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English Past and English Present: The Phrase "Old English" in Middle English Texts

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Abstract Examining English texts from the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries that use the phrase "Old English" reveals the writers' attitudes about older forms of the language. In most instances, they did not intend to identify or define "Old English" but instead, to note its close or distant relationship to the language as they used it themselves, including in contrast to French or Latin. When proverbs are described as "Old English" both age and vernacularity are meant to impress an English-speaking audience. Elsewhere, writers such as William Langland and William Caxton use "Old English" to indicate linguistic archaism, especially of lexicon.

Keywords Old English · Middle English · Proverbs · Periodization · History of the English language

The systematic periodization of the English language into divisions described as "Old English", "Middle English", and "New English" took shape during the course of the nineteenth century. Recent scholarship traces the development of the term "Middle English" with great care and interest (Matthews 1999, 2000; Lass 2000), though the descriptive terminology used for the English language of the period between the Anglo-Saxon Invasion and the Norman Invasion is equally complex and interesting. As David Matthews explains, some English philologists and literary historians of the mid-nineteenth century referred to the language of the pre-Conquest Anglo-Saxons as "Saxon" rather than "Old English" because one of their main goals was to determine when "true" English began. He cites the example of R.

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G. Latham (*The English Language*, 1841), for whom "Old English" began in the reign of Henry III and continued until the reign of Edward III, at which point Latham distinguishes the beginning of Middle English (Matthews 1999: xxviii–xxix; Matthews 2000: 3, 25). The term "Anglo-Saxon" was also used by English scholars of the period, which is why Jacob Grimm retained it for the pre-Conquest period and used "Altenglisch" for the immediately following centuries that we would now characterize as Early Middle English (Matthews 2000: 4). According to Roger Lass, the great Anglo-Saxonist Henry Sweet is responsible for introducing and justifying the use of "Old English" to describe the pre-Conquest language in his edition of *King Alfred's Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care* (1871) (Lass 2000: 15). Sweet preferred "Old English" to "the barbarous and unmeaning title of 'Anglo-Saxon'" (Lass 2000: 15). Sweet's main criterion for distinguishing between Old English and Middle English was the level of inflectional complexity, but he also paid some attention to vocabulary, referring to Old English as the "unmixed" stage of the language.[1]

The issue of periodization—its criteria, even its very justification—continues to interest modern scholars but it is not the point or problem of this essay. For my purposes, the now standard periodization assigning the term "Old English" to the language between the Anglo-Saxon Invasion and the Norman Invasion and "Middle English" to that from the Norman Conquest to the Reformation (allowing for some seepage along the seams) provides a sufficiently accurate guideline. I am interested not in the forms of Old English, but in the perception of older forms of English as these attitudes were expressed in the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries. The Middle English writers who used the term "old english" often did so without reasoning that would pass muster among modern philologists. In most instances, they did not intend to identify or define the language to which they referred, but instead, to note its relationship—close or distant—to the language they used themselves.

I have located a number of examples of the phrase "old english" in texts dating from the thirteenth through the fifteenth centuries: these instances sort very clearly into two patterns of usage. In the majority of cases, the Middle English writer uses "old english" to introduce a proverb, while in the others the phrase refers to some element of archaic vocabulary. The two different uses do not exhibit any clear contrast in chronological patterning, so I will begin with the larger, proverbial group.

Because proverbs derive a good part of their authority from their actual or imputed venerability, it is not surprising to see them introduced as "old". However, the more specific designation of "old english" raises questions of intent when several instances are found in English translations or adaptations of Anglo-Norman texts. For example, Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* explains:

> yn a prouerbe of olde Englys
> Tellë men, and soþe hyt ys,
> "Þat ȝougþë wones, yn agë mones;"

[1] Lass (2000: 15). On the history of Anglo-Saxon scholarship itself, outside the issue of periodization, see Berkhout and Gatch, eds. (1982), Frantzen (1990) and Damico et al. (1995–2000).

