THE INFLUENCE OF ANGLO-FRENCH PRONUNCIATION UPON MODERN ENGLISH

W. W. SKEAT

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By the Rev. Professor W. W. Skeat.

In some remarks upon "The Proverbs of Alfred," printed in the Phil. Soc. Trans. for 1895–8, p. 399, I endeavoured to draw attention to certain curious peculiarities of spelling to be found in some MSS., particularly of the thirteenth century, and I showed that they can all be accounted for by the simple supposition that the scribes who wrote them were trained in Norman schools, and were more accustomed to the pronunciation of Anglo-French than to the true English sounds of the words which they were trying to write down. I cannot find that much use has yet been made of this discovery, except by myself. However, I am now prepared to go very much further, and to say that students of Middle English will have to recognize the *practical* side of the principles which I have laid down. For there is a great deal more in it than might be supposed. It has now become quite clear to me that the Norman pronunciation did, in many cases, overpower and divert the native pronunciation of native words; and this influence has to be reckoned with in a very much larger number of instances than any scholar has hitherto suspected. Indeed, I find in it an easy answer to a great many peculiarities of pronunciation that seem, at first sight, to contradict the usual phonetic laws.

In order to make the chief points clearer, I have drawn up a list of sixteen canons, showing in what respects a Norman would naturally vary from an Englishman in matters of pronunciation. These I have reprinted, and renumbered, in an article entitled "Observations of some peculiarities of Anglo-French Spelling," which appears at p 471 of my "Notes on English Etymology," to be published by the Clarendon Press in the present year; and they are briefly recapitulated below, at p. 25, followed by a list of early texts in which A.F. spellings occur. I do not say that these

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canons are exhaustive, but they refer to the more important points of difference between French and English; and I shall therefore refer to these, by number, for the student's convenience.

Surely it is worthy of notice that *sal* for *shal* (shall) occurs freely in *non*-Northumbrian texts, such as the Bestiary, the Proverbs of Alfred, and even in the Old Kentish Sermons!

Perhaps one clear example of what I am aiming at will show at once the full force of the argument. If we open Dr. Furnivall's splendid Six-text edition of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, we can hardly fail to be struck by the oddity of the spelling of the Cambridge MS. So obvious are its eccentricities, that Dr. Furnivall himself, in his Temporary Preface, written as long ago as in 1868, drew particular attention to them, and enumerated some of them. Amongst other things, he says, with perfect truth :—" The square scribe—as we may call the one who wrote most of the MS.—had evidently a great fancy (1) for swallowing *els* and *tess*; and (2) the guttural *gh* and *g*, with an *n* and *d* once; (3) for putting *oes* for *aes*, *ees*, and *us*; . . . . (7) this scribe used *t*, *th*, *d*, and other flats and sharps in a noteworthy way; . . . . (9) prefixed *s* to initial *ch*; (10) used *w* for *v*, and *v* for *w*; . . . . (12) he wrote some odd forms. Whether these peculiarities are Midland or Northern, or some Midland and some Northern, I must settle in the footnotes, and now only collect instances of them."

If we turn to these footnotes, we find, practically, that they settle nothing definitely, beyond establishing that some peculiarities are Northern, which is correct. The right clue was not really in hand. Footnote No. 3 on p. 52 says: "*Figten* is Midland; see Genesis and Exodus, l. 3227." Footnote No. 2 on p. 56 says: "Cp. *then* for *ten*; see Genesis, p. 94, l. 3305; *leð* for *let*, p. 95, l. 3348; *herðe* for *herte*, p. 81, l. 2856"; with other similar remarks in notes 1, 3, and 5 on p. 57, where further references to Genesis are given. The right answer is, that *figten* is no mark of Midland at all, but a sure mark of Anglo-French influence; and I have already shown, in my article on the "Proverbs," p. 412, that Genesis and Exodus is precisely one of the texts which bear traces of the handiwork of a Norman scribe. In like manner, the Cambridge MS., above considered, belongs to the same class, or is much to be suspected of doing so. With this clue, let us apply some of my sixteen canons,[1] and see how they

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[1] They were chiefly drawn up from MSS. of the *thirteenth* century, so that they are only partially applicable to MSS. of so late a date as 1400.

work. I quote the Cambridge MS. as 'C.,' and take only such examples as occur in the "Temporary Preface," pp. 51–59.

