Chaucer as a Sociolinguist:

Understanding the Role of Language in Chaucer's Internationalism

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We all know that Geoffrey Chaucer was English. And it is also quite clear that his writing was very much inspired by European literature, from Antiquity to the Latin Middle Ages and beyond. But despite our knowledge of Chaucer's various influences, it seems that we still have to investigate the multifarious nature of Chaucer's English and how it might have affected his vision of the world and of poetry. Indeed, Chaucer's approach to literature reflected his approach to the world he lived in: he embraced a pluricultural and multilingual world and transposed this international awareness in a rich polyphonic vernacular, something he accomplished with the abilities of a true sociolinguist.

This essay will examine Chaucer's idiom (a linguistic object encompassing all of the different dialects, jargons and styles of a given language) and how centuries of language contact left a remarkable multilingualism and pluriculturalism in its linguistic DNA. But it will also wonder if this situation might have influenced Chaucer's poetry and if it might explain his enthusiasm to embrace other cultures.

Bakhtinian linguistics tell us that every ideology, whether religion-based, scientific, or literary, is fundamentally grounded in a semiotic structure. Linguistics can then be considered as a global science encompassing a vast network of subjects and sub-structures and whose purpose is essentially sociological. Bakhtin's central concern throughout his career was the relationship between the "I" and the "other," both needing the other for completion. In "K filosofii postupka" ("Towards a Philosophy of the Act") Bakhtin frames his thinking by a set of oppositions, the most important being a given and posited mode of reality. The former is

characterized by its closure and its self-sufficiency whereas the latter is open and still in development. Bakhtin has, of course, a certain idea of how these oppositions are distributed in the world, but what is of particular interest is the fact that "the human subject displays both given and posited modes in his or her situation in being" (Coates 27). In other words, our perception is by nature axiological and depends upon what we think our relationship with the other should be: "I perceive myself as incomplete and developing, but other people perceive me as completed and whole. Likewise, in my nature as agent I am active and posited, whereas in my capacity as object I am passive and given" (*Ibid.*). The human act thus becomes the plane upon which this duality can reach a certain unity and can define itself. It is accordingly in the very nature of language to communicate with the "other." And Chaucer's own linguistic performances were nothing if not turned towards the other, the man in the marketplace, the outcast, the stranger. The internationalist approach of Chaucer's poetry is, in this respect, as much the result of the inherently sociological dimension of language as it is of England's multilingualism.

The history of the English language did not unfold against a peaceful background. It has been marked by centuries of invasions, wars, massacres between different people, each defending its own language, culture and faith. As fascinating as it seems, we will not be looking here at the details of that history, especially since many distinguished scholars have done so in the past – a brief look at Robert McCrum, Robert MacNeil and William Cran's *The Story of English* should satisfy any inquisitive reader. However, what we will say is that when the Anglo-Saxons first encountered the Celts, the Romans and later on the Vikings and the Normans, the dialects they all spoke entered in contact with each other and evolved as any other living organisms would.

Britain was inhabited by the Celts for centuries before its Romanization started in 55 B.C. Linguistically speaking, this first conquest played an important role since it allowed Latin to settle in this part of Europe. The Celts did not stop using their vernacular for all that, but they were forced to use Latin in order to communicate with their rulers, a diglossia that reinforced Latin's role as a *lingua franca*. Yet, Latin's hegemony could not protect the language against pidginization (a process allowing people who do not speak the same language to communicate thanks to a simplified dialect called "pidgin"): the Latin spoken by the legionaries was, in effect, a provincial variety, different from the standard Latin used in the streets of Rome. However, it is believed that the Celts never learned it, and although their own vernacular was displaced in the south of Britain, it remained quite strong in the north, where the resistance stopped the invaders near Hadrian's Wall. But while the Romans and the Celts were fighting for the dominion of Britain, they were overrun during the second half of the fifth century by Germanic tribes. Although that helped, in some ways, the Celts in getting rid of the Latin yoke, their arrival was not exactly a benediction. Indeed, the disorganized Celtic resistance could not match what Bede described as "an invincible army" (Bede 27). They were finally overwhelmed and had no choice but to accept the inevitable: those who gave up the fight were culturally and linguistically assimilated by the Anglo-Saxons, but an important number of them fell back westwards behind the Cambrian Mountains, in Cornwall and even in Ireland and Armorica (Leith 17). Nonetheless, this contact between the Anglo-Saxons and the Celts had but fairly limited linguistic consequences. The Anglo-Saxon people brought with them their culture and Germanic dialects and obviously intended to keep them. As a result, even though the majority of the native inhabitants held to their idiom (already weakened by the Roman dominion), they could not match the strength of the Germanic presence.

The Viking raids on England began in 793 by the sack of Lindisfarne and Jarrow, continued throughout the ninth and tenth centuries and would have long-term consequences on the evolution of the English language. In only a few decades, the Vikings had overrun most of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, but Alfred the Great's resistance forced the invaders to settle in the Danelaw (a region under Viking control in the northeast of England), which allowed Old English and Old Norse to enter into frequent contact. Until these invasions, Old English had been highly inflected language. The meaning of a sentence was, thus, not determined by the order of the words (as it is in Modern English) but by their ending, defined by the words's grammatical function. But the processes of pidginization and creolization (something that happens when a pidgin becomes a population's native language) that began with the contact between Old English and Old Norse gradually levelled these inflections because, although the two languages were very similar, these complications beclouded the meaning of some sentences. For instance, if an Anglo-Saxon were to sell one of his horses to a Scandinavian, he would say "Ic selle ðe ðat hors ðe draegeð minne waegn" ("I will sell you the horse that pulls my cart"). On the other hand, if the Scandinavian were to trade the same thing, he would say "Ek mun selja ther hrossit er dregr vagn mine." The content words are closely related to one another, the Anglo-Saxon uses the words *hors* and *draegeð,* while the Scandinavian says *hros* and *dregr*. But, the rest of the sentence will eventually disturb the conversation since the Scandinavian does not understand Old English grammatical words. Indeed, the Anglo-Saxon says *ðat hors* for "one horse", and *ða hors* for "two horses". In other words, there are no differences in the word *hors* at the singular and at the plural since number is conveyed by the forms of the pronoun and in the end no one will really understand how many horses are for sell (McCrum 70-71). In this context, the language has to be simplified. This contact also resulted in the borrowing of large quantities of words, most of which are still present in Modern English and which coexist with Old English words. Such is the case with

"shirt", from the Old English *scyrte*, and "skirt", from the Old Norse *skyrta*: both words have the same Germanic etymology and essentially mean the same thing but each represents a different dialect (MED s. v. skirt(e); OED s. v. skirt, noun). On one side of the Danelaw, speakers tended to say *skirte,* and on the other side of it *shirte.*

Hastings and the Norman invasion in 1066 represented another massive language shift and cultural revolution. In a situation of advanced language contact, a distinction is usually made between two different linguistic changes with, on the one hand, fast-acting transformations that mainly modify the lexicon and the spelling and, on the other, long-term changes that focus on syntax, and morphology. William's takeover was particularly bloody, and interestingly enough, this idea of order and violence was reflected in the first stage of the Old English lexical transformation. The *Peterborough Chronicles* thus gives us a general idea of what sort of words was then borrowed: except for new ranks (*cuntesse*, *duc*), we find concepts such as doing *iustice* (to hang someone), *castel*, *prisun* or *crucethur* (a torture device) (Barber 166). These first loan words show, once more, the capacity of language to reflect a profound social and political transformation, and as Thomas Allan Shippey noticed, "[m]uch of this vocabulary looks like the words inmates of a concentration camp might learn from the guards" (2). But while contact with Old Norse helped Old English simplify through the loss of some of its inflexions, French influenced English at a different level. Indeed, the Norman political shift was followed by such a massive transformation of the Old English lexicon that together with the already engaged process of morphological synthesis, the language evolved into a new variety considered by linguists as a different idiom. In their *Manuel de l'anglais du Moyen-Âge*, Fernand Mossé and André Jolivet explained:

> Following the transfer of the political center from Winchester to London, it is the
> Mercian dialect that became, after the Norman Conquest, the base of the common
> language and the source of Modern English. Although Alfred and Ælfric's language is

quite close to Chaucer and Shakespeare's language, it is not exactly its ancestor. (Mossé and Jolivet 1. 21).

