

CHAUCER AND DIALECTOLOGY

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More than fifty years ago J. R. R. Tolkien (1934 : 1—70), devoted seventy pages to “Chaucer as a philologist: *The Reeve’s Tale*”*, but what he meant was, in fact, dialectology.

Let us objectively first remember that *The Reeve’s Tale* is well-known for its use of northern phonological or grammatical elements, sometimes semantic elements too, forming a sharp contrast to its usually southern dialect. Chaucer simply had local colour intentions in the presentation of his fabliau about two Norfolk students; his aim was definitely not naturalistic and, moreover, even if his introduction of dialectal traits meant an innovation in the history of English literature (the following attempt can be found in the *Second Shepherd’s Play*), it was still tentative and his fundamental goal was to convey meaning and to be understood by his predominantly southern audience, not to disintegrate language; he was not James Joyce’s forerunner...

As often happens with Tolkien, his assumption looked so well established and argued that critics seem to have thought that he had solved all the problems raised by Chaucer’s use of dialect. They took it for granted and went on repeating Tolkien’s views. Ralph W. V. Elliott’s important contribution to the knowledge of Chaucer’s English (1974) still praises Tolkien’s article without any restriction:

How well Chaucer’s ear was attuned to the northern dialect of his own time has been admirably demonstrated in J. R. R. Tolkien’s now *classic* [italics mine] address to the Philological Society in 1931. (Elliott 1974: 390—3).

* I am thankful to Prof. Dr. Görlach, whose comments on my Poznań paper underlined the fact that the RT was a work of fiction. It had not seemed necessary to me to dwell on that point, which I thought obvious. My intention had simply been to try to see what could be deduced from a work of fiction.

Elliot had not probably had any opportunity to use Th. Garbaty's article (1973) "Satire and regionalism : the Reeve and his tale", which is a watershed, for although Garbaty acknowledges Tolkien's intuition, he gives another interpretation of Chaucer's choice of a northern speech. Interestingly he too noticed that Chaucer has made no other attempt at reproducing other dialects; why is, e.g. the Dartmouth shipman's tale not touched with south-westernisms? In other words, what attracted him in that particular dialect? According to Tolkien, what we have is a northern speech mainly characterized by Scandinavian elements, and such features were also current in East Anglia. Besides — and this is a personal comment — if the *Reeve's Tale* is a tale about two students whose native dialect is northern, they are Cambridge students and, moreover, the Reeve, who conveys their tale, is from East Anglia. East Anglia is thus a channel between the North and London. Tolkien therefore sees him as "the symbol of the direction from which northerly forms of speech invaded the language of the southern capital, and the right sort of person to choose to act as intermediary in the tale" (Tolkien 1934 : 6). Garbaty relies on M. L. Samuels' famous article (1963) "Some Applications of Middle English Dialectology", where he drew attention to the change of influence in the mid-fourteenth century : owing to their peripheral character, the dialects of Norfolk and Suffolk ceased to be at the root of the change of nature of the London dialect. His point was exclusively about the linguistic influence of East Anglia and he even clearly writes that "immigration from there must have continued"; such a fact is again stressed by Garbaty : "Although Ekwall's East Anglian linguistic theory seems to be disproven, his population facts are incontestable, and they are in line with the evidence of Samuels" (Garbaty 1973 : 6). In other words, for a mostly London audience, the Reeve still represented the perennially despised immigrant, a parvenu. And even if his dialect was no longer Londoners' rival, it had been a few decades ago, which also implies that Londoners immediately recognized it was what Garbaty calls a "backwoods patois ... which was no longer ludicrous in polite society, but which would have been barely understood with best intentions" (Garbaty 1973 : 6).

But the clearest reaction against Tolkien's views was expressed a few years later by N. F. Blake (1979) in "The Northernisms in the *Reeve's Tale*". N. F. Blake's first point is against Tolkien's "very eclectic" edition of the portions of the *Reeve's Tale* containing the direct speech sentences put into the mouths of the two undergraduates. Ignoring the possibility that the number of Chaucer's original northernisms might have been increased by various scribes, Tolkien had obviously included any of them in his "edition", which means that he obtains a rather huge corpus of forms. We should remember that Tolkien had dismissed the possibility of addition of northern traits by copyists: "an examination of the seven MSS. does not, however, bear this out. The general tendency of all has been to southernize the original" (1934:12).

