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IN THE COUNTRY INNS OF A SMALL corner of northern Germany, in the spur of land connecting Schleswig-Holstein to Denmark, you can sometimes hear people talking in what sounds eerily like a lost dialect of English. Occasional snatches of it even make sense, as when they say that the "veather ist cold" or inquire of the time by asking, "What ist de clock?" According to Professor Hubertus Menke, head of the German Department at Kiel University, the language is "very close to the way people spoke in Britain more than i,000 years ago." [Quoted in *The Independent,* July 6, 1g87.1 This shouldn't entirely surprise us. This area of Germany, called Angeln, was once the seat of the Angles, one of the Germanic tribes that 1,5oo years ago crossed the North Sea to Britain, where they displaced the native Celts and gave the world what would one day become its most prominent language.

Not far away, in the marshy headlands of northern Holland and western Germany, and on the long chain of wind-battered islands strung out along their coasts, lives a group of people whose dialect is even more closely related to English. These are the 300,000 Frisians, whose Germanic tongue has been so little altered by time that many of them can, according to the linguistic historian Charlton Laird, still read the medieval epic *Beowulf* "almost at sight." They also share many striking similarities of vocabulary: The Frisian for boat is *boat (as* compared to the Dutch and German *boot),* rain is *rein* (German and Dutch *regen),* and goose is *goes* (Dutch and German *gans).*

In about A.D. 450, following the withdrawal of Roman troops

from Britain, these two groups of people and two other related groups from the same corner of northern Europe, the Saxons and Jutes, began a long exodus to Britain. It was not so much an invasion as a series of opportunistic encroachments taking place over several generations. The tribes settled in different parts of Britain, each bringing its own variations in speech, some of which persist in Britain to this day—and may even have been carried onward to America centuries later. The broad *a* of New England, for instance, may arise from the fact that the first pilgrims were from the old Anglian strongholds of Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex, while the pronounced r of the mid-Atlantic states could be a lingering consequence of the Saxon domination of the Midlands and North. In any case, once in Britain, the tribes variously merged and subdivided until they had established seven small kingdoms and dominated most of the island, except for Wales, Scotland, and Cornwall, which remained Celtic strongholds.

That is about as much as we know—and much of that is supposition. We don't know exactly when or where the invasion began or how many people were involved. We don't know why the invaders gave up secure homes to chance their luck in hostile territory. Above all, we are not sure how well—or even if—the conquering tribes could understand each other. What is known is that although the Saxons continued to flourish on the continent, the Angles and Jutes are heard of there no more. They simply disappeared...although the Saxons were the dominant group, the new nation gradually came to be known as En • land and its language as English, after the rather more obscure Angles. Again, no one knows quite why this should be.

The early Anglo-Saxons left no account of these events for the simple reason that they were, to use the modern phrase, functionally illiterate. They possessed a runic alphabet, which theyused to scratch inscriptions on ceremonial stones called runes (hence the term *runic)* or occasionally as a means of identifying valued items, but they never saw their alphabet's potential as a way of communicating thoughts across time. In 1982, a gold medallion about the size of an American fifty-cent piece was found in a field in Suffolk. It had been dropped or buried by one of the very earliest of the

intruders, sometime between A.D. 450 and 480. The medallion bears a runic inscription which says (or at least is thought to say): "This she-wolf is a reward to my kinsman." Not perhaps the most profound of statements, but it is the earliest surviving example of Anglo-Saxon writing in Britain. It is, in other words, the first sentence in English.

Not only were the Anglo-Saxons relatively uncultured, they were also pagan, a fact rather quaintly preserved in the names of four of our weekdays, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, which respectively commemorate the gods Tiw, Woden, and Thor, and Woden's wife, Frig. (Saturday, Sunday, and Monday, to complete the picture, take their names from Saturn, the sun, and the moon.)

It is difficult to conceive of the sense of indignity that the Celts must have felt at finding themselves overrun by primitive, unlettered warriors from the barbaric fringes of the Roman empire. For the Celts, without any doubt, were a sophisticated people. As Laird notes: "The native Celts had become civilized, law-abiding people, accustomed to government and reliable police, nearly as helpless before an invading host as most modern civilian populations would be." Many of them enjoyed aspects of civilization—running water, central heating—that were quite unknown to the conquering hordes and indeed would not become common again in Britain for nearly 1,500 years. For almost four centuries they had been part of the greatest civilization the world had known, and enjoyed the privileges and comforts that went with it. A tantalizing glimpse into the daily life and cosmopolitan nature of Roman Britain surfaced in 1987 with the discovery of a hoard of curse tablets in Bath near a spring once dedicated to the goddess Sulis Minerva. It was the practice of aggrieved citizens at that time to scratch a curse on a lead tablet and toss it with a muttered plea for vengeance into the spring. The curses were nothing if not heartfelt. A typical one went: "Docimedes has lost two gloves and asks that person who has stolen them should lose his minds and his eyes." The tablets are interesting in that they show that people of Roman Britain were just as troubled by petty thievery (and, not incidentally, just as prone to misspellings and lapses of grammar) as we are

today, but also they underline the diversity of the culture. One outstandingly suspicious victim of some minor pilferage meticulously listed the eighteen people he thought most likely to have perpetrated the deed. Of these eighteen names, two are Greek, eight Latin, and eight Celtic. It is clear that after nearly four centuries of living side by side, and often intermarrying,* relations between the Romans and Celts had become so close as to be, in many respects, indistinguishable.

In 410, with their empire crumbling, the Roman legions withdrew from Britain and left the Celts to their fate. Under the slow pagan onslaught, many Celts were absorbed or slaughtered. Others fled to the westernmost fringes of the British Isles or across the Channel to France, where they founded the colony of Brittany and reintroduced Celtic to mainland Europe. Some Celts—among them the semilegendary King Arthur—stayed and fought and there is evidence from place names to suppose that pockets of Celtic culture survived for some time in England (around Shaftesbury in northeast Dorset, for example). But little is known for sure. This was the darkest of the dark ages, a period when history blends with myth and proof grows scant.

The first comprehensive account of the period is *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, written in Latin by the Venerable Bede, a monk at Jarrow in Northumbria. Although it is thought to be broadly accurate, Bede's history was written almost 300 years after the events it describes—which is rather like us writing a history of Elizabethan England based on hearsay.

Despite their long existence on the island—the Romans for 367 years, the Celts for at least 1,000—they left precious little behind. Many English place names are Celtic in origin (Avon and Thames, for instance) or Roman (the *-chester* in Manchester and the *-caster* in Lancaster both come from the Roman word for camp), but in terms of everyday vocabulary it is almost as if they had never been. In Spain and Gaul the Roman occupation resulted in entirely new

* To take a notable, but little-known example, Saint Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, was the son of a Roman official and his British wife. Far from being Irish, as is commonly supposed, Saint Patrick was Welsh. The only reason he ended up in Ireland was that he was kidnapped at the age of sixteen and taken there by Irish pirates.

languages, Spanish and French, but in Britain they left barely five words [according to Baugh and Cable, page 80], while the Celts left no more than twenty—mostly geographical terms to describe the more hilly and varied British landscape.

This singular lack of linguistic influence is all the more surprising when you consider that the Anglo-Saxons had freely, and indeed gratefully, borrowed vocabulary from the Romans on the continent before coming to the British Isles, taking such words as *street, pillow, wine, inch, mile, table,* and *chest,* among many others. The list of mundane items for which they lacked native terms underlines the poverty of their culture.

And yet for all their shortcomings, the Anglo-Saxons possessed a language that was, in the phrase of Otto Jespersen, "rich in possibilities," and once literacy was brought to them, it flowered with astonishing speed. The main bringer of literacy, and of Christianity, was St. Augustine, who traveled to Britain with forty missionaries in 597 and within a year had converted King Ethelbert of Kent at his small provincial capital, Canterbury (which explains why the head of the English church is called the Archbishop of Canterbury, even though he resides in London). With that initial victory, Christianity quickly spread over the island, towing literacy in its wake. In only a little over a hundred years England became a center of culture and learning as great as any in Europe.

No one, of course, can say at what point English became a separate language, distinct from the Germanic dialects of mainland Europe. What is certain is that the language the invaders brought with them soon began to change. Like the Indo-European from which it sprang, it was a wondrously complex tongue. Nouns had three genders and could be inflected for up to five cases. As with modern European languages, gender was often arbitrary. *Wheat,* for example, was masculine, while *oats* was feminine and *corn* neuter [cited by Potter, page 25], just as in modern German *police* is feminine while girl is neuter. Modern English, by contrast, has essentially abandoned cases except with personal pronouns where we make distinctions between *I/me/mine, he/him/his,* and so on.

Old English had seven classes of strong verbs and three of weak,

and their endings altered in relation to number, tense, mood, and person (though, oddly, there was no specific future tense). Adjectives and pronouns were also variously inflected. A single adjective like *green* or *big* could have up to eleven forms. Even something as basic as the definite article *the* could be masculine, feminine, or neuter, and had five case forms as a singular and four as a plural. It is a wonder that anyone ever learned to speak it.

And yet for all its grammatical complexity Old English is not quite as remote from modern English as it sometimes appears. Scip, *boed, bricg,* and *poet* might look wholly foreign but their pronunciations—respectively "ship, "bath, "bridge," and " that"—have not altered in a thousand years. Indeed, if you take twenty minutes to familiarize yourself with the differences in Old English spelling and pronunciation—learning that i corresponds to the modern "ee" sound, that *e* sounds like "ay" and so on— ou can begin to pick your way through a great deal of abstruse
text. You also find that in terms of sound values, Old English is a much simpler and more reliable language, with every letter distinctly and invariably related to a single sound. There were none of the silent letters or phonetic inconsistencies that bedevil modern English spelling.

There was, in short, a great deal of subtlety and flexibility built into the language, and once they learned to write, their literary outpouring was both immediate and astonishingly assured. This cultural flowering found its sharpest focus in the far northern kingdom of Northumbria. Here, on the outermost edge of the civilized world, sprang forth England's first great poet, the monastic Cædmon; its first great historian, the Venerable Bede; and its first great scholar, Alcuin of York, who became head of Charlemagne's palace school at Aachen and was one of the progenitors of the Renaissance. "The light of learning then shone more brightly in Northumbria than anywhere else in Europe," Simeon Potter noted without hyperbole in his masterly study, *Our Language.* Had it not been for Alcuin much of our ancient history would almost certainly have been lost. "People don't always realise," wrote Kenneth Clark [in *Civilisation,* page i8], "that only three or four antique manu-

scripts of the Latin authors are still in existence: our whole knowledge of ancient literature is due to the collecting and copying that began under Charlemagne."

Barely had this cultural revival gotten underway than England and her infant language were under attack again—this time by Viking raiders from Scandinavia and Denmark. These were people who were related to the Anglo-Saxons by both blood and language. In fact, they were so closely related that they could probably broadly understand each other's languages, though this must have been small comfort to the monks, farmers, and ravaged women who suffered their pillaging. These attacks on Britain were part of a huge, uncoordinated, and mysterious expansion by the Vikings (or Norsemen or Danes, as history has variously called them). No one knows why these previously mild and pastoral people suddenly became aggressive and adventurous, but for two centuries they were everywhere—in Russia, Iceland, Britain, France, Ireland, Greenland, even North America. At first, in Britain, the attacks consisted of smash-and-grab raids, mostly along the east coast. The famous monastery of Lindisfarne was sacked in 793 and the nearby monastery of Jarrow, where Bede had labored, fell the following year.

Then, just as mysteriously, the raids ceased and for half a century the waters around the British Isles were quiet. But this was, to dust off that useful cliché, the quiet before the storm, a period in which the inhabitants must have watched the coast with unease. In 85o their worst fears were confirmed when some 350 heavily laden Viking ships sailed up the Thames, setting off a series of battles for control of territory that went on for years, rolling across the British landscape rather like two wrestlers, with fortune favoring first one side and then the other. Finally, after an unexpected English victory in 878, a treaty was signed establishing the Danelaw, a line running roughly between London and Chester, dividing control of Britain between the English in the south and the Danes in the north. To this day it remains an important linguistic dividing line between northern and southern dialects.

The Danish influence in the north was enormous. The scale of their settlements can be seen from the fact that more than 1,400 place-names in northern England are of Scandinavian origin. For a long time, the people in some places spoke only Old English, while in other places, often on the next hillside, they spoke only Old Norse. Occasionally this arrangement lasted for years—in the Shetland Islands, in the far north of Scotland, it lasted for centuries, with the people speaking a Norwegian dialect called Norn until well into the 1700s, of which some 1,500 dialect words survive to this day—but for the most part the two linguistic sides underwent a relaxed and peaceful merger. A great many Scandinavian terms were adopted, without which English would clearly be the poorer: *freckle, leg, skull, meek, rotten, clasp, crawl, dazzle, scream, trust, lift, take, husband, sky*. Sometimes these replaced Old English words, but often they took up residence alongside them, adding a useful synonym to the language, so that today in English we have both *craft* and *skill*, *wish* and *want*, *raise* and *rear*, and many other doublets. Sometimes the words came from the same source but had grown slightly different in pronunciation, as with *shriek* and *screech, no* and nay, or *ditch* and *dike,* and sometimes they went a further step and acquired slightly different meanings, as with *scatter* and *shatter, skirt* and *shirt, whole* and *hale, bathe* and *bask, stick* and *stitch, hack* and *hatch, wake* and *watch, break* and *breach.*

But most remarkable of all, the English adopted certain grammatical forms. The pronouns *they, them,* and *their,* for instance, are Scandinavian. This borrowing of basic elements of syntax is highly unusual, perhaps unique among developed languages, and an early demonstration of the remarkable adaptability of English speakers.