In the decades following the Norman Conquest, Old English began to evolve – or rather mutate – at an extraordinary speed, losing in that process much of its most distinctive characteristics. Nonetheless, even though inflexions were gradually levelled, we cannot consider the Normans or the Vikings as being responsible for this morphological synthesis. Both Hastings and the Danelaw might be considered merely as accelerative factors of a natural phenomenon. This simplification of language is indeed very similar to what Dick Leith compares to a "gradual erosion" (100). In the centuries following the Norman Conquest, this erosion was concretely represented by the apparition of grammatical words (*to*, *by*, *for*...) whose purpose was to clarify syntactic relationships. By Chaucer's time, the conjugation of verbs was not completely fixed yet, often leading to the coexistence of ancient and modern grammatical forms. For instance, the past singular stem of certain verbs was different from its past plural (as seen in *was* and *were*) (Benson 38). Chaucer thus used the singular "ran" as a plural ("and after hym they ran"; VII 3381), but then switched, a few lines later, to its regular plural form "ronne" ("They ronne so hem thoughte hir herte breeke" VII 3388).

The contact between French and English did not produce, as one might have expected, a large-scale pidginization since the invaders were simply too few in numbers. Between 50 000 and 60 000 Normans settled in an England then inhabited by a million and a half people, leading to a reinforced multilingualism (Crépin 30). England was still, as a result, a multilingual society, even during the fourteenth century, and "[b]y Chaucer's time it is probable that almost everyone born in England, with the exception of some of those on the Celtic marches of Wales and Cornwall, grew up with English as their main and native language" (Shippey 1). But even though English had become the main language used by most of the population, its essence was still marked by the contact with other cultures. Chaucer

used indeed more than three hundred foreign words in *The Nun's Priest's Tale* alone, another striking example that his internationalism was first and foremost linguistically motivated. To illustrate this point, let us have a look at the table presented below and which presents the etymology of the content words used by Chaucer in the five first lines of the *General Prologue* of *The Canterbury Tales*. This table allows us to see concretely how Old English evolved through more than nine centuries of language contact. There is no real difference between the number of French and Germanic words used by Chaucer. Yet, although 55% of the content words do come from Old English, the replacement of some of those words bear witness to the strength with which Latin and French influenced English culture. Some borrowings not only replaced already existing concepts but also took deep roots in Anglo-Saxon culture, with, for instance, the disappearance of the traditional names of the months. Chaucer's "Aprill," which was spelled with two "l's" because of the Old French "avrill" (see MED s.v. "april" and Andrew 1-2) was accordingly used instead of the Old-English "Eastermonað," while "March" replaced "Hreðmonaþ."

| | Old English | Middle English | Old French | Latin | Modern English |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Eastermonað | Aprill | avrill | Aprilis | April |
| | Hreðmonaþ | March | marz | Martius | March |
| | stingan | perced | percier | *pertusiare | pierce |
| | ædre | veyne | veine | vena | vein |
| | flogoða | licour | licour | liquorem | liquor |
| GP | ārfæstnes | vertu | vertu | virtutem | virtue |
| | tíeman | engendered | engendrer | ingenerare | engender |
| | mearu | tendre | tendre | tenerem | tender |
| | blowan | flour | flor | florem | flower |
| | | | | | |
| | scūr | shoures | la verse | versare | shower |
| | swete | soote | dulce | dulcis | sweet |

| drugað | droghte | secheresse | siccare | drought |
|--------|---------|------------|---------|---------|
| rot | roote | racine | radix | root |
| swete | sweete | dulce | dulcis | sweet |
| cropp | croppes | pousse | pulsare | crop |
| geong | yonge | jofne | juvenis | young |
| sunne | sonne | soleil(l) | sol | Sun |
| bræð | breeth | sofle | sufflare | breath |
| holt | holt | boscage | boscaticum | holt |
| hæð | heeth | bruiere | brugaria | heath |

(Chart by Dr. Jonathan Fruoco)