By a close analysis of the Hengwrt MS., reflecting Chaucer's language most closely, N. F. Blake demonstrates that "even if evidence in the vocabulary is uneven (...) at the grammatical and phonological level there is an increase in northernisms in the copying of the poem" (Blake 1979:3 and 6) which completely goes into reverse, for he goes further than that. What Tolkien had viewed as a philological effort on Chaucer's behalf is presented as only the intention to give "a flavour of a regional variety of speech" (Blake 1979:6) and, besides, he comes to the conclusion that since many scribes seem to have found it easy to transform southern forms into northern forms, Chaucer's knowledge of the northern dialect was in no way exceptional" (Blake 1979:6). If Blake's approach is not a process of de-Chaucerization, it is definitely one of de-Tolkienization...

Blake does not mention Garbaty's article, which is ultimately halfway between Tolkien's and Samuels'. Willingly or not, his next point is directed against Garbaty's hypothesis that the *Reeve's Tale* patois forms could not be understood by a London audience. It seems objective to notice that a few simple phonological and grammatical variants to which some more or less strange words have been added cannot be a handicap in comprehension.

His final point concerning Chaucer's motivation in the choice of that particular dialect is not more favourable for previous critics. To him it is clear that such critics have made an anachronic interpretation of the use of dialect in Chaucer's time in function of its contemporary implications.

Without aiming at being exhaustive this short survey of scholarly reactions to Tolkien's article shows that we have progressively moved from an unquestioned appraisal to more or less the reverse position. D. Burnley's recent book on Chaucer's language (1983) seems to be a clear index of the reversal of values. His chapter on Linguistic Diversity does not even mention Tolkien's name. He expressly takes sides for the process of northernization by further copyists and, moreover, shows that even if they sometimes reacted conservatively, Londoners were trained to a dynamic variation in their language: in other words that they were open to it and that they were definitely able to "translate" variants.

If the fact that Chaucer has attempted to reproduce a northern dialect is unquestionable, the quantity and quality of dialect originally introduced by Chaucer will probably always be problematic. It now seems established that the number of northern forms has been increased to make Chaucer's dialectal approach more true to life. And, after all, even Tolkien was conscious of the problem raised by the various manuscripts, for his article is preceded by a short notice in which he accounts for the delay in publishing his paper by saying he had hoped to check the readings of other manuscripts. But, even if he had done so, it would have been in function of the knowledge of his time, which means that he would have missed all further discoveries con-

cerning manuscripts filiations or origins, the reactions of scribes confronted with manuscripts written in other dialects, etc... (cf.e.g. Burnley 1983); his work was bound to be made outmoded by recent sociolinguistic discoveries.

It has seemed to me that in the present state of knowledge it would be more or less impossible to add any external evidence to Blake's clarification of the situation. I have therefore tried to see whether another approach would not tell us more about Chaucer's attitude towards dialectology. What I mean is to try to analyze internal evidence, i.e. a close reading of the GP and sometimes of the tales to discover more about the dialectal, geographical and social distribution of the pilgrims.

According to Tolkien, "[Chaucer showed] considerable judgment in choosing for his purpose *northern* clerks, at *Cambridge*, close to *East Anglia* (whence he brought his Reeve). Indeed, in an *East Anglian* reeve, regaling Southern (and largely London) folk, on the road in *Kent*, with imitations of *northern* talk, which was imported southward by the attraction of the *Universities*, we have a picture in little of the origins of literary English "(Tolkien 1934:6). Here again, Tolkien's linguistic intuition looks rather sound, but we cannot proceed with intuitions if we want to know more about the dialectal realia hidden in the *Canterbury Tales*. I thus suggest trying to determine the origins of his pilgrims and/or of the characters dealt with the tales. In fact it looks as if he wanted to hint at the origin of some of his pilgrims, leaving it open for us to understand or not from which part of the country they come. Here as everywhere, Chaucer's technique is rather to suggest and let people understand if they are able to. He leaves dialect analysis open. It is strange that critics should have understood that technique as far as the meaning of the text is concerned, but not for the particular linguistic aspect.