Þat þou dedyst ones, þou dedyst eftsones.[2]

Mannyng's version of the proverb cannot be "old english" in the modern understanding of the term, because "age" is a Middle English borrowing from French. However, the proverb does antedate Mannyng by at least a generation or two, as it also appears in the mid-thirteenth-century *Proverbs of Hendyng* with the Germanic lexeme "old" (adorned with an unetymological "h") in place of "age": "Young woneth, Hold moneth."[3] Mannyng cites the proverb as an authority and seems to think that characterizing it as both "old" and "English" will enhance its authoritativeness with his English-speaking audience by connecting the proverb to the wisdom of their ancestors: the old proverb is a truth that "men say".[4] In this case, the proverb is definitely English (based on the vocabulary of the thirteenth-century version) and at least oldish.

The surest example of an "old english" proverb that actually dates back to the Old English period as we currently understand it appears in a late redaction of the *Ancrene Riwle*. Cambridge, Magdalene College, Pepys 2498 is a religious miscellany copied in a single hand of the late fourteenth century (Zettersten 1976: xix). Its text of the *Ancrene Riwle* incorporates passages that are not found in earlier versions, and it explicitly addresses an audience of both women and men. In its discussion of confession ("Schrift"), the confessor is exhorted to ascertain gaps in the religious knowledge of the penitent concerning such matters as the Seven Deadly Sins, the Ten Commandments, the Twelve Articles of Faith, the Pater Noster, and one's own Five Senses. Any lack of such essential knowledge should be addressed right then and there, "for oft men seien on olde Englisch. he þat wil nouȝth whan he may. he schal nouȝth whan he wolde" (Zettersten 1976: 147). This proverb does appear (in different places) in earlier versions of the *Ancrene Riwle*, but without the descriptive phrase "olde Englisch"; Whiting's examples of the proverb begin even earlier, around the turn of the millenium.[5] This section of the Pepys 2498 version of the *Ancrene Riwle* is supported by references to authorities such as St. Paul and St. Augustine, sometimes in Latin with English translation, sometimes just in English. With respect to the proverb, the combination of "men seien"—supporting the commonly accepted truth of the sentence—and "olde Englisch"—stressing its antiquity—provides authority to an anonymous saying.

One very late citation of an "old english" proverb also puts the emphasis on the authority bestowed by great age. "The Treatise of Fishing with an Angle" made its first appearance in 1496, in the second edition of *The Book of St. Albans*, printed by Wynkyn de Worde.[6] *The Book of St. Albans*, with its collection of instructions on hunting, hawking, and heraldry, was directed towards an audience of aristocrats and gentry. That is exactly why Wynkyn de Worde chose it as the home for "The Treatise of Fishing": "I have compyled it in a greter volume of dyuerse bokys

[2] Robert Mannyng, *Handlyng Synne,* lines 7671–7674 (1978: 244).

[3] *Proverbs of Hendyng* O ms. 192.5; see Whiting and Whiting, Y27 (1968: 680).

[4] Ellis (1998: 9) sees a conscious reference to "folk wisdom".

[5] See Whiting and Whiting, W275 (1968: 642).

[6] Harrison (1979: 8). See also Loges (1994).

concernynge to gentyll & noble men to the intent that the forsayd ydle persones whyche sholde haue but lytyll mesure in the sayd dysporte of fysshyng sholde not by this meane vtterly dystroye it" (Wynkyn de Worde 1880: 23). Despite their social advantages, Wynkyn's readership is not presumed to be literate in Latin, because when the author of the "Treatise" cites a medical proverb in Latin, he or she translates it quite fully.[7] In that case, the Latin carries iconic authority. However, a bit later in the "Treatise", as the author describes the general advantages of angling, one of them takes the form of an "olde englysshe prouerbe": "As the olde englysshe prouerbe sayth in this wyse. Who soo woll ryse erly shall be holy helthy & zely" (Wynkyn de Worde 1880: 4). There is no evidence that would support a great age for this proverb—in fact, Whiting finds no earlier occurence[8]—but describing the sentence as "englysshe" makes it comfortable and as "olde" makes it authoritative.

