

## A NOTE ON LME GENDER

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While discussing the unhistorical occurrences of the masculine and feminine gender, i.e. the “confused” or “changed” gender, most scholars have tried to account for them by “masculinization”, “neutralization”, increased sex-indicative function, “Genuswechsel”, emotional attitudes of authors, or irrelevance of gender to nominal inflections where marking gender was totally abandoned in the fifteenth century.

This study is based on personal pronouns replacing names of allegorical birds in “The Branches of the Appletree”. An account of the unhistorical gender occurrences is based on 1) tracing the original of which “The Branches...” is a translation, 2) a suggestion that the possibility of natural gender cannot be neglected, and 3) enallage.

“The Branches of the Appletree” is a part of *The Tretyse of Loue*, one of the English books printed in Westminster between 1491 (Caxton’s death) and 1494 when Wynkyn de Worde began publishing under his own name. The print can be dated around 1493 since the opening lines of the book state that it “was translaid out of frenshe Into englyshe the yere of our lord Mccccxxxxiiij” (*Tretyse* 1/11)<sup>1</sup>.

“The Branches...” is a part of the compilation which includes:

1. The Tretyse of Loue.
2. The Tretyse of Loue: Hours of the Cross.
3. The Tretyse of Loue: Remedies Against the Seven Deadly Sins.

<sup>1</sup> Actually the English *Tretyse* was not a work of one translator. On p. 103/6–7 there it says “... for theym that translated it” and in addition spellings and personal pronouns used, to mention only these, do change at some point in the text. This is not true, though, in “The Branches...”.

4. The Three Signs of True Loue and Frienship.
5. The Branches of the Appletree.
6. The Seven Signs of Jesus' Love.
7. An Exhortation by Faith.
8. Master Albert of Cologne's Nine Articles.
9. Diverse Sayings of Saint Paul and Others.
10. The Six Masters on Tribulation.

Parts 1–4 form a unit (Fisher 1970: xiii–xiv). According to Fisher, on whose edition of the text I have worked, the remaining six texts were added to the *Tretyse* proper (parts 1–4). The origin of these six tracts was a puzzle till the discovery of MS. Francais 2292 in the Bibliothèque Royale in Brussels which contains, among others, five of the tracts, i.e. all but (7) "An Exhortation by Faith". John H. Fisher's edition of the *Tretyse* includes them in the Appendix.

Fisher (1970: xxix–xxx) argues that the Brussels manuscript is the source of the English translation, although the allegory was very popular and there are 75 manuscript and incunabula texts "still extant in Latin, French, German and Netherlandish" (Fisher 1970: xxviii). The text is the "Palma Contemplationis". As to the English and Brussels texts "The most striking similarity is, of course, that in these two texts alone the tree is called an appletree. In all other versions so far noted it is a palmtree." (Fisher 1970: xxix).

Fisher mentions also the appearance of 3 identical Latin phrases<sup>2</sup> in these two texts and says that "...the point need not be labored further since there seems to be little doubt as to the direct connection between the texts." (Fisher 1970: xxx)

In another place Fisher (1970: xv) discusses possible objections to the said source of the translation, and says that in some cases "In order to get the correct readings, the English translator must have had another text before him." (Fisher 1970: xv note 2)<sup>3</sup>.

There is also a casual remark, not referring to the translation itself but to the series of tracts in the English and French versions of parts (5, 6, 8, 9, 10), that "The series ... must then, represent independent borrowings from a common source." (Fisher 1970: xv).

#### DATA

There are seven branches of the appletree, that is of the tree of contemplation, and each of them has a bird<sup>4</sup> assigned to it that exemplifies the behaviour

<sup>2</sup> Only two are identical, the third is shorter in the English version.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also notes on pp. 157–159. These notes are by no means exhaustive, there are many more differences between the texts.

<sup>4</sup> "The Branches..." is divided into two parts; the first deals with the seven fruits

described. The branches are

- (1) self-knowledge — peacock
- (2) concern for fellow men — screech-owl
- (3) temporal affliction and penance — swan
- (4) compunction — harpy
- (5) abiding — waiting — nightingale
- (6) visitation — swallow
- (7) affection — love — phoenix

In the French text the relationships between the nouns in question, i.e. birds' names, and their pronominalizations is in accordance with the French grammatical gender, whereas the English rendering of them presents some problems.