In Chaucer's own words (GP 15), the pilgrims come "from every shires ende".

1) *from definite places in England (to the exclusion of London and East Anglia):*

- (1) the CLERK: from Oxford
- (2) the SHIPMAN: from Dartmouth
- (3) the WIFE OF BATH: from Bath, so again the SW, but not in the same region.

2) *from anywhere:* he is clearly not interested in their geographical origins: lack of information in the GP but also in the tales:

- (1) the KNIGHT
- (2) the SQUIRE: his son
- (3) the YEOMAN: in fact he belongs to the same group since he is the Knight's servant

- (4) the MONK
- (5) the PHYSICIAN

3) *no precise localization, but lets us guess:*

- (1) the MAN OF LAW
- (2) the FRANKLIN
- (3) the MILLER

(1) the MAN OF LAW and the FRANKLIN

The Man of Law often goes to London: GP 309 we read that he has often been at the Parvys (probably Saint Paul's Parvys). His travelling companion has often been his shire representative to Parliament (GP 356), which means that he was not a Londoner either. They seem to have been identified with real persons from Lincolnshire or Norfolk; besides, the English part of the *Man of Law's Tale* takes place in Northumbria. The situation is somehow comparable with that of the *Reeve's Tale*: his tale would be an intermediary channel between London, where he has often been, and far away in the north. But, as we shall see, there is a fundamental difference between the Man of Law and the Reeve. The Man of Law has reached a high position in the social hierarchy. He remains rooted in his native shire and is much more interested in purchasing land (GP 318) and in becoming a landed gentleman.

It is impossible not to associate what we discover about the Man of Law with what we try to know about the Franklin. Although he has often been taken as a kind of parvenu, according to Robinson he has held offices to which a man below the rank of gentleman was not ordinarily eligible. Moreover, Chaucer specifies that he is a man of dignity (*worthy*).

These two characters often happen to come to London, but they remain outsiders deeply rooted in their country. They are not presented as "invaders", as dangerous immigrants, but as persons trying to make their way in their original shire.

(2) the MILLER

All the information we can get about him is derived from his tale and from the conversational sections. He localizes his tale in Oxford. At first sight that detail might seem irrelevant for our purpose; and yet it is not totally. What is important is the opposition between the Miller and the Reeve. They did not know each other before. Their rivalry is thus not personal; besides the Oxford-Cambridge opposition lies the fact that the Reeve is originally a carpenter, so a manual worker, who, like many of his East Anglian countrymen, has climbed in the social hierarchy. The Oxford Miller's carpenter, probably because he is from Oxford and not from East Anglia, has remained

a mere carpenter without any ambition. In other words, the Miller functions as an anti-Reeve.

4) *from anywhere in the country (but not London); that place has a positive value:*

- (1) the PARSON
- (2) the PLOUGHMAN

The two characters live in a small village; it does not matter where, the point is that it is outside London.

Both of them are presented as two positive values; our attention is more particularly drawn to the Parson. He does not desert his parish to seek a more lucrative employment in London: he does not hire a priest to care for his parish while he tries to find another job for himself in London. What is important here is that he does not follow the general tendency to go to London to make money: both Langland and Chaucer deplore that most parish priests should try to settle in London because their parishes have become too poor to live in.

Apart from any moral judgement it becomes clear from the social survey depicted in the *Canterbury Tales* that London represents money and prestige. Connections with London for those whose birthplace it is not represents proportionate loss of fundamental values; what is true from a moral point of view is also true from a linguistic point of view.

5) *from London:*

- (1) the FIVE GUILDSMEN
- (2) the COOK

Let us notice that he seems to embody a city cook vs. the Southwark inn-keeper in the conflict between cooks and hostelers; his tale confirms his place of origin: it is about a London apprentice.