The Middle English *Mirror* is another work citing an "old english" proverb. Here, the proverb supports the idea that light entertainment offers little of value:

> for hii þat maken þes songes and þes gestes, hii maken hem after weneinge, & men seit on old english þat weneinge nis no wisdome (Duncan and Connolly 2003: 3).

The *Mirror* is a late-fourteenth-century prose translation of an Anglo-Norman verse sermon cycle—the *Miroir*—composed by Robert de Gretham in the mid-thirteenth century. Gretham's patron for this work has been identified as Lady Elena of Quency, but he "anticipated … a broader audience … for he addresses his readership in the masculine plural, as 'barons' or 'seignurs' (retained as 'lordinges' in the Middle English)" (Blumreich 2002: xiv). Kathleen Blumreich infers from Gretham's errors in Anglo-Norman language and versification that his first language "was almost certainly English" (Blumreich 2002: xiv). Nevertheless, the proverb that Gretham invokes as "quidance n'est pas sauair"[9] seems not to have originated on English soil, as two additional instances from the thirteenth century appear in the works of French writers without insular connections.[10] The English version of the proverb does not appear until late in the fourteenth century; besides the *Mirror,* it occurs in *Piers Plowman*—"Wenyng is no wysdoem ne wyse ymaginacioun"[11]—and probably underlies these lines from Gower's *Confessio amantis:*

> It may to him noght wel betide
> Which useth thilke vice of Pride,
> Which torneth wisdom to wenynge
> And Sothfastnesse into lesynge
> Thurgh fol ymaginacion.[12]

[7] Wynkyn de Worde (1880: 2). On Dame Juliana Berners as the possible author of the "Treatise", see Harrison (1979).

[8] Whiting and Whiting, R143 (1968: 489).

[9] Duncan and Connolly (2003: 2, line 26).

[10] Philippe de Navarre and Adenet. See *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi*, MEINEN 1.1.1 (1995–2002: vol. 8, 175).

[11] Langland, *Piers Plowman,* C.XXII.33 (1978: 363). In the B-text: B.XX.33.

[12] Gower, *Confessio amantis,* Book I, lines 2265–69 (1899–1902: vol. 1, 97).

As with many other medieval English proverbs, this one is marked by alliteration, a structural feature that is easily overlooked in Langland's alliterative poem but stands out more clearly in the contexts of Gower's end-rhyme and the *Mirror's* prose. The *Mirror*-translator's identification of the proverb's language as "old english" may well intend to call attention to its alliteration, which creates an impression of venerability. Furthermore, reference to the Englishness of the proverb points to the act of translation itself. Robert de Gretham, writing for an aristocratic household in the thirteenth century, naturally wrote in French. The Middle English translator, more than a century later, worked in an environment where French and English competed with each other (and with Latin) as languages of religious discourse. The French *Miroir* continued to be read well into the fifteenth century (Duncan and Connolly 2003: lx), but the Middle English translation made the text available to a less-aristocratic audience. Duncan and Connolly believe that most of the *Mirror* manuscripts were associated with the London area, where lay literacy (in English) was growing (Duncan and Connolly 2003: xi, lx). In fact, one tract arguing in favor of vernacular scriptures incorporates some material from the *Mirror* (Duncan and Connolly 2003: xx). This is the same time and place where the Wycliffites were promoting English as a language for religious texts, and one manuscript of the *Mirror* also includes some sermons "derivative of the Wycliffite cycle" (Duncan and Connolly 2003: xviii). Despite these connections, and the *Mirror*-translator's emphatic condemnation of morally compromised clergy, Duncan and Connolly do not believe that he himself was a Wycliffite, but that, like Langland, he expressed ideas of broader currency (2003: l). Wycliffite or not, the translator of the *Mirror* promoted the use of English through the very nature of his work and employed the phrase "old english" not just to label a proverb, but to link the use of the English language to a venerable tradition of wisdom.[13]

Following a similar pattern, the Middle English translator of *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* employs "old english" as a marker of proverbial wisdom in place of the "wise man" found in his source text:

> And therfor, in olde Englisshe, it is saide that 'so ofte goth the potte to water, that atte the laste it comithe broken home.'[14]
> Et pour ce dit le saige que dès vij. ans vient eaue à fin, c'est-à-dire que tant va le pot à l'eaue que le cul en demeure.[15] [And therefore the wise man says that waters come to an end after seven years, which is to say that the pot goes so often to water that the bottom remains there.]

