

Analyze Sir Gawain and the Green Knight

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Abstract: Sir Gawain and the Green Knight describes the story of a young knight in the legendary court of King Arthur. The poem begins with a narration of Camelot's Christmas party at King Arthur's court. During the banquet, a mysterious green knight, green hair and green skin, riding a green horse, challenges a strange game to the gathering crowd. This game has triggered a series of events, in which Gawain faces the test and temptation. Sir Gawain and the Green Knight belongs to a school of medieval literature, known as "romanticism". Romantic texts are not mainly about love, but more about adventure. Romantic texts usually involve a hero (usually a knight) in a mission, and many risky things will happen in the process of performing the mission. This poem experiences a long history, and the Old English used in it is quite different from modern English. This paper discusses the evolution of English by analyzing the differences between vocabulary, grammar and modern English.

Keywords: Evolution of Old English

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a famous medieval poem in the Arthurian legend.¹ Little is known about its author except he was a contemporary of Chaucer and probably a Christian priest.² The poem was composed towards the end of the 14th century³ as an evident effort to extol Sir Gawain and his knightly virtues of loyalty, valor, rectitude, and integrity.⁴ Due to the long history of the poem so that there are plenty of differences from modern English, the essay highlights the dissimilar characteristics between Middle English and Modern English from the perspective of orthography, lexical borrowing, and morphology.

1 Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is a famous medieval poem in the Arthurian legend.

The poem contained the runic characters.⁵ The thorn letter (þ) that was used in Old English and Icelandic to represent the sounds /θ/ and /ð/ and later written as -th, it symbolized a spirant sound (both voiced and voiceless sound). Another runic letter appeared in the text that was wynn (ƿ) which used in Old and Middle English, later replaced by -w. The word wynn, namely 'p', it sounded /w/. In the text, the word of 'watz' or 'wyl' was shown by w, not wynn⁶.

On my bonkkes ful brode Bretayn he settez Wyth wynne⁷. Siþen þe sege and þe assaut watz sesed at Troye⁸. If ȝe wyl listen þis laye bot on little quile⁹.

As for the long vowel -a, the sound was equal to /a:/,¹⁰ in some areas such as London, East Midland or West Midland, the long vowel-a in some dialects of Middle English became -o.¹¹ In the passage the example of 'mony' in place of 'many', although the spelling of 'many' was found in the texts of northern dialects.

In mony turned tyme tene þat wroȝten¹²

2 Conjunctions in Modern English¹¹

Affected by the Norman-French, there are some linking words including -wh in Modern English, for instance, while or when, which adopts the orthographic feature of -qu in the text.¹³ In the sentences, the words 'quile' and 'quen' instead of 'while' and 'when'. However, there is not the word 'where' replaced by 'quere' in the passage so that the feature is not wholly contained the words' spelling of Middle English.

Where were and wrake and wonder¹⁴

2.1 The tortuous trend of Middle English changes

The change of inflections in Middle English has a reduction trend. The inflectional endings of the vowels a, o, u, e were indistinct to a sound, the so-called 'indeterminate vowel', which came to be written as -e (less often i, y, u, depending on place and date). Due to this reason, a mass of initially different endings, for example, -a, -u, -e, -an, -um were decreased commonly to a uniform -e, while the expressions of the previous grammatical distinctiveness were no longer supported.¹⁵ About the text, