in the dead center of the volume: just after the *Obsecro Te* and on a set of blank leaves that may have been originally designed for illumination. I have elsewhere discussed this book in detail, and the text with which I conclude may be dated to the first decades after the Henrician reformation. Nonetheless, it offers evidence for the profound linguistic impress of "medieval English" on the writer's heart and hand. Much like Ælfred's inscription in the Codex Aureus, it records a vernacular, first-person voice responding to a Latin text of devotion and holy descent.

> Lorde god allmightie & mercifull father whose power & mercye is immut-
> able whiche hast togither created all thynges which wouldest thy worde for
> the redemption of mankynde to be incarnated whiche alone knowest the
> hearte of all things haue mercye on me according to thy great mercye &
> heare my prayer. O Lorde god of Nazareth which art sent out from the
> bosom of the allmightie father into the worlde to release synnes to comforte

thafflicted & sorowfull people vouchesaffe to deliver me from affliction and losen me from the trowble that I am nowe in and to defende me from myne enemyes visible & invisible presente & to come Lorde god. Which hast restored to concorde mankinde with queme and hast with thy proper blode bought in heritage promised to him chyffely paradise & hast for a peace amonge man & angelle. Thou lord god vouchesaffe with thy mynd to stablishe a sure concorde between me and my enemies, & to open the good will of them, and all their anger and wrath which thei decline to me warde, to mitigate & extinguishe, as thou diddest take clen awaye hatred which Esau had against his brother Jacob. Lorde god of Israell, who madest Adam of a parte of earth or clompe of ye grounde vouchesaf to deliver me through thy power strengthen faith as thou hast saved Noe by ye wather of destruction Abraham from the Caldes, & also his.

This prayer hovers between the commonplace and the creative. For a reader with an eye towards medieval English idioms and ideologies, the appeal for the defense against enemies visible and invisible will recall the prayers of St. Bridget, popular throughout late medieval England, especially in their vernacular form known as the "Fifteen Oes." St. Bridget's Latin plea, "liberes me ab omnibus inimicis visibilibus et invisibilibus" (free me from all enemies visible and invisible), is virtually translated here. In addition, the repeated appeals for mercy resonate with the *miserecordia* prayers of the late medieval church, themselves echoic of the Psalms. Much of this prayer's vocabulary would have been commonplace to Middle English orisons: God's immutable power and mercy; the plea to be delivered from affliction; to loosen the writer from the trouble; the desire to take hatred clean away. Among the Middle Englishisms that stand out, there is the idiom "to me warde," a way of expressing "towards me," that shows up in such texts as *Pearl*, *Troilus and Criseyde*, and Lydgate's *Pilgrimage of the Life of Man*. It may well have been an archaism by the time of Tyndale, who used it in his versions of 2 Corinthians 7:7: "For he tolde vs youre desyre youre mornynge youre fervent mynde to me warde: so that I now reioyce the more."

For a text written in the 1550s, there is much here that is "medieval." Its long sentences, unsure in their subordinate clauses and relative pronouns, evoke the prose of an earlier century, where (to appropriate the words of Richard Beadle) only a modern editor's "liberal use of parentheses and dashes … might do something to meet the writer's desire to combine subordination" with devotional assertion.[27]

But the most strikingly medieval moment in the text is the use of the word *queme*. Descending from the Old English *gecweme*, the word meant satisfaction or pleasure, often in actions pleasing to God. The noun

appears (in various spellings) throughout a range of Northern Middle English texts, as well as in such regional poems as *Gawain* and *Pearl*. The *OED* and the *Middle English Dictionary* give the following quotation from the Townley Cycle *Play of Jacob* as the last recorded use of the noun: "Thou shall well yhwe thi holy day, and serue to wheme God with all thi hart." After this time (at least according to the *OED*), the word was seen as regional or archaic, and it survives not in literary uses but in lexicographies of Northern dialects and provincialisms.

An Elizabethan reader would have found *queme* as a relic in the architecture of this passage's vocabulary. Compared to the Latin-sounding *mitigate* (according to the *OED*, a late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century word) and *extinguish* (according to the *OED*, a word that first appears in the 1540s and 50s), *queme* would have seemed as medieval as these other words sound modern. Indeed, this prayer straddles the old and new in such arresting ways, that we cannot but see in it a human supplicant, putting pen to parchment (in Thomas Hahn's words) in "a reconsideration of the resources and possibilities of literacy." That this writer understood his place on the cusp of language change is clear, finally, in his phrasing of the creation of man, as if he were translating the old into something new: "Lorde god of Israell, who madest Adam of a parte of earth or clompe of ye grounde ..." Anyone from Aldorman Ælfred onwards could have understood "a parte of earth," but only someone of the late sixteenth century could have made sense of "clompe of ye grounde." In fact, the *OED* records the first use of the word *clump* as meaning "a group of trees" in 1586, and has no entry for the word meaning a "compact mass or piece" (clearly the book of hours' annotator's meaning) until 1699. This prayer may offer up the earliest recorded, written use of *clump*, and in that little bit of lexicographic one-upsmanship, we may find a writer acutely conscious of watching one version of his language end and another begin.