The Middle English translator omits the first proverb in the French source, perhaps because it is less familiar to him and his audience; I know of no medieval English versions of "dès vij. ans …," but "goth the potte to water …" is common in English beginning in the mid-fourteenth century.[16] The same proverb appears five

[13] For a wider study of the links between proverbial wisdom, alliteration, and the use of English, see Deskis (2016).

[14] Wright, ch. LXVII (1906: 90). Emphasis added.

[15] Wright (1906: 254, #5). Emphasis and translation added.

[16] See Whiting and Whiting P323 (1968: 467).

chapters earlier in the text, introduced as "a trew prouerbe" in the Middle English version.[17] In that instance, Geoffroy de la Tour uses a different keyword in his French: instead of "pot" he writes "cruche".[18] Such lexical variation (*pot, cruche, cane*) is common in French versions of this proverb, whereas all of the Middle English variants use *pot.*[19] Ordinarily, the consistency in the English versions versus the variability of the French might lead one to propose an English origin for the proverb, but the reverse is more likely to be true here. The earliest attestations of the proverb are French and roughly two centuries prior to the English, beginning with the twelfth-century *Proverbes au Vilain.* The proverb probably circulated in England via French texts like the *Proverbes au Vilain* and *Roman de Renart* until finally appearing in English texts beginning in the fourteenth century. By associating the proverb with "old english", the Middle English translator of *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry* not only implies ancient authority for the proverb, but claims the proverb itself as an item of English cultural inheritance. His "rebranding" of the proverb as English strives to add authority to his version of the text in its competition with French versions also in circulation.

The next instance of the descriptive phrase "old english" introduces a sentence that shares some structural features with the proverb but is perhaps more closely related to the lyric:

> As me saiþ on hold Englis: 'Wan deþ haþ i-bite and is last strok y-smite, þan ay loue ys lef forȝut' (Fletcher 2009: 228). [When death has bitten and smitten his last stroke, then all love is left forgotten.]

This sentence, appearing in a fifteenth-century manuscript of homiletic material in English and Latin,[20] uses the present tense to make a generalized, free-standing statement of wisdom, like a proverb. Furthermore, it is introduced with the verb "say" just as in our first two, proverbial, examples.[21] However, this sentence contains some un-proverb-like repetition—death both bites and smites—and its sound patterning clearly indicates a lyric segment of three-stress lines, two of them rhyming with each other and the third boasting internal alliteration:

> Wan deþ haþ i-bite
> and is last strok y-smite,
> þan ay loue ys lef forȝut.

Siegfried Wenzel's study of verses in late-medieval English sermons reveals that they (like many other Middle English lyrics) commonly combine end-rhyme with alliteration; for example:

[17] Wright, ch. LXII (1906: 82).

[18] Wright (1906: 261, #112).

[19] *Thesaurus proverbiorum medii aevi,* GEFÄSS 11.1 (1995–2002: vol. 4, 279–82); Whiting and Whiting, P323 (1968: 467).

[20] Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hatton 96; Fletcher (2009: 230).

[21] For a more detailed examination of how proverbs are introduced in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century English sermons, see Deskis (2016: 90–96).

Mon iboren of wommon ne lyueth but a stounde.
In wrechednes and in wo ben his dayes i-wounde.
He sprynges out as blossome and sone falles to grounde,
And wendes away as schadewe þat no wey is ifounde.[22]

Some of these sermon lyrics are also related to proverbs. This stanza seems to be built around the proverb "Pride goes before and shame comes after"[23]:

Pruyde þat is ouergart [excessive]
Algate haþ vnquart [trouble]
At þe latter ende.
For when pryde goþ byfore,
Schame sewyth euer more,
Wende hou he wende.[24]