#### EXAMPLES

- (1) *peacock* (Eng. 1103–9; Fr. 132/23–26)  
Vpon this braunche makyth the pecok *his* nēest. The pecok is of suche nature that whan *she* slepyth on nyghtes and wakyth sodenly, *she* cryeth for the fere that *she* hathe to lose *hir* bewte.  
[Sur celle brance fait *le* paon son nyt. *Le* paon est de tel nature que quant *il* dort par nuyt at *il* sesueille soudainement, *Il* crie pour ce qu'il cuide sa beaulte auoir perdue.]
- (2) *screech owl* (Eng. 111/10–14; Fr. 133/23–26)  
Vpon this braunche makyth the shrikeowle *hir* nest, that is of suche nature that *she* drawith *hir* about suche places as dēde bodyes ben beried. And whan ony is nere his deth *she* felith it aferre, & cryeth lowde by grete pyte & sorowe.  
[Sur cest rain fait *le* huason nyd quy est de telle nature que *il* se traist entour le sepulcre des trespassez. Et quant aucun est pres de sa mort *il* le sent de loing, et crie par grant pitie et douler.]
- (3) *swan* (Eng. 112/6–8; Fr. 134/15–16)  
Vpon braunche makith the swann *her* nest, that is of suche nature that whan *she* shall deye *she* singyth.  
[Sur cest rayn fait *le* cisgne son nid, quy est de telle condition que quant *il* doit mourir *il* chante moult doucement.]
- (4) *harpy* (Eng. 113/3–9; Fr. 135/7–12)  
Vpon this braunche makith *hir* nest a byrde whiche is callid harpia, that hath the semblaunce of a mannes visage, & *hir* nature is to slee the fyrst

of the tree of penance, the second with the seven branches of the tree of contemplation. Of these two, only the second is analyzed here. Birds and flowers (the latter do not contribute to the problem discussed) are the only allegories in the entire *Tretyse*.

man *she* fyndeth, & thenne gooth she to some water where *she* beholdeth *hirself* & seeth that *she* hath slayn *hir* owne liknes, & thenn makyth she a full grete sorowe alwaye that euer *she* sawe ony man.

[Sur cest rain fait son nyd *la* harpie que a semblant d'homme et si est tant crucle beste que *elle* occist le premier *quelle* treuve, Et puis va sur eaue et se mire, dont veoit *quelle* a mort son semblable si maine moult grant dueil toutes fois *quelle* voit homme.]

(5) *nightingale* (Eng. 114/26—30; Fr. 136/22—26)

Vpon this braunche makith þe nightyngale *his* neest, þat is of suche nature that *he* singyth al nyght ayenst þe day, & whan *he* seth þe daye & the sonne ryse, *he* makyth so gre Ioy þat vneth *he* kepith *his* lyfe.

[Sur cest rain faisoit *le* Rossignol son nyd, Qui est de tel nature quil chante la nuit encontre le Iour. Et quant *il* voit le iour et le soleil luer, *il* maine si grant ioie pour peu quil ne desrompt.]

(6) *swallow* (Eng. 115/31—34; Fr. 137/21—22)

Vpon this braunche makyth the swallow *hir* nest, & *she* is of suche nature that *she* takyth *hir* fedinge in ayre & in fleeng.

[Sur cel rain fait *la* yronde son nyd. *Elle* est de telle nature *quelle* prent sa pasture en layr en volant.]

(7) *phoenix* (Eng. 117/12—20; Fr. 138/31—139/2)

Vpon this braunche makyth *her* nest the phenyx that signefyeth the spirytuell folke, for this that *he* is singular. For full fewe is of them, or of suche that come to this hye stage. The phenyx is of suche nature that whan *he* shall deye *he* gadreth togyder thornes and gooth in to the moost hote part of al the londe þat *he* is in, & whan *he* hath heped them he fleeth ouer theym soo longe that they begyn to brenne. And thenne breuneth *he hymselfe* in that fyre, and of those ashes groweth a nother fenyx.