The Norman Invasion had thus left deep marks in the English linguistic background, especially in the upper reaches of society, where social rank and fluency in French were still strongly correlated. Although a situation of coexisting monoglots—that is to say of people only speaking one language—certainly lasted for some time once William the Conqueror was crowned, it gradually disappeared, leaving in its wake a much more enduring sense of linguistic stratification: "French outranked English. Latin, the international language of the Church, in some ways outranked even French. And on the Celtic marches English was allowed to outrank Welsh, and with many local adjustments Cornish, Irish and Scots Gaelic too" (Shippey 1) A brief detour by Thomas Cantilupe's beatification commission, which was held in 1320 in Hereford, near the Welsh border, will help us to better visualise how marked England's multilingualism was and how the English people reacted to the situation. Michael Richter notes that the detailed records of Cantilupe's beatification commission show that one hundred and sixty-three witnesses were questioned, most of whom tried to speak in the most prestigious language they knew. The table presented here thus gives a unique glimpse at the linguistic hierarchy in medieval England: among the thirty-one clerics, none spoke English or Welsh, sixteen used pure Latin, twelve French and three used a mixture of French and Latin. The situation is even more interesting for commoners: one hundred and thirty-two people addressed the commission, one hundred of whom spoke in English, twenty-one in French, ten

in a mixture of French and Latin and only one in Welsh (Richter 188-190). This happened in Hereford, only a few miles away from Wales. In other words, 75% of commoners used English, which proves that the vernacular was still quite important for many people, but 23% of them tried to impress the commission with the highest-ranked idiom they could possibly speak. Besides, we know that out of the 64% of commoners living in rural areas, only 9.4% used French while out of the 35.6% living in cities, almost 49% spoke either French or a mixture of French and Latin. There was consequently a major difference between the province and the cities, a difference that was not only geographical or political but also ideological. In the province, people are traditionally more conservative than in urban areas, where both languages and cultures are subjected to a strong homogenization.

|  | Commoners | Clerics |
|---|---|---|
| Latin | 0 | 16 |
| French | 21 | 12 |
| French-Latin | 10 | 3 |
| English | 100 | 0 |
| Welsh | 1 | 0 |
| Total | 132 | 31 |

If J. R. R. Tolkien was correct in his 1934 lecture to the Philological Society, then Chaucer was not only a gifted poet but also a remarkable philologist, thinking like a linguist of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In this respect, Chaucer was probably more conscious than anyone else of the sociolinguistic situation in England. Indeed, Middle English was more than just Chaucer's language and was actually spoken in a variety of dialects, identified during the fourteenth-century as Northern, Midlands and Southern, and nowadays

as the Northern, West Midland, East Midland, Southern and Kentish dialects. Each of these idioms had characteristics of its own: for instance while the author of the epic romance *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* wrote in the West Midland dialect, Chaucer wrote in the Southern dialect, more precisely the one spoken in London and which would later become the standard variety of English. Both poets wrote in Middle English, but as Tolkien noticed, "the adjectives 'hard' and 'dark' would probably have been applied to [*Gawain*] by most people who enjoyed the works of Chaucer' (*Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* 1). And although Chaucer spoke "the king's English," he was perfectly aware of the coexistence of these varieties of English and knew how to reproduce and use them. *The Reeve's Tale* is thus a wonderful example of Chaucer's abilities as a sociolinguist. The clerks in this Tale are from Strother in the North of the country and accordingly speak in the Northern dialect. But Chaucer does not merely imitate comical accents or local grammatical forms; he reproduces with great care their idiom and makes them utter words his own audience would this time have found "hard" and "dark," such as "Hym boes" (4027), he must, a deponent form; "heythen" (I.4033), hence; or "ymel" (I.4171), among. Aleyn's asking "John, and wiltow swa?" ("Will ye de sae?" I.4040) is indeed far from being standard Middle English.

*The Summoner's Tale* is equally interesting, for it illustrates this multilingualism and the sense of social snobbery made obvious by the details of Cantilupe's beatification commission. Indeed, in that Tale, the friar often uses Latin, which seems normal for a cleric, but also tends to punctuate his speech with French phrases, especially when he is addressing Thomas, "O Thomas, je vous dy, Thomas, Thomas!" ("O Thomas! Thomas! Thomas! Je vous dis!*"* III.1832), and his wife, "'Now dame,' quod he, 'now je vous dy sanz doute'" ("Madame, je vous dis sans doute" III.1838). Here, the Friar obviously uses fragments of French in order to make apparent his social rank and to impress Thomas's wife. But when the friar asks Thomas about the whereabouts of his spouse, he then shows little desire to react to

this linguistic competition and answers in provincial Middle English, "'Yond in the yerd I trowe that she be, [...] and she wol come anon'" ("'Out in the garden, I expect,' said he [. . .] 'she's bound to come in soon'" III.1798-99). Had he said that very same sentence a few centuries earlier, he would have said, according to Shippey, "Geond on thæm geared ic tuwie that heo beo, [...] and heo wile on an cuman" (4), which shows very little difference between Old English and Thomas's own idiom. Yet, when his wife finally joins them, she starts reacting to the friar's linguistic prowess and flirtatious words with the same provincial Middle English, but this time enriched by French words ("desire", "disport", "plese", l. 1826, 1830, 1831). As Shippey has remarked,