(3) the MANCIPIE

He provides provisions for colleges and inns of court. The Temple referred to is probably the Inner or Middle Temple near the Strand.

(4) the PRIORESS

Much ink has been spilt on her French. It is a well-known fact that she speaks the French of Stratford atte Bowe. Of course the variety of French she speaks has social implications: she has not learnt French at the Court, but paradoxically enough, that detail also informs us about her English.

Stratford atte Bowe is the nunnery of Saint Leonard's at Bromley, Middlesex: just outside London, a few miles from Greenwich. Ekwall quickly discusses that so-called Middlesex dialect, saying that some scholars have made a distinction between the Middlesex dialect, the Westminster dialect and the City dialect; he concludes that "on the whole the material seems to indicate that Middlesex dialect agreed with that of the City, but influence from neighbouring WS areas may have made itself felt, especially in the western parts" (Ekwall 1956:XXIX). Manly's discussion makes clear that the occupants of the nunnery of Stratford-Bow "were in general, though not always, persons decidedly lower in the social scale than the members of Barking ... There are several records ... concerning the placing of the daughters of London tradesmen in the convent of St. Leonard's... and it is quite certain that ambitious citizens would seek to obtain such advantages for their daughters" (Manly 1926:204).

(5) the SECOND NUN AND THE THREE PRIESTS

At first sight they seem to belong to the same nunnery as the Prioress, with the same linguistic features. But Manly's point cannot be dismissed: there must have been a single priest, who "was apparently not a priest specially assigned to residence in the nunnery, but the priest of the parish, who had official relations with the nunnery as confessor" (Manly 1926:223).

(6) the PARDONER

He belongs to the order of Our Lady of Roncevaux, which had a hospital at Charing Cross.

6) *from East Anglia (Yorkshire and Northumberland)*

(1) the MERCHANT

He is either a merchant of the Staple or a Merchant Adventurer; anyway, he is connected with Ipswich: "He wolde the see were kept for any thyng/Bitwixe Middelburgh and Orewelle" (GP 276-77).

(2) the FRIAR

Apart from the fact that his coat is of *double worstede*, meaning from Worstead in Norfolk, we have no clear indication, but a precious element is going to help us: "he lipped to make his English sweet" (GP 265). This is an understatement meaning that the Friar tries to react against his local accent to adopt the London polite fashion. Let us remember that Tolkien, and, before him, Trevisa in his translation of Hidgen's *Polychronicon*, called the northern speech *scharp*, *slytting*, *frotting* and *unschape*. In the GP the Friar is introduced as an important character. He is solemn, able to have social conversations (*dalliance*) and he speaks a fair language. He is "sweet", "plesant", "esy",

“worthy”, “curteis”, “vertuous”...: he has succeeded in establishing himself in a prestige position.

But, in spite of all his efforts, the Friar ultimately betrays himself at the beginning of his tale, when he says: “Whilom ther was dwellynge in my con-tree...”, and his country happens to be in the north, as we discover from the language spoken by clearly local characters, obviously speaking an unaffected kind of language: a carter and an old woman:

1543 *hayt, Brok, hayt, Scot* (carter speaking)

1546 *tholed* (carter speaking)

1554 *caples* (used by the summoner, but to report the carter's words)

1561 *heynt* (carter speaking)

1618 *thou list* (carter speaking)

(3) the SUMMONER

The information given is still less clear. Chaucer gives no direct element in the GP; only, and this is important, that he was a kind of parrot able to repeat anything (we find some examples in the GP and in his tale:

GP 656 *questio quid iuris*

Tale 1770 *Deus hic*

1770 *Deus hic*

1832 *je vous dy*

1837 *je vous dy sanz doute*

1866 *Te Deum*

1934 *cor meum eructavit*)

so why not trained in repeating correct London speech? But here again Chaucer seems to play with us. For if a close reading does not tell us where he lives, we can infer it from what we are told of the Pardoner (“his freend and his compeer”), who belongs to the order of our Lady of Roncevaux, which maintained a hospital at Charing Cross. Owing to travel difficulties, the fact that they are friends implies that the Summoner must be living around the same place. After all, behind the friendship between the Pardoner and the Summoner, and the hostility between the Friar and the Summoner, we can guess a lot concerning their places of origin and the places where they are living. On the other hand, the Summoner localizes his tale in Yorkshire, more precisely “in a mersshy contree called Holderneshe”, probably in the low and marshy suburb of Hull, but the point here is that it is in Yorkshire.