Canon 4. "The English *wh*, as in modern Northern English, became a mere *w*. They wrote *wat* for *what*."

Compare Dr. Furnivall's remark—"*h* is left out in *wich*, 2361; put-in in *whilhom*, 2384, 2403"; p. 59. Just so; it was put in by complete confusion.

Canon 2. "Old French had no initial sound of *sh*."

Compare—"We find an *s* prefixed to the initial *ch* in 195 *schyn*, chin; 475 *schaunce*, chance," etc.; p. 57. That is to say, the scribe confuses the sound of *sh* with that of *ch*. Dr. Furnivall instances similar forms from the Anturs of Arthur, in the West-Midland dialect; referring to the Camden Society's edition. But the Anturs of Arthur, in the very third stanza, has the characteristic Anglo-French *hurl* for *erl*, and *hernestely* for *ernestly* (Canon 1). It is no sure mark of West-Midland, this putting of *sh* (*sch*) for *ch*.

In Canons 14 and 15, I show that Normans wrote *th* for final *t*, and conversely; and I explain this. I add that "we even find *thown* for *town*."

Compare—"We have also *t* for *th* in 2098 *Atenys* (Athens); 2981 *To* (tho, i.e. then); 3041 *þynkyt* (thinketh). But *th* for *t* in 1078 *blenþhe* (blent); 2185 *abouthe* (about)," etc.

At p. 52, we read that C. omits the *t* in *parlemen*, 1306. This agrees with Canon 12, which points out a similar omission of *d* in *lond* (after an *n*).

Canon 9. "The sound *ght* was most difficult for Norman scribes. *Ght* sometimes becomes *wt* or *t*."

Compare Dr. Furnivall's remark on p. 53—"In 505 *outhe*, ought; 604, *sleythe*, sleight; 1214, *cauth*, caught, *ght* is represented by *the* or *th*." That is to say, the scribe wrote *outhe* (with *th* for *t*), as already noted; and by this *oute* (as it should have been) he meant *oughte* with *gh* suppressed. Just so.

It is hardly worth while to go on. It may suffice to say that the spelling of C. can be completely accounted for, if we are careful to *add* the fact of its containing *Anglo-French* spellings to the other facts which concern the dialect only.

The importance of the above remarks lies in this. If we wish to compare a MS. showing strong Anglo-French peculiarities with others of the same date and contents, it is sometimes convenient to compare this MS. C. with the first four native English MSS. which are printed side by side with it. It doubtless contains

dialectal peculiarities *as well*; but for these we can make separate
allowance. The Lansdowne MS. is much the worst, and is a little
risky; but the A.F. marks in it are very few; as, e.g., *strenksthe*
for *strengthe*, 84; *wepped* for *wepte*, 148; *werde* for *werlde*, 176;
hoistre for *oistre*, 182; etc. However, the comparison is more
curious than instructive; the MS. is too late to be relied upon for
A.F. peculiarities.

Having said thus much about Anglo-French spelling, by way of
introduction, I wish to draw special attention to the much more
important fact, affecting even our modern pronunciation of common
words, that Anglo - French pronunciation actually diverted, in
some instances, the true sounds of native words. Surely this is
somewhat serious; and the more so when we consider that our
dictionaries take no notice of the fact; at least, I can call to mind
no special instance in which this has been done.

By way of a clear example of what I mean, I would cite the
modern English *fiddle*. The A.S. and early M.E. form was
invariably *fithel*; but the *th* was, to the Norman, a difficult sound
(see p. 29 below), and the obvious way of avoiding it was to turn
the voiced *th* (*dh*) into the voiced *d*, as in the O.F. *guider*, to guide.
The result was the late M.E. *fidel*, of which the earliest example
cited in the N.E.D. is dated 1450; the accompanying verb *fidelin*
occurring in 1440. Langland has both the sb. *fithel* and the verb
fithelen; Chaucer has the sb. only, in his famous Prologue, l. 296.
If we now turn to the Six-text edition, it is interesting to find that
MS. C., the only one which is strongly marked by Anglo-French
peculiarities, is the only one that spells the word with a *d*. The
spelling is *fedele*, showing at the same time that the scribe had not
quite caught the true sound of the short *i*. The Lansdowne MS.
has the extraordinary form *phepel*, which is marked by the French
use of *ph* for *f*, and of short *e* for short *i*; yet it shows the correct
English sound of the middle consonant.