One final cataclysm awaited the English language: the Norman conquest of 1066. The Normans were Vikings who had settled in northern France 200 years before. Like the Celtic Britons before them, they had given their name to a French province, Normandy. But unlike the Celts, they had abandoned their language and much of their culture and become French in manner and

speech. So totally had they given up their language, in fact, that not a single Norse word has survived in Normandy, apart from some place-names. That is quite remarkable when you consider that the Normans bequeathed io,000 words to English. The variety of French the Normans spoke was not the speech of Paris, but a rural dialect, and its divergence from standard French became even more pronounced when it took root in England—so much so that historians refer to it not as French, but as Anglo-Norman. This, as we shall see in ,a moment, had important consequences for the English language of today and may even have contributed to its survival.

No king of England spoke En ish for the next 30o years. It was not until 1399, wit the accession of enry IV, hat England had a ruler whose mother tongue was n is One by one English earls and bishops were replaced by Normans (though in some instances not for several years). French-speaking craftsmen, designers, cooks, scholars, and scribes were brought to Britain. Even so, for the common people life went on. They were almost certainly not alarmed that their rulers spoke a foreign tongue. It was a commonplace in the past. Canute from the century before was Danish and even Edward the Confessor, the last but one Anglo-Saxon king, spoke French as his first tongue. As recently as the eighteenth century, England happily installed a German king, George I, even though he spoke not a word of English and reigned for thirteen years without mastering his subjects' language. Common people did not expect to speak like their masters any more than they expected to live like them. Norman society had two tiers: the French-speaking aristocracy and the English-speaking peasantry. Not surprisingly, the linguistic influence of the Normans tended to focus on matters of court, government, fashion, and high living. Meanwhile, the English peasant continued to eat, drink, work, sleep, and play in English.

The breakdown can be illustrated in two ways. First, the more humble trades tended to have Anglo-Saxon names (baker, miller, shoemaker), while the more skilled trades adopted French names (mason, painter, tailor). At the same time, animals in the field usually were called by English names (sheep, cow, ox), but once

cooked and brought to the table, they were generally given French names (beef, mutton, veal, bacon).*

Anglo-Norman differed from the standard French of Paris in several ways. For one thing, Parisian French, called Francien, tended to avoid the "w" sound. So while the Normans pronounced *quit, question, quarter,* and other such words as if they were spelled *kwit, kwestion,* and *kwarter,* Parisians pronounced them with a hard "k" sound. Equally, standard French used *cha- in* some constructions where the Normans used *ca-*. Thus we have such differences as carry/charrier, *cauldron/chaudron, cattle/chattel.* (Our word *chattel* was adopted later.) The Normans used the suffixes *-arie* and *-orie,* while the French used *-aire* and *-oire,* which gives us such pairings as *victory/victoire* and *salary/saloire.* Anglo-Norman kept the *s* in words such as *August, forest,* and *beast,* while Francien gradually forsook them for a circumflex: Aout, *fora, bête.* [All of these cited by Baugh and Cable, A *History of the English Language,* page 176]

Norman French, like the Germanic tongues before it, made a lasting impact on English vocabulary. Of the 10,000 words we adopted from Norman French, some three quarters are still in use—among them *justice, jury, felony, traitor, petty, damage, prison, marriage, sovereign, parliament, govern, prince, duke, viscount, baron.* In fact, nearly all our words relating to jurisprudence and government are of French origin, as are many of the ranks of aristocracy, such as *countess, duke, duchess,* and *baron,* but not—perhaps a bit oddly—*king* and *queen.* At the same time, many English words were adopted into French. Sometimes it is not possible to tell who was borrowing from whom—whether, for example, we t00k *aggressive* from the Normans or they took their *agressiffrom* us, or whether the English *intensity* came before or after the Norman *intensit*^{y}. In other matters, such as syntax, their influence was less dramatic. Only a few expressions like *court martial, attorney general,* and *body politic* reflect the habits of French word ordering.

* It should be noted that Burchfield, in *The English Language,* calls this distinction between field names and food names "an enduring myth" on the grounds that the French terms were used for living animals as well (he cites Samuel Johnson referring to a cow as "a beef "), but even so I think the statement above is a reasonable generalization.

Because English had no official status, for three centuries it drifted. Without a cultural pivot, some place to set a standard, differences in regional usage became more pronounced rather than less. As C. L. Barber notes: "Early Middle English texts give the impression of a chaos of dialects, without many common conventions in pronunciation or spelling, and with wide divergences in grammar and vocabulary." *[The Story of Language,* page 152]

And yet it survived. If there is one uncanny thing about the English language, it is its incredible persistence. In retrospect it seems unthinkable to us now that it might have been otherwise, but we forget just how easily people forsake their tongues—as the Celts did in Spain and France, as the Vikings did in Normandy, and *as* the Italians, Poles, Africans, Russians, and countless others all did in America. And yet in Britain, despite the constant buffetings of history, English survived. It is a cherishable irony that a language that succeeded almost by stealth, treated for centuries as the inadequate and second-rate tongue of peasants, should one day become the most important and successful language in the world.

Its lowly position almost certainly helped English to become a simpler, less inflected language. As Baugh and Cable note: "By making English the language mainly of uneducated people, the Norman conquest made it easier for grammatical changes to go forward unchecked." In Old English, as we have seen, most verbs were not only highly inflected, but also changed consonants from one form to the next, but these were gradually regularized and only one such form survives to this *day—was/were.* An explicit example of this simplification can be seen in the *Peterborough Chronicle, a* yearly account of Anglo-Saxon life kept by the monks at Peterborough. Because of turmoil in the country, work on the chronicle was suspended for twenty-three years between 1131 and 1154, just at the period when English was beginning to undergo some of its most dramatic changes. In the earlier section, the writing is in Old English. But when the chronicle resumes in 1154, the language is immeasurably simpler—gender is gone, as are many declensions and conjugations, and the spelling has been greatly simplified. To modern eyes, the earlier half l00ks to be a foreign language; the

later half is unmistakably English. The period of Middle English had begun.

Several events helped. One was the loss by the hapless King John of Normandy to the French crown in 1204. Isolated from the rest of Europe by the English Channel, the Norman rulers gradually came to think of themselves not as displaced Frenchmen but *as* Englishmen. Intermarrying between Normans and British contributed to the sense of Englishness. The children of these unions learned French from their fathers, but English from their mothers and nannies. Often they were more comfortable with English. The Normans, it must be said, were never hostile to English. William the Conqueror himself tried to learn it, though without success, and there was never any campaign to suppress it.

Gradually, English reasserted itself. French remained, until 1362, the language of Parliament and, for somewhat longer, of the courts, but only for official purposes—rather like Latin in the Catholic church. For a time, at least up until the age of Chaucer, the two coexisted. Barnett notes that when the Dean of Windsor wrote a letter to Henry IV the language drifted unselfconsciously back and forth between English and French. This was in 1403, three years after the death of Chaucer, so it is clear that French lingered. And yet it was doomed.

By late in the twelfth century some Norman children were having to be taught French before they could be sent away to school. [Crystal, *The English Language,* page 173] By the end of the fourteenth century Oxford University introduced a statute ordering that students be taught at least partly in French "lest the French language be entirely disused." In some court documents of this period the syntax makes it clear that the judgments, though rendered in French, had been thought out in English. Those who could afford it sent their children to Paris to learn the more fashionable Central French dialect, which had by this time become almost a separate language. There is telling evidence of this in *The Canterbury Tales,* when Chaucer notes that one of his pilgrims, the Prioress, speaks a version of French known only in London, "For Frensh of Paris was *to* hir unknowe. -

The harsh, clacking, guttural Anglo-French had become a source

of amusement to the people of Paris, and this provided perhaps the ultimate—and certainly the most ironic—blow to the language in England. Norman aristocrats, rather than be mocked for persevering with an inferior dialect that many of them ill spoke anyway, began to take an increasing pride in English. So total was this reversal of attitude that when Henry V was l00king for troops to fight with him at Agincourt in 1415, he used the French threat to the English language as a rallying cry.

So English triumphed at last, though of course it was a very different language—in many ways a quite separate language—from the Old English of Alfred the Great or Bede. In fact, Old English would have seemed as incomprehensible to Geoffrey Chaucer as it does to us, so great had been the change in the time of the Normans. It was simpler in grammar, vastly richer in vocabulary. Alongside the Old English *'motherhood,* we now had *maternity,* with *friendship* we had *amity,* with *brotherhood, fraternity,* and so on.

Under the long onslaught from the Scandinavians and Normans, Anglo-Saxon had taken a hammering. According to one estimate [Lincoln Barnett, page 97], about 85 percent of the 30,000 Anglo-Saxon words died out under the influence of the Danes and Normans. That means that only about 4,500 Old English words survived—about i percent of the total number of words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. And yet those surviving words are among the most fundamental words in English: man, *wife, child, brother, sister, live, fight, love,* drink, *sleep, eat, house,* and so on. They also include most of the short "function" words of the language: *to, for, but, and, at, in, on,* and so forth. As a result, at least half the words in almost any sample of modern English writing will be of Anglo-Saxon origin. According to another study cited by McCrum [*The Story of English*, page 61], every one of the one hundred most common words in English is Anglo-Saxon. To this day we have an almost instinctive preference for the older Anglo-Saxon phrases. As Simeon Potter has neatly put it: "We feel more at ease getting a *hearty welcome* than after being granted a *cordial reception."*

It is sometimes suggested that our vocabulary is vast because it

was made to be, simply because of the various linguistic influences that swept over it. But in fact this love of variety of expression runs deeper than that. It was already evident in the early poetry of the Anglo-Saxons that they had an intuitive appreciation of words sufficient to ensure that even if England had never been invaded again her language would have been rich with synonyms. As Jespersen notes, in *Beowulf* alone there are thirty-six words for hero, twelve for battle, eleven for ship—in short, probably more than exist today.

It is true that English was immeasurably enriched by the successive linguistic waves that washed over the British Isles. But it is probably closer to the truth to say that the language we speak today is rich and expressive not so much because new words were imposed on it as because they were welcomed.

THANKS TO THE proliferation of English dialects during the period of Norman rule, by the fifteenth century people in one part of England often could not understand people in another part. William Caxton, the first person to print a book in English, noted the sort of misunderstandings that were common in his day in the preface to *Eneydos in* 1490 in which he related the story of a group of London sailors heading down the River "Tamyse" for Holland who found themselves becalmed in Kent. Seeking food, one of them approached a farmer's wife and "axed for mete and specyally he axyd after eggys" but was met with blank looks by the wife who answered that she "coude speke no frenshe." The sailors had traveled barely fifty miles and yet their language was scarcely recognizable to another speaker of English. In Kent, eggs were *eyren* and would remain so for at least another fifty years.

A century later the poet George Puttenham noted that the English of London stretched not much more than sixty miles from the city. But its influence was growing all the time. The size and importance of London guaranteed that its dialect would eventually triumph, though other factors helped—such as the fact that the East Midlands dialect (its formal name) had fewer grammatical extremes than other dialects and that the East Midlands area was

the seat of the two main universities, Oxford and Cambridge, whose graduates naturally tended to act as linguistic missionaries.

Chaucer's was the language of London—and therefore comparatively easy for us to follow. We may not instantly apprehend all the words, but when we see the prologue of *The Canterbury Tales* we can at the very least recognize it as English:

> When that Aprille with his shoures sote
> The droghte of Marche hath perced to the rote,
> And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
> Of which vertue engendred is the flour.

Compare that with this passage in the Kentish dialect written at about the same time: "And vorlet ous oure yeldinges: ase and we vorleteb oure yelderes, and ne ous led na3t, in-to vondinge, ac vri ous vram queade." Recognize it? It's the last sentence of the Lord's Prayer, beginning, "And forgive us our trespasses. . . ." As the Chaucer authority David Burnley notes, many of the poet's contemporaries outside London were still using spellings and phrasings that "make their works scarcely intelligible to us without special study." *[Chaucer's Language,* page lo] Some of the dialects of the north were virtually foreign languages—and indeed can sometimes still seem so.

This was a period of the most enormous and rapid change in English, as Caxton himself noted when he wrote: "And certaynly our langage now used varyeth ferre [far] from that which was used and spoken when I was borne." Caxton was born just twenty-two years after Chaucer died, yet in the space of that time the English of London moved from being medieval to modern. The difference is striking. Where even now we can understand Chaucer only with a fair lavishing of footnotes, Caxton can be as easily followed as Shakespeare. Caxton's spellings often look curious to us today, but the vocabulary is little changed, and we can read him at more or less normal speed, as when he writes: "I was sittyng in my study [when] to my hande came a lytle booke in frenshe, which late was translated oute of latyn by some noble clerke of fraunce. . . .

Even so, English by Chaucer's time had already undergone

many consequential changes. The most notable is that it had lost most of its inflections. Gender had disappeared in the north of England and was on its knees in the south. Adjectives, which had once been inflected up to eleven ways, now had just two inflections, for singular and plural (e.g., a fressh floure, but fresshe floures), but even here there was a growing tendency to use one form all the time, as we do today.

Sometimes words were modified in one grammatical circumstance but left untouched in another. That is why we have *knife* with an *f* but *knives* with a v. Other such pairs are *half/halves, grass/ graze, grief/grieve, calflcalves.* Sometimes there was a spelling change *as* well, as with the second vowel in *speech* and *speak.* Sometimes the pronunciation changed, as between *bath* and *bathe* and as with the "s" in *house* becoming a "z" in *houses.* And sometimes, to the eternal confusion of non-English speakers, these things happened all together, so that we have not only the spelling doublet *life/lives* but also the pronunciation doublet "lives" and "lives" as in "a cat with nine lives lives next door." Sometimes, too, conflicting regional usages have left us with two forms of the word, such as *fox* with an *f,* but *vixen* with a *v,* or given us two spellings for words, such as *phial* and *vial.* And sometimes, as we shall see later, they left us with some of the mostly wildly unphonetic spellings of any language in the world.

Although East Midlands was the preeminent dialect, not all East Midlands forms triumphed. The practice in London of placing -n or *-en* on the end of present indicative verbs was gradually driven out by the southern practice of using *-th,* so that *loven* became *loveth,* for instance, and this in turn was eventually driven out by the northern *-s* or *-es* ending, as in the modern form *loves.* Why this northern provincialism should gradually have taken command of a basic verb form is an enduring mystery. It may simply be that the *-s* form made for smoother spoken English. In any case, by Shakespeare's time it was much more common in speech than in writing, though Shakespeare himself freely used both forms, sometimes employing *goes,* sometimes *goeth.*

Casualness of usage and style was a hallmark of the Middle and early modern English periods. Chaucer sometimes used *doughtren*

for the plural of *daughters* and sometimes *doughtres,* sometimes *yeer* and sometimes *yeres.* Like other writers of the period, he appeared to settle on whichever form first popped into his head, even at the risk of being inconsistent from one paragraph to the next.

But, I must quickly interject, a problem with interpreting Chaucer is that none of his original manuscripts survive. Everything we have of his was copied by medieval scribes, who sometimes took extraordinary liberties with the text, seeing themselves more as editors than as copyists. At the same time, they were often strikingly careless. For example, the Clerk's Tale contains the line "They stood a throop of site delitable," but in various manuscripts *site* is rendered as *sighte, syth, sigh,* and *cite.* It is impossible at this remove to know which was the word Chaucer intended. Literally scores of such confusions and inconsistencies clutter the manuscripts of most poets of the age, which makes an analysis of changes in the language problematic. It is often noted that Chaucer's spelling was wildly inconsistent: Cunt, if you will forgive an excursion into crudity (as we so often must when dealing with Chaucer), is spelled in at least five ways, ranging from *kent* to *quainte.* So it isn't possible to say whether the inconsistency lies with Chaucer or his copyists or both.

Other forms, such as plural pronouns, had yet to settle. Chaucer used *hi, hem,* and *her* for *they, them,* and *their (her* for *their* survived up to the time of Shakespeare, who used it at least twice in his plays). Similarly *his,* where we now use its, was the usual form until about i600, which is why the King James Bible is full of constructions like "If the salt has lost his savour, wherewith shall it be salted?" Similarly *which* was until about the same time often used of animate things as well as inanimate, as in the form of the Lord's Prayer still used in England: "Our Father which art in heaven."

In Old English there were at least six endings that denoted plurals, but by Shakespeare's time these had by and large shrunk to two: *-s* and *-en.* But even then the process was nowhere near complete. In the Elizabethan Age, people sometimes said *shoes* and sometimes *shoen,* sometimes *house* and sometimes *housen.* It is interesting to reflect that had the seat of government stayed in

Winchester, rather than moved the sixty miles or so to London, we would today very probably be talking of six housen and a pair of shoen. Today there are just three of these old weak plurals: *children, brethren,* and *oxen.* However, even though *-s* (or *-es* after an *-sh* spelling) has become the standard form for plurals, there are still traces of the complex Old English system lurking in the language in plurals such as *men, women, feet, geese,* and *teeth.*

Similarly verbs have undergone a long and erratic process of regularization. Chaucer could choose between *ached* and *oke, climbed* and *clomb, clew* or *clawed, shaved* and *shove.* In Shakespeare's time *forgat* and *digged* were legitimate past tenses. In fact, until well into the seventeenth century *digged* was the more common (as in Shakespeare's "two kinsmen digg'd their grave with weeping"). As recently as 1751, Thomas Gray's famous poem was published as "Elegy Wrote in a Country Churchyard." Seventy years later the poet John Keats could write, "Let my epitaph be: here lies one whose name was writ on water." So the inavariable pattern we use today—write, *wrote, written*—*is* really quite recent.

The common pattern in these changes was for the weak verbs to drive out the strong ones, but sometimes it worked the other way, so that today we have *torn* instead of *teared* and *knew* rather than *knowed.* Many of these have become regularized, but there are still 250 irregular verbs in English, and a surprising number of these are still fluid—so that even now most of us are not always sure whether we should say *dived* or *dove, sneaked* or *snuck, hove* or *heaved, wove* or *weaved, strived* or *strove, swelled* or *swollen.*

Other words underwent changes, particularly those beginning with n, where there was a tendency for this letter to drift away from the word and attach itself to the preceding indefinite article. The process is called metanalysis Thus a napron became an apron, a *nauger* became an *auger,* and an *ekename* became (over time) a *nickname.* By a similar process, the nicknames Ned, Nell, and Nan are thought to be corruptions of "mine Edward," "mine Ellen," and "mine Ann." [Cited by Barber, page 183]

But there were losses along the way. Today we have two demonstrative pronouns, *this* and *that,* but in Shakespeare's day there

was a third, *yon* (as in the Milton line "Him that yon soars on golden wing"), which suggested a further distance than *that*. You could talk about this hat, that hat, and yon hat. Today the word survives as a colloquial adjective, *yonder*, but our speech is fractionally impoverished for its loss. Similarly Shakespeare in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* was able to make a distinction between *hair* and *hairs* that is effectively lost to us today when he wrote, "Shee hath more haire than wit, and more faults than hairs."