According to Robinson (1959), both the Friar's and the Summoner's tales have a northern complexion:

1761 *thou list* (the friar of the tale speaking)

2150 *capul* (in the old man's thought).

And if we analyze the Friar's and Summoner's speech behaviour, it appears that both of them try to be Londonized, but when we compare the two characters, there seems to be a scale of denorthernization; that process is obviously still less natural for the Friar than for the Summoner:

a) the Friar controls himself to try to make his English sweet;

b) he avoids giving precise details about his native country: he must be ashamed of his birthplace;

c) but whenever he reports some native characters' speech he betrays himself and happens to use northern forms.

It is obvious from the start that the Summoner is deprived of any social ambition; he is physically and morally ugly; we could add that even linguistically he is ugly. He is a parrot deprived of any linguistic background. His job brings him to use Latin and French and he does so without being ill-at-ease; he is too silly to realize that what he says is sometimes meaningless, but he is well trained in repeating without any effort, hence his use of London English. But at the same time he has no inhibition concerning his original dialect and he is not ashamed of saying that his tale takes place in Yorkshire. Paradoxically, he does not try to pepper his tale with northern traits to make it more realistic. We may assume that it is because he is more deeply southernized than the Friar, better integrated into the London milieu, without being totally cut off from his northern marshes, of which we can find two linguistic by-products in his tale. Here too they are put in the mouths of local people.

In other words, the Summoner's geographical origins are not a problem for him. From a linguistic as well as a social point of view he seems to be fully Londonized; the place he comes from no longer represents a handicap for him: he must no longer feel an immigrant.

(4) the REEVE

The comparison between the Friar and the Summoner will help us to understand the Reeve's speech behaviour.

The Reeve has made money and has succeeded in becoming a reeve (he was a carpenter). He is quite proud of himself and does not try to hide the place where he lives: he lives in Baldeswell, in Norfolk. That place happens to be an important source of immigration to London, but no longer a source of transformation of London English, as we know after Samuels' article (1963). From a social point of view he thus still embodies a potential immigrant, but his dialect is no longer a danger for Londoners. He feels quite at ease using it, as he seems quite at ease in Baldeswell. Let us remember that he clearly expresses his contempt for Londoners: one of his undergraduates does not want to be called “a cokenay” (a case of *double entendre*: both ‘a simpleton’ and an ‘East End inhabitant’). In fact, the Reeve is a parvenu in his own shire. The very situation of somebody who seems quite self-satisfied being a parvenu in

his own shire although he embodies the danger of settling in London is very likely to provoke laughter among a London audience... It is part of the grotesque characterizing of fabliaux; we are not far from N. F. Blake's assumption. Moreover, the use of dialect forms in the direct speech parts of the *Reeve's Tale* seems to have been misunderstood. To me it is not coincidental that they should appear at dawn. In the general context of the fabliaux, they must be understood as a parody of dawn-songs, which, of course, could not have been written in dialect. Chaucer is well aware of the use he can make of registers and, in the context of a miller's room and after the events we have just read, that dawn-song in correct London dialect could not but add to the fun.

Chaucer was obviously quite conscious of the variety of dialectal, geographical and social backgrounds among his company of pilgrims. But for him the geographical origins are rather a matter of social integration, a gradation in the process of Londonization, than a matter of dialect speaking. He uses dialect to help us understand in which relationship some characters are to their places of origin. It is part of the meaning of the use of dialect in the *Reeve's Tale*, since the Reeve is so proud of his position that he despises Londoners, but we should not forget that behind that particular aspect of the use of dialect in the *Reeve's Tale* what we have is definitely a linguistic joke part of the typology of fabliaux.

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