This passage is far from unique in its blend of old and new and its subversion of the fault lines between "medieval" and "modern" language and sensibility. But what it offers in my narrative of medieval English is the evidence of voice coming to terms with text; the challenges that we, as modern scholars, have with using written documents as evidence of language change; and the material condition of the English language taking form amidst the interleavings of the Latin. Much like Abbot Samson of three centuries before, this writer offers a prayer "secundum linguam Norfolchie" – with all the idiosyncratic blends of form and lexicon that may have been that dialect's own norm. And if the old and

new stand side-by-side, it may be because someone is writing at the close of a lifetime that had seen linguistic change in the place "ubi natus et nutritus est."

My chapter has attended to some moments in the history of medieval English when we can see changes and contingencies at work – when we may find in the self-conscious writings of an individual or in the ventriloquisms of a genre an awareness of vernaculars in contact and in contest with varieties of forms. To speak and write, conscious of diachronic change and synchronic variation, attentive to the multilingualism of the British Isles, and sensitive to the material environments in which vernacularity took shape – to do all these things is to live in medieval English. As I have suggested here, that English can be understood anew by placing texts back in their documentary contexts: not excerpted in textbooks or anthologies, but restored to the voice and verso of their origins. In the process, we may understand how situational medieval English was – a language of times and places, but one of pens and parchments, too. If linguistic history, to return to Machan's formulation, needs to be rewritten in a manner other than retrospectively, it needs first to be reread on its own pages.

Notes

1 See Wogan-Brown *et al.*, eds., *The Idea of the Vernacular*.
2 See the discussions throughout the chapters in Momma and Matto, eds., *A Companion to the History of the English Language*, especially the chapter by Minkova and Stockwell, "Phonology," 29–42.
3 "Chaucer and the History of English."
4 "The Rise and Fall of the Great Vowel Shift?"
5 "Prosodic Optimization."
6 *The Grounds of English Literature*.
7 Quoted in Townend, "Contacts and Conflicts," 77.
8 See Turville-Petre, *England the Nation*, and Trotter, ed., *Multilingualism in Later Medieval Britain*.
9 Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, as quoted and translated in Townend, "Contacts and Conflicts," 76.
10 See Bullough, "The Educational Tradition in England," and Brooks, ed., *Latin and the Vernacular Languages*.
11 Stevenson, *Asser's Life of King Alfred*, ch. 23; Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, 75.
12 Text quoted from Ker, *Facsimile of British Museum MS. Harley 2253*, fol. 76r. For translation, discussion, and critical contexts, see Lerer, "'Dum ludis floribus'."
13 See the essays in Lerer and Price, eds., *The History of the Book and the Idea of Literature*, as well as Bishop, "Book History," and Vander Meulen, "How to Read Book History."

14 "Early Middle English," 85.
15 *Troilus and Criseyde*, II.22–8; V.1793–9, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, gen. ed. Benson.
16 *Visible Song*, 16.
17 de Hamel, *A History of Illuminated Manuscripts*, 20-2. The online facsimile, text, and translation are at www.southampton.ac.uk/~enm/codexau.htm.
18 Whitelock, ed., *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, 205–6.
19 I quote from the text at the Southampton website, with letter forms restored to Old English orthography, checked against Sweet's text, 205. Translation from Southampton website.
20 Whitelock, ed., *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader in Prose and Verse*, 289.
21 The text appears across the top of London, British Library, MS Royal 8. D.xiii, fol. 25r. Edited and first published by Brown, *English Lyrics of the Thirteenth Century*, xii. My edition is based on the revised and emended text of Dronke, *The Medieval Lyric*, 144, 280; translation mine. Material in this and the following paragraph develops arguments I had made in "The Genre of the Grave and the Origins of the Middle English Lyric."
22 This text from Stanley, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale*.
23 Ker, ed., *The Owl and the Nightingale*. The opening of the poem from the Jesus Manuscript is from fol. 156r. The subsequent text I quote from the Cotton Manuscript is from fol. 246r. The poem edited as "Death's Wither-Clench" is called "Long Life" in Ker's edition.
24 See the discussion in Fisher, "Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English," and in Fisher, Richardson, and Fisher, eds., *An Anthology of Chancery English*.
25 *An Orthographie*, 2.
26 Lerer, "Literary Prayer and Personal Possession in a Newly Discovered Tudor Book of Hours."
27 "Private Letters," 298.