[Sur cest Rain fait son nid *le* feniz lequel signifie les spirituelz pour ce quil est singulier. Car petit est de ceulz ou de telz qui par ioingnent a ce tres hault estage. *Le* feniz est de telle nature que quant *il* doit mourir *il* assemble plente de petite busce seche si se trait en la plus chaulde partie de toute la terre, puis volle par dessus tant quil lesprent, et la se brusle et art en ce feu. Et des cendres naist vng petit ver duquel renaist vng feniz.]

## DISCUSSION

In (1) there is a shift from *his* to *she*, *hir*. In (7) the shift is from *her* to *he*, *hymselfe*.

Within the entire text of "The Branches..." the number of occurrences of the feminine forms is as follows: objective *hyr* 6, *her* 4, *hir* 10, genitive *hyr* 4, *her* 4, *hir* 19, *hyrselfe* occurs twice, and *hirself* 4 times.<sup>5</sup> These forms are

<sup>5</sup> This paper is part of a larger study on the morphology of the *Tretyse*.

used in reference to women (*our lady*, *the doughter*, *moder*, *mari mawdeleyne*), to the soul, to one flower (*lelye*) and to the cited birds. In all these cases the *she* form and only *she* is also used in reference to them.

In addition to that, there is one case which is cumbersome.

(Eng. 110/18—22; Fr. 132/33—133/1)

It (*narde*) is an herbe lityll & low & of hote nature that signefieth humilitie that gladly obeyeth *hirself*, & that maye not be done wythout þe hete of harite. Suche humylite yeldeth grete colour & odour, for *it* drewe þe sone of god down to erth...

[Ly est vne herbe petite et basse et de chaulde nature si endure humilite, qui volontiers sencline, et qui ne poeult sans la colour de charite. *Telle* humilite rent grant couleur et oudeur. Ceste humilite attrait le filz de dieu en terre...]

Thus *humilite* is used with *hirself*. *it drewe* should be assigned to *humilite* by comparison with corresponding *ceste humilite attrait*. This case is beyond the scope of this study and is given here only for the sake of completeness.

Thus the gender switch in (1)<sup>6</sup> is a shift from msc. to fem. and the one in (7) from fem. to msc. In all remaining cases (2—6) one gender is used throughout each respective part.

The consistent use of a gender (2—6), however, is not always in accordance to OE or French (be it the source of the English version of "The Branches...").

The following table is a comparison of gender assignment to the Ns in question in the English and French versions of the text.

	English	French
(1) peacock	msc.	msc.
	fem.	
(2) screech owl	fem.	msc.
(3) swan	fem.	msc.
(4) harpy	fem.	fem.
(5) nightingale	msc.	msc.
(6) swallow	fem.	fem.
(7) phoenix	fem.	msc.
	msc.	

In (4—7) the English text eventually follows the French gender; in (1—3) it does not.

(4) and (7) are different, regardless of whether they agree with French, because they are clear borrowings referring to mythical birds, and thus they should be grouped together. Their gender is generally accepted in European

<sup>6</sup> I tried to find some solution in checking French grammatical gender of nouns following English possessive pronouns but it does not lead anywhere.

culture as fem. and msc. respectively (Greek αἴ Ἀρπυια fem. usually pl. and οἴφοϊνιζ, τκοζ msc.).

Let us now consider the grammatical gender of the Ns in question in OE<sup>7</sup> and Latin, and see whether it agrees with that of the texts.

	English text <sup>8</sup>	OE	Latin	French text
(1)	msc.	+	+	+
	fem.	+	+	—
(2)	fem.	+	+	—
(3)	fem.	—	—	—
(5)	msc.	—	+	+
(6)	fem.	+	+	+

In (1) in OE *pawa* was msc. and *pawe* fem., in Latin *pavo* msc. and *pava* fem.

Here (3) and (5) do not agree with the grammatical gender of the Ns under consideration in OE. (3) does not agree with Latin.