The action of Norman pronunciation on English was sporadic
and uncertain, affecting some words, and not others; or else
affecting some words more than others. In some cases the effect
was only transient or partial. Consider, for example, the words
feather and *fathom*. These might, in like manner, have become
fedder and *faddom*; and we have clear evidence that such pro-
nunciations were once in use. The M.E. *fether* occurs in Chaucer,
C.T., A 2144; and, if we turn to the Six-text, we shall again find
that MS. C. has *fedyr*, whilst all the rest have *th*. And this form

feder very nearly became established, as the N.E.D. gives instances of it in Langland and Lydgate, and even in the works of Bishop Fisher. The form *fathom* had a much narrower escape of being superseded. We find the form *fædm* as early as in Ælfric's Glossary, so that it was once an English dialectal variation; but, after the Conquest, it became fairly common, being naturally preferred by Norman speakers. The N.E.D. gives examples from the Cursor Mundi, King Alisaunder, and the prose Merlin; and the verb *fadmen* occurs in Havelok, which abounds with A.F. spellings. In the Chaucer MSS., the *d*-form is clearly preferred; thus in C.T., A 2916, the first five MSS. have *fadme*, and only the Lansdowne MS. has *fathome*. However, in F 1060, the forms are equally divided; the first three MSS. have the spelling with *d*, and the last three have the spelling with *th*. In the Rom. Rose, 1393, the Glasgow MS. has *fadoms*. The N.E.D. quotes the form with *d* from Shakespeare's Tempest, Winter's Tale, and Othello, and from Harrison's England! The E.D.D. shows that it is still common in Northumbrian and East Anglian; so that we have here an instance of a case in which the Midland and Southern form *fathom* has maintained its ground against the combined influence of Northumbrian and Anglo-French. At the same time, I feel quite justified in drawing the inference, that the influence of Anglo-French should always be considered, just as we consider that of Northumbrian. It is only in this way that apparent exceptions to phonetic laws can be rightly understood.

I have taken the above case of the word *fiddle* because it well illustrates my position. But it is by no means an important one. The frequent inability of the Norman to pronounce *th*, though clearly exhibited in a majority of our thirteenth-century MSS., was nevertheless, for the most part, temporary. In course of time, the Norman learnt his lesson, and could pronounce both the voiced and voiceless *th* as well as any native. I may, however, quote a few more examples of the reduction of *th* to *d*, viz.: *afford*, from A.S. *geforthian*; *burden*, for *burthen* (influenced by *burden* of a song, from F. *bourdon*), *murder*, for *murther*; and the common word *could*, from M.E. *couthe*.[1]

It is of much more importance to take the case of a sound which the Norman wholly failed to achieve, and which is consequently

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[1] It is curious to find that, in Chaucer, Prol. 713, MS. C. has the Northern form *couthe*, pronounced as *coude*, and rhyming with *loude*, where all the rest have *coude*. For *mordering*, *morthering*, see C.T., A 2001.

obsolete, viz., the sound of the A.S. final guttural in such words
as *fāh*, a foe, *bōh*, a bough, and *tōh*, tough.   These words are
considered, one by one, in my "Principles of English Etymology,"
series 1, § 333, and are well known.   But somewhat more still
remains to be said.