Returning to our "hold Englis" sentence and its context, Fletcher interprets the collection as probably belonging to a member of the secular clergy in a milieu where neither preacher nor audience was very highly educated. The structure of text D, in which our sentence appears, "is so free that it might perhaps more appropriately be thought of as 'preachable material' than 'sermon'" (Fletcher 2009: 166), and in MS Hatton 96 overall, vernacular "poetry, proverbs and appeals to common sense seem raised to a virtual parity with *auctoritates* of the more familiar sort" (Fletcher 2009: 195). Ultimately, then, it matters little whether the sentence in question is perceived as a lyric or a proverb; in either case, it is an example of speech that acquires authority through its structuredness and its repeated or reported nature. Tagging the sentence as "old english" reinforces its status as received wisdom, just as it did in our first two examples, but in this instance, the descriptor "old" is more important than "English". Nevertheless, a pattern begins to emerge: when Middle English writers use the phrase "old english" to ascribe authority to a statement, they appear to be dissembling, or at least overstating the case. In the *Mirror* and *The Book of the Knight of La Tour-Landry*, describing the sentences as "old english" mischaracterizes what were probably French proverbs. In the homiletic material, the lyric/proverb may well have been composed in English, but based on its use of end-rhyme, it was probably not "old". "The Treatise of Fishing with an Angle" also exaggerates the age of its English proverb. Thus, in the linguistic ecology of late-medieval England, writers for what were probably monolingual English audiences seem to presume that these audiences will perceive authority in statements linked to their own language as opposed to Latin or French, the languages that modern scholars generally assume to have possessed higher status. Translators, especially, appeal to the English past to reinforce their use of English present.

The next set of examples characterizes "old english" mainly as the source of archaic vocabulary, with changing attitudes towards that vocabulary as we move

[22] Wenzel, #15 (1978: 149).

[23] Whiting and Whiting, P385 (1968: 471–72).

[24] Wenzel, #7 (1978: 141). Wenzel notes the proverb, but does not consider the connection with the lyric to be close.

from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. The earliest instance appears in the *Life of St. Margaret* from the Katherine Group:

> Þus þe eadi meiden, Margarete bi nome, i þe moneð þet on ure ledene – þet is, ald Englis – is *Efterliðe* inempnet, ant *Iulius* o Latin, o þe twentuðe dei, deide wið tintrohe (Millett & Wogan-Browne 1990: 82, 84).

This sentence sets up a core contrast between English and Latin, illustrated by the different names for the seventh month of the year. The author's careful precision aids didacticism and even leans toward pedantry: not only does he identify *Efterliðe* as English and *Iulius* as Latin, but he takes pains to explain that "ald Englis" is "ure ledene". Why would "our language" be "old english" and not just "English"? As it turns out, *Efterliðe* is an Old English word in the modern sense: this is its only recorded appearance in Middle English, and even in Old English it appears only once, in the *Old English Martyrology*:

> On þone seofoðan monað on geare, þone we nemnað on Lyden Iulius …. Þone monað we nemnað on ure geðeode se Æftera Lyða (Rauer 2013: 128).

The close parallel probably indicates that the author of *Seinte Margarete* borrowed this sentence from the *Old English Martyrology*, as suggested by Andrew Galloway (2007: 99). The Middle English hagiographer engaged in a pattern of preserving archaic lexemes (Faulkner 2012: 198), which in this case might have been quite unfamiliar to his audience, hence the specification of *Efterliðe* as "old" English. Besides displaying his multilingual learning, the Middle English author deliberately resurrects an Old English word and attempts to teach it to his audience as part of "our language". He engages in a double act of linguistic politics: first by juxtaposing English and Latin words on equal footing, and second, by stressing that English—rather than Latin or French—is "our language". For this author, old vocabulary, like the "old english" proverbs examined earlier, can be a source of pride.