In the English text initial pronominalizations are used before *nest*; in the French text *son nyd* is not marked for gender but in all cases except (4) and (7) birds' names marked for gender precede *son nyd*<sup>8</sup>. Thus gender information for the English translation is given in advance, before the need for pronominalization arises.

From the above quotations and the two tables it follows that we are actually dealing with two problems (besides borrowings), i.e.

- (i) gender conflict in (1) and (7), and
- (ii) gender assignement in general.

Gender conflict occurs in *possessive-nest*, i.e. the introductory possessive pronoun in (1) and (7) does not agree in gender with other occurrences of pronouns in the respective passages.

For the entire data presented "masculinization" and "neutralization" cannot be postulated since most of these nouns are rendered by feminine PRO-forms. "Genuswechsel"<sup>9</sup>, i.e. a set of influencing factors such as change in the outward form leading to a change in declension, a tendency to make Ns ending in a vowel feminine and Ns with consonantal endings masculine by analogy to historicaly fem. and msc. nouns, or contextual factors such as Reimassoziation (influence of rhyme), "Begriffsassoziation" (influence of meaning e.g. "new" msc. *church* — person of the Pope) and gender of foreign synonyms are of no or little help here.

<sup>7</sup> The OE gender has been given on the basis of Bosworth and Toller (1898) and OED.

<sup>8</sup> This sets (4) and (7) apart, supporting 'fresh' borrowings, i.e. Ns felt as different. (7) and its shift from fem. to msc., and especially its initial fem. will be discussed later. In OE texts (4) and (7) can be found though their gender is hardly obvious ((4) usually pl., (7) msc. if anything).

<sup>9</sup> In description of "Genuswechsel" I follow Jones (1967: 102).

The idea of "cover term" also does not contribute to the explanation since no gender is used consistently<sup>10</sup>. The theory put forward by Jones (1967) according to which pronominal forms at stake should be viewed as markers of relationships within a sentence is not helpful either since most Ns in question are fem. in the English text and fem. pronouns having only 2 forms (she-her) are less distinctive than the 3 msc. forms (he-him-his). Emotions of the author, another "factor" frequently employed in gender assignement analysis, remain untraceable.

Mustanoja (1960: 50) says that

... the wonderful elasticity of the medieval system of allegory and symbolism gives the writer a remarkable freedom in the treatment of their allegorical characters, particularly with regard to sex.

Was the translator given the same freedom? Should we stop at this point stating that there was a general *confusion* of genders?

As it was said in the introduction one may still pursue the issue analyzing the natural gender option, tracing the original of the text, or analyzing the context of the PRO-forms in question.

#### Natural gender

Both sex and grammatical gender are semantic categories. Sex usually presupposes the choice of grammatical gender but not vice versa. Natural gender refers to sex.

In the text there appears one more bird which does not belong to "proper" allegories, i.e. birds sitting on the branches of the tree of contemplation. It serves as an additional illustration of compunction (4).

(8) *turtle* (Eng. 113/14—16; Fr. 135/23—25)

Thus as the turtle dooth whan *she* hath loste *her felaw*, & *she* come to the place where *he* deyed & fynde feders or ony other signe, *she* makyth grete sorowe.

[*La dame* Retint lescu du chavallier qui pour lui estoit mort, *quelle* regardoit tous les iours et dessus plouroit et meuoit grant dueil.]

(8) clearly distinguishes natural genders, i.e. PRO-forms selection is done on the basis of sex assignement. In OE *turtle*<sup>11</sup> is usually fem. although msc. is also found.

In Modern English a bird of the genus *Pavo* can be either msc. *peacock* or fem. *peahen*. The msc. form is unmarked and thus can be used in a "gene-

<sup>10</sup> *bird* in OE was msc. and *l'oiseau* is also msc., *avis* in Latin is fem.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. note 7.

ric" sense. When we employ "generic" *peacock* it can be realized either as *he* or *she* depending on the sex of a given bird. It is particularly obvious when there are no overt differences between the fem. and msc. forms e.g. *turtle*. In such cases pronominalization is the sole means of rendering natural genders.