(Other languages possess even further degrees of thatness. As Pei notes, "The Cree Indian language has a special *that* [for] things just gone out of sight, while Ilocano, a tongue of the Philippines, has three words for *this* referring to a visible object, a fourth for things not in view and a fifth for things that no longer exist.") [Pei, *The Story of Language,* page 128]

Some of the changes since Shakespeare's time are obvious. *Thee* and *thou* had already begun a long decline (though they still exist in some dialects of northern England). Originally *thou* was to you as in French *tu* is to *vous*. *Thou* signified either close familiarity or social inferiority, while *you* was the more impersonal and general term. In European languages to this day choosing between the two forms can present a very real social agony. As Jespersen, a Dane who appreciated these things, put it: "English has thus attained the only manner of address worthy of a nation that respects the elementary rights of each individual." *[The Growth and Structure of the English Language,* page 251]

The changing structure of English allowed writers the freedom to express themselves in ways that had never existed before, and none took up this opportunity more liberally than Shakespeare, who happily and variously used nouns as verbs, as adverbs, as substantives, and as adjectives— often in ways they had never been employed before. He even used adverbs as adjectives, as with "that bastardly rogue" in *Henry IV,* a construction that must have seemed as novel then as it does now. He created expressions that could not grammatically have existed previously--such as "breathing one's last" and "backing a horse."

No one in any tongue has ever made greater play of his language. He coined some 2,000 words—an astonishing number—and gave

us countless phrases. As a phrasemaker there has never been anyone to match him. Among his inventions: one fell swoop, in my mind's eye, more in sorrow than in anger, to be in a pickle, bag and baggage, vanish into thin air, budge an inch, play fast and loose, go down the primrose path, the milk of human kindness, remembrance of things past, the sound and the fury, to thine own self be true, to be or not to be, cold comfort, to beggar all description, salad days, flesh and blood, foul play, tower of strength, to be cruel to be kind, and on and on and on and on. And on. He was so wildly prolific that he could put two catchphrases in one sentence, as in Hamlet's observation: "Though I am native here and to the manner born, it is a custom more honored in the breach than the observance." He could even mix metaphors and get away with it, as when he wrote: "Or to take arms against a sea of troubles."

It is terrifying to think that had not two faithful followers, the actors John Hemming and Henry Condell, taken the considerable trouble of assembling an anthology of his work, the famous First Folio, in 162_3, seven years after his death, sixteen of his plays would very probably have been lost to us forever. As it is two have been: *Cardenio* and *Love's Labour's Won.*

Not a single Shakespeare manuscript survives, so, as with Chaucer, we cannot be sure how closely the work we know is really Shakespeare's. Hemming and Condell consulted any number of sources to produce their folio—printers' manuscripts, actors' promptbooks, even the memories of other actors. But from what happened to the work of other authors it is probable that they have been changed a lot. One of Shakespeare's publishers was Richard Field and it is known from extant manuscripts that when Field published the work of the poet John Harrington he made more than a thousand changes to the spelling and phrasing. It is unlikely that he did less with Shakespeare, particularly since Shakespeare himself seemed singularly unconcerned with what became of his work after his death. As far as is known, he did not bother to save any of his poems and plays—a fact that is sometimes taken as evidence that he didn't write them.

There have been many other more subtle changes in English since Shakespeare's day. One has been the rise of the progressive

verb form. Where we would say, "What are you reading?, Shakespeare could only say, "What do you read?" He would have had difficulty expressing the distinctions contained in "I am going," "I was going," "I have been going," and "I will (or shall) be going." The passive-progressive construction, as in "The house is being built," was quite unknown to him. Yet it goes without saying that this scarcely slowed him down.

Even in its greatest flowering English was still considered in many respects a second-rate language. Newton's *Principia* and Bacon's *Novum Organum* were both published in Latin. Sir Thomas More wrote *Utopia* in Latin. William Harvey wrote his treatise on the circulation of blood (written in 1616, the year of Shakespeare's death) in Latin. Edward Gibbon wrote his histories in French and then translated them into English. As Baugh and Cable note, "The use of English for purposes of scholarship was frankly experimental."

Moreover in Shakespeare's day English had yet to conquer the whole of the British Isles. It was the language of England and lowland Scotland, but it had barely penetrated into Wales, Ireland, and the Scottish Highlands and islands—and would not for some time. (As recently as this century Britain was able to elect a prime minister whose native tongue was not English: to wit, the Welsh-speaking David Lloyd George.) In 1582, the scholar Richard Mulcaster noted glumly: "The English tongue is of small account, stretching no further than this island of ours, nay not there over all."

He had no way of knowing that within less than a generation English would be transported to the New World, where it would begin its inexorable rise to becoming the foremost language of the world.