A century or so after *The Life of St. Margaret*, William Langland also advertises his learning through a display of philology:

> Kyndeliche, by Crist, ben suche ycald 'lollares',
> As by þe Engelisch of oure eldres, of olde mennes techynge.
> He þat lolleth is lame or his leg out of ioynte
> Or ymaymed in som membre, for to meschief hit souneth.
> Rihte so sothly such manere ermytes
> Lollen aȝen þe byleue and þe lawe of holy churche.[25]

Langland does not use the exact phrase "old english", but his "Engelisch of oure elders, of olde mennes techynge" contains the same elements. Furthermore, he refers to this English of olden times as a source of wisdom and authority, just as in *Seinte Margarete*. Modern interpretations of this passage diverge somewhat regarding what precise wisdom is being presented: Pearsall's punctuation (above) implies a historical definition for the term "lollar", while Joseph Wittig would repunctuate (with a period at the end of line 213), making "þe Engelisch of oure

[25] Langland, *Piers Plowman* C.IX.213-18 (1978: 170).

eldres" the beginning of an extended simile.[26] For our purposes, the difference is moot because either way, Langland is using his implied knowledge of "old english" to explain a lexeme. His assumption that the English of the past carries weight is more important than the details of his philological explanation or simile. In fact, "lollar" was not, as far as we can tell, a very old word in Langland's day—the *OED* examples begin in the fourteenth century[27]–so Langland appears to be investing the word with a venerability that it did not possess. It is more likely that Langland's references to "eldres" and "olde men" reflect the vernacularity of the word rather than its antiquity. Langland is well known for his artful use of Latin authorities, but in this instance he draws on the authority of the vernacular, assuming that it, too, will resonate with his audience.

Like William Langland and the author of *Seinte Margarete*, William Caxton recognized the impediment to understanding that archaic vocabulary could create; unlike the other authors, Caxton strove to erase, rather than explain such unfamiliar words. He describes his aims at the end of Book 7 of his edition of the *Polychronicon*:

> Therfore J William Caxton a symple persone haue endeuoyred me to wryte fyrst ouer all the sayd book of proloconycon/and somwhat haue chaunged the rude and old englyssh/that is to wete certayn wordes/which in these dayes be neither vsyd ne vnderstanden.[28]

Caxton's use of the phrase "old english" is unique in its whiff of opprobrium: he is a proponent of "new" English against the old. Expression of this bias against older forms of English is easy to find in the prologues and epilogues to Caxton's publications. One of the most famous is his prologue to *Eneydos*, in which he relates the anecdote of a merchant whose meal is delayed because of the dialect difference between "egges" and "eyren" (Crotch 1928: 108). However, in developing his theme of the difficulty of pleasing all audiences, Caxton devotes at least as much attention to the incomprehensibility of "olde englysshe". He recounts the complaints of

> some gentylmen whiche late blamed me sayeng y^{t} in my translacyons I had ouer curyous termes whiche coude not be vnderstande of comyn peple/and desired me to vse olde and homely termes in my translacyons. and ‖ fayn wolde I satysfye euery man/and so to doo toke an olde boke and redde therin/ and certaynly the englysshe was so rude and brood that I coude not wele vnderstande it (Crotch 1928: 108).

Lest he be blamed for giving up too easily, Caxton adds a second example of the opacity of older texts:

> And also my lorde abbot of westmynster ded do shewe to me late certayn euydences wryton in olde englysshe for to reduce it into our englysshe now

[26] Wittig (2001). Wittig is followed by Galloway (2007: 97–98).

[27] "Lollard".

[28] Epilogue to Book 7 of *Polycronicon*, in Crotch (1928: 68).

> vsid/And certaynly it was wreton in suche wyse that it was more lyke to dutche than englysshe I coude not reduce ne brynge it to be vnderstonden (Crotch 1928: 108).

With his usual editorial modesty, Caxton claims (perhaps truly) that he is unable to understand these "old english" writings, implying that his readers would fare no better.[29] Being also pressed by "som honest and grete clerkes" to use more "curious" vocabulary, Caxton stands "abasshed" between demands for older and newer stylistics. Ultimately, he rejects the archaism of the older vocabulary: "but in my Iudgemente/the comyn termes that be dayli vsed ben lyghter to be vnderstonde than the olde and auncyent englysshe" (Crotch 1928: 109). Caxton offers as his model the translations of John Skelton, created "not in rude || and olde langage. but in polysshed and ornate termes craftely" (Crotch 1928: 109). Unlike many of his other paratexts, in which Caxton adopts an "aesthetics of access" (Ramey 2015), his prologue to *Eneydos* directs the volume away from the general public and towards a more educated and discerning audience: "For this booke is not for e[u]ery rude [and] vnconnynge man to see/but to clerkys and very gentylmen that vnderstande gentylnes and scyence" (Crotch 1928: 109). "Olde englysshe" is "rude" and "broad"—that is, rural and lower-class—as well as opaque.