Samuel Moore in his paper "Grammatical and natural gender in Middle English" says:

...I have not considered masculine or feminine pronouns as in conflict with natural gender when they refer to animals (real or mythical) unless there is evidence that the animal is *not* of the sex indicated by the pronoun. (Moore 1921: 97)

In fact, in the case under discussion there is no counterevidence as to the natural gender. The only one possible is (1) since it is the *he peacock* that has a beautiful tail and thus it would be hard for the *she peacock* not having the beautiful tail to be afraid of losing her beauty. The shift from msc. to fem. in (1) is against natural gender. And in accordance with my earlier classification of the problem we have here (i) *gender conflict*.

Here selectional restrictions may come to play a role, i.e. beauty being associated with feminine animates. Both (1) and (7) could possibly be accounted for by semantic conditioning. In (1) the shift from msc. to fem. can be conditioned by *beute*. In (7) the shift from fem. to msc. can be due to the uniqueness of the phoenix. There is always only one phoenix; it procreates in a very sexless way and thus there is no need for sex differentiation. Msc. can be felt as "generic", it is unmarked; fem. would call for a msc. counterpart, it would be "marked".

Nevertheless, there is still something missing, especially in this account of (7). In other words, the initial fem. in (7) looks like a slip on the translator's part.

The above considerations leave us with a virtually ad hoc gender but if we were able, insisting that the English text is a translation, to find a hypothetical text in a language in which gender is assigned more or less freely, using natural gender to account for the data would not be totally unjustified.

#### *Possible candidate for the original*

Whether the quoted French text is the source of the quoted English text is disputable<sup>12</sup>. The very text has also its Latin, German and Netherlandish versions. Latin gender of the birds in question was already discussed. German matches OE. Netherlandish may be an option<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> I could only wish that there were a Netherlandish text with *apple* instead of *palm* and that it happened to be the direct source of "The Branches...".

	English text	OD <sup>14</sup>
(1)	msc.	+
	fem.	+
(2)	fem.	+
(3)	fem.	-/+
(5)	msc.	+/-
(6)	fem.	+

In Old Dutch (3) and (5), i.e. those which did not agree with OE, could have been both msc. and fem. If there was a difference between gender forms it was the vowel occurring at the end of feminine formations. In Modern Dutch *pauw* (peacock), *uil* (owl), *zwaan* (swan), *nachtegaal* (nightingale), *zwaluw* (swallow) have *de*. The so-called *de*-words in Modern Dutch are historically both masculine and feminine nouns and can be pronominalized either as *he* or *she*<sup>15</sup> (Dekeyser 1980: 102).

Unfortunately, in the *Tretyse* there are three passages about this work being a translation from French (1/11, 103/7, 130/18—19).

#### *Context of the PRO-forms — enallage*

Enallage is a term from Greek which refers to e.g. a progressive expansion of diminutive forms throughout a text. In other words, when a noun is used in its diminutive, following nouns may take also their diminutive forms. It is a distortion of formal grammatical relationships in a text by the employment of a different grammatical form that would normally be expected. This can include tense, gender, case, etc.

At this point I would like to enlarge the context of the allegorics under discussion. In the text, the nature of the birds helps to characterize a good human being, i.e. one who lives according to religious rules (the seven branches). This human being is referred to as soul. *Soule* is pronominalized consistently<sup>16</sup> by feminine pronouns. It is also fem. in the French text.

Passages preceding those on birds are usually about the soul. Let me quote relevant passages.

(2) (Eng. 111/9—10)

And sholde applie *hyr* (soul) humbly and gladly to the nede of their (neighbors) afflictions.

<sup>14</sup> After Holthausen 1927.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Although priority is given to msc. PRO-forms.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. p. 15, context of (4). In French 135/5 "Il lui doibt souvenir..." thus *it* here does not refer to the soul though it may look like it.

## (3) (Eng. 112/4—6)

...*she* (soul) putteth *hirsself* in grete afflicte by penaunce & also that *she* suffreth loyefully & with a peasible hert all aduersitees for the loue of our lorde.

## (6) (Eng. 115/29—31)

When our lord hath pyte on the soule desiryng him, he vysiteth *hir* by his grace that he gyueth *hir* the felynge of his swete presence that *she* hath somoche desired.

As for (5), the preceding passage is longer. It starts by talking about the soul, then talks about *prophets*, *dauyd*, and *saynt poul* who were all "mounted" upon the branch in question. The immediate context is

## (5) (Eng. 114/23—26)

Saynt poul was mounted one day on this braunche & sayd, 'I desire to be dyssolued & to be wyth cryst', & in another place he sayd, 'Wretched man, who shal delyuer me of this body of deth?'

Thus in (2), (3), and (6), the preceding passages talk about the feminine soul and the birds that follow these passages have feminine pronominalizations. In (5), on the other hand, the immediate context is msc. and *nightingale* is also msc.

The context of (1) can be compared to that of (3), i.e. *soule* but *god* at the end.

## (1) (Eng. 110/2—6)

The fyrste braunche is consideracyon of *hymselfe*, that is whan the soule knoweth *hyrselfe* and enserchyth faythfully & truly in *hir* conseyence, soo that therein abyde noo thyng that shold dysplese god.

but there, not like in (3) we have the msc.-fem. shift. *Hymselfe* corresponds to French *de soy* and thus the English translator was forced to use gender marked forms earlier in the text. It seems that since it is the first allegory, French gender, which happened to agree with English "generic", was used. The shift was a result of the interplay between *beute* on the one hand and *peacock* and *peahen* on the other. It should be stressed here that the two forms exist in English, i.e. msc. and fem.

(7) is the other shift case. But let us look at (4) first. The context of (4) is as follows.

## (4) (Eng. 112/36—37—113/1—3)

In like wyse whan the soule is meuyd & pryckyd wyth trybulacyon. It<sup>17</sup> oughte to remembre how *hyr* souerayn sauyour & loue was for *her*

<sup>17</sup> Cf. note 16.

perced & nayled on the crosse. And this shapnesse & sorow sholde put away all other payne & sorowe from *hir* hert.

Thus the context of (4) is fem., the bird (*harpia*) is fem., plus this bird's gender is the same as in Greek.

In (7) the introductory context is about *soule* but then again about *dauyd* (cf. (5)). The immediately preceding sentence is:

## (7) (Eng. 117/11)

And in a nother place he saith, 'Mi soule fayleth'.

In (7) there is the shift from fem. to msc. The initial fem. can be due to *soule*, or it can be interpreted as a slip, or which seems most probable, it is due to analogy to (4); notice also that (4) and (7) are the only ones that have *son nyd* preceding the bird's name. The subsequent use of msc. (7) is in agreement with Greek and French.

Excluding (1) and (7) and only optionally including (4) we may summarise the above considerations as follows:

Thematic context	soul — fem.				
Immediate context	2	3	(4)	5	6
msc.	—	—	—	+	—
fem.	+	+	+	—	+
Birds	2	3	(4)	5	6

Thematic conditioning of gender in allegory would be the expected thing to happen but the data given show that the gender dominating in immediate contexts can influence the gender of Ns in the following passages. If the nearest subject is fem. the bird has a fem. gender. If the nearest subject is msc. the bird is msc. in gender. This, in turn, allows to include (1) and (7) and (4). In (1) *noo thyng* is rendered in French by *il*, in (7) *mi soule* is unquestionable as to the gender, and in (4) *this sharpnesse & sorrow* corresponds to French *celle*. Even if this last part may seem too far-fetched, enallage, as the force governing the gender assignment in the quoted passages, seems to be the case.

## CONCLUSIONS

The examples presented illustrate language in flux. That is why natural gender analysis is not very convincing. Searching for the original text leaves us also in vacuum. Immediate context conditioning of gender assignment, i.e. enallage, is a workable point of departure and suggests that certain occurrences of LME "confused" or "changed" gender can be due to seemingly trivial factors such as the gender of the nearest subject, which may be totally responsible for the "unaccountable" data.

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