That the Normans recognized the sound, and tried to represent it
in writing, is clear; for they invented the symbol *gh* for this very
purpose.   But when they came to sound it, they found it none too
easy.   Two courses were open to them : (1) to ignore it, and (2) to
imitate it by substitution.   If the vowel in the word were long,
the weight (so to speak) of the syllable fell more upon the vowel
than the consonant, and the word might still be easily recognized,
even if the pronunciation of the *gh* was extremely slight.   This
explains many forms at once, viz., *bough, dough, plough, slough,
though, high, nigh, sigh, thigh, neigh, weigh*; and to these we may of
course add such words as *borough* and *thorough*, in which the
syllables containing the *gh* are wholly unstressed and are of small
consequence; as well as *sloe* (A.S. *slāh*), *foe* (A.S. *fāh*), in which
the final guttural is not even written.   The treatment of the A.S.
prep. *þurh* is most instructive; for it split into three distinct forms.
The attempt to pronounce the final *h* after the *r* produced the M.E.
thurw, thoruh, thoru, Mod.E. *thorough*, where the indeterminate
final vowel is all that is left of the guttural, but it serves the turn;
and it is highly interesting to observe that the modern spelling
occurs in MS. C. alone, in C.T., A 920, where the other MSS.
have the more uncompromising spellings *thurgh* and *thorgh*, which
only some of the community could rightly pronounce.   Some
speakers, however, actually transposed the *r* so as to bring it next
to the *th-*, thus producing the form *thruh*, which occurs in an early
thirteenth - century Southern MS., strongly marked with A.F.
spellings, in Reliq. Antiq., i. 102.   This form had no chance of
preservation, and something had to be done with it.   The majority
hit upon the happy expedient of lengthening the vowel, which
weakened the final guttural and allowed it to be gradually and
quietly dropped; and this is the origin of the modern E. *through*,
in which the *ou* represents the lengthened *u* and the *gh* remains as
a mere ornament, admirable to the eye, but ignored by the ear.
The minority who had not the wit to lengthen the vowel were
driven to find a substitute for the *gh*, and the nearest recognizable
sound being that of *f*, they produced the form *thruf* or *thruff*,
a form which is still common in our dialects; see, e.g., the

Lincolnshire and Whitby Glossaries. We thus see that the A.S. *þruh* actually produced no less than *three* forms, viz., *thorough*, *through*, and *thruff*,[1] two of which are in literary use; and all because some means had to be used to get rid of the A.S. final *h*. I do not deny that the same result might possibly have been produced by mere dialectal variation; but it seems to me that the fixed determination of the Normans to learn English made such changes imperative and inevitable; and it is unscientific to neglect an influence so potent and yet so subtle. Phonetic laws are of no use to us unless we consider *all* the influences that in some way or other affect them. We have thus seen that the easiest way of preserving a final M.E. *gh* after a short vowel was to exchange it for *f*. This accounts for a number of words in which the vowel was originally short, such as *cough*, *laugh*, *trough*, and others in which it was deemed, for some reason or other, highly advisable to preserve the *f*-sound, such as *chough*, *enough*, *hough*, *rough*, *tough*. In these five last instances the use of the *f* rendered the vowel-length unnecessary, and the vowels were actually shortened, because the words were otherwise recognizable. Similarly, some dialects have *duff* for *dough*.

The same exchange of A.S. final *h* or *g*, M.E. *gh*, for *f*, occurs also after a consonant, in the case of E. *dwarf*, from A.S. *dweorh* or *dweorg*, as noted in the N.E.D.

A curious point, and not (I think) much observed, is that the A.S. final *h* could be represented by the substitution of *k*, as well as of *f*, in cases in which the said *h* was preceded by a consonant. Thus the A.S. *beorgan*, to protect, is represented by *bargh-* or *barf-* in the prov. E. *bargham* or *barfam*, a horse-collar (E.D.D.); but these are not the only forms. A Norman who could not sound *bergh-* or *bargh-* was at liberty to substitute either *barf-* or *bark-*; in fact, *bark-* is the better imitation of the two; and this is why we find such forms as *barkham* and *barkum* in some Northern dialects. Precisely the same substitution appears in some place-names. Thus Bartlow in Cambs. was spelt *Berklow* in the time of Fuller; and this *berk* is merely an A.F. pronunciation of A.S. *beorh*. Such a substitution, which phonetically is by no means a bad one, becomes still easier to understand when we remember that the form *berk* was already familiar to the Norman from its

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[1] Also *thurf*, as in "*thurf* our louerdes grace'; Early English Poems, ed. Furnivall, p. 35, l. 15.