> her by-play with the friar is meant to show an urge towards social climbing, a readiness to side with, and flirt with, what she takes to be the upper classes. She uses the French vocabulary of romantic involvement not because she needs it or has no other words available, but to indicate, or to pretend, that she is, or was, or one day will be, something better than a farmer's wife in a barnyard. (7)

Chaucer was, in other words, quite aware of the importance of multilingualism in England and of the prestige associated with French and Latin. And like a true sociolinguist, he shows how language could be manipulated to enhance one's social rank. After all, even the Pardoner recognizes that

<div align="center">

in Latyn I speke a wordes few,

To saffron with my predicacioun,

And for to stire hem to devocioun

(VI.344-46)

(and say a few words in Latin

—That's to give spice and colour to my sermon—

It also helps to stir them to devotion.)

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In order to show the linguistic consequences of the Norman invasion, Manfred Scheler compared the etymology of the words listed in the *Shorter English Dictionary*, or SED, (80,096 headwords of all stylistic levels), the *Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, ALD, (27,241 headwords, representing various stylistic levels) and finally the *General Service List*, GSL, which only lists the most common words (3,984 headwords). He thus established a certain number of categories based on his etymological study and that are here limited to five sources of lexical influences: *Inselgermanisch* (that is to say, the Germanic part of the English lexicon), French, Latin, Celtic languages and various sources (72). The following chart illustrates once again the richness and diversity of the English lexicon, even six centuries after Chaucer's death. As we have seen, Chaucer's vocabulary had already ceased to be purely Germanic and had integrated elements from different cultures and languages. Scheler's analysis confirms that in the most general vocabulary, the *Inselgermanisch* amounts to less than French (22.2% in the *Shorter English Dictionary* and 27.43% in the *Advanced Learner's Dictionary*). Even if this Germanic origin seems more important for the most frequent words (47.08%), it remains slightly inferior to the languages of Latin origin: French (38%) and Latin (9.59%) amount together to 47.59%. In the same way, more than half of the words present in the entire lexicon come from French or Latin (56.66% in the SED). It is also particularly interesting to notice that the Celtic languages, which have been used in Britain for longer than Anglo-Saxon dialects, left almost no marks in Modern English. Latin's percentage reflects, however, a strong cultural borrowing while the importance of French is due to a forced linguistic contact between a conqueror's superstratum and the conquered's substratum. It is, in this regard, as Scheler explains, "a reflection of the far-reaching influence of French and Anglo-Norman culture and civilization on late medieval England" (55).
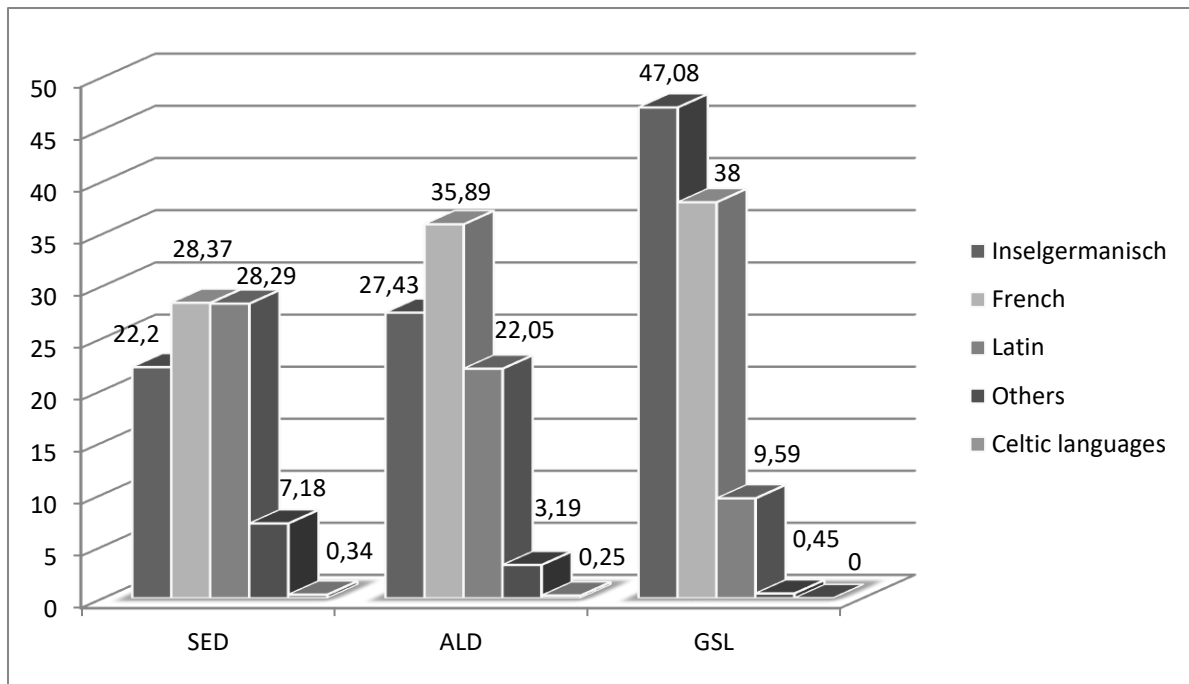
As we have seen, Chaucer's Middle English was more than just a Germanic language. It was the linguistic representation of Europe's incredible history and culture, for Europe was already a vast political and cultural entity. Indeed, as E. R. Curtius explains, "European literature is coextensive in time with European culture, therefore embraces a period of some twenty-six centuries (reckoning from Homer to Goethe)" (12). Chaucer was of course aware that he owed much of his inspiration and both his artistic and linguistic legitimacy to an international cultural tradition, for "it is only from the perspective of those post-Chaucerian centuries that the very subject of Chaucer as a European writer comes into focus as a subject at all: for Chaucer there was no question of being anything else" (Simpson 57).