In the prologue to his translation of *Charles the Grete*, Caxton expresses appreciation of contemporary style without disparaging the old. In a modesty topos[30] he asks his readers "to pardone me of the rude 7 symple reducyng/and though so be there no gaye termes/ne subtyl ne newe eloquence/yet J hope that it shal be vnderstonden" (Crotch 1928: 96). Here, Caxton links "newness" with comprehension even as he claims to lack the "newe eloquence" he praises.

Returning to the *Polychronicon*, Caxton would not have found expression of the inferiority of "old english" in Ralph Higden's Latin or John Trevisa's English versions of the work. In his famous chapter on the language of the inhabitants of Britain (Book I, ch. 59), Higden describes English as "corrupta" as a result of linguistic borrowings from the Danes and the Normans; Trevisa's translation gives "apayred".[31] Part of the blame for the decline of English lies with the "rurales homines" (Higden) or "vplondisshe men" (Trevisa) who strive to speak French in order to enhance their social status.[32] By Caxton's day, English possessed a status closer to that of French, but his opinion of what we may assume to be older, Germanic lexemes is that they are "rude" and associated with "vplondisshe men." Higden and Trevisa gently deplore the "decline" of English, but Caxton has moved on and embraces its contemporary form. As England's first printer, Caxton had to create both a wide reading audience and a language that would appeal to them; as is evident in his paratexts, he gave careful consideration to his linguistic choices.[33]

[29] On the link between Caxton's editorial persona and his audience, see Ramey (2015: 737).

[30] See Ramey (2015: 736).

[31] Babington (1869: 41, vol. 2, 159).

[32] Babington (1869: 160, 159).

[33] For a detailed description of the types of linguistic changes worked by Caxton on the *Polychronicon*, see Waldron (1999).

The debate over the value of archaic language would continue through the Renaissance.[34]

For some authors and translators of the Middle English period, the descriptor "old english" mainly adds weight to other stylistic features that are meant to enhance the wisdom value of their statements. A proverb, for example, is often identified by its distinctive syntax but it may also be set apart by the use of alliteration or end-rhyme. Introducing a proverb with an introit such as "men say" implies that it expresses a widely-held principle; describing the proverb as having originated in "old english" stresses the diachronic durability of the adage. This use of the phrase "old english" has nothing to do with stages of the language: in the examples I have presented, the language of the "old english" proverb is perfectly contemporary in both lexis and grammar. A translator may also describe a proverb as "old english" in order to mask the fact that his source text is really not-so-old French. The writers who use the phrase in these ways assume that their audiences will value both what is "old" and what is "english". The high value placed on "old english" is especially marked in *The Life of St. Margaret*, where the author maintains the archaic word "Efterliðe" despite the difficulty it is likely to pose to his audience. This writer needs to prove the venerability of the English language in order to support his choice to use it. William Langland invents, or at least exaggerates, the archaism of the word "lollares" but nevertheless embraces the wisdom found in "þe Engelisch of oure eldres". For all of these writers, "old english" is "our" language and brings together author, audience, and text, even if the author sometimes needs to explain the connection. For William Caxton, on the other hand, the choice to write and publish in English is based less on political and more on commercial considerations. His audience—both patrons and purchasers—already desired English texts, so the question for Caxton was what kind of English to give them. When he looked at "old english" books, he saw something akin to what we see: texts composed in archaic spellings, with archaic vocabulary and archaic grammar sufficient to erect a substantial impediment to comprehension. Caxton's decision to avoid "old english" was not without a social component—he did characterize it as "rude" and "broad"—but in the end, the distance between English past and English present was just too wide for him to bridge.

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[34] See Blank (2006).

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