Chaucer's decision to write in Middle English was then very much, as Elizabeth Slater noticed, "the triumph of internationalism" (79), since he was deeply nourished by the "international and courtly world" in which he "received his training and spent his mature life" (73). Chaucer was also the *grand translateur* described by Eustache Deschamps, inspired by the masters of vernacular literature to elevate his own limited and marginal idiom into a prestigious literary language. French troubadours and trouvères had after all been nourishing

Europe since the twelfth century with masterpieces such as Chrétien de Troyes's Arthurian legends, the *Chanson de Roland* or the *Roman de la Rose*. And from the thirteenth century onwards, that creative momentum was transferred from France to Italy, "in a fertilization that surpasses linguistic barriers, the tearing national divisions" (Boitani 15). Dante Alighieri and other poets, such as Francesco da Barberino, author of *Documenti d'Amore*, were thus among the first to compose in an Italian vernacular, a decision that regenerated the whole European artistic tradition through successive waves of "Italianism" (Curtius 34) that ended up crashing on the shores of Spain, France, Germany and England. Charles V of France commissioned, for instance, several translations during the second half of the fourteenth century. Jacques Bauchant, who translated Elisabeth of Schönau's treatises, even went so far as to tell his king that "Latin is not as understandable nor as common as the native tongue" (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS fr. 1792, fol. 2r) and that his translations would help "govern your people and teach them science and good mores through the example of a good and well-ordered life" (fol. 2v). Such a statement would have been inconceivable a few decades earlier and shows the prestige now more than ever associated with vernaculars.

But writing in a vernacular meant more than just language transfer. It encompassed "a vast array of acts of cultural transmission and negotiation, deviation and/or synthesis, confrontation and/or reconciliation" (Minnis 16). Chaucer's use of Middle English was, therefore, a creative act, part of a pan-European literary tradition then represented by the access of vernacular languages to writing. That is what Salter meant when she famously wrote about the triumph of internationalism. But Chaucer's Middle English also synthesized, as we have seen, centuries of language contact and of cultural transmission; it confronted and reconciled in its linguistic DNA the wonderful pluriculturalism and multilingualism that makes our world so interesting. Chaucer's language illustrates that history. It bears the mark

of the sack of Troy, of the apotheosis of Julius Caesar, and of the fall of the Western Roman

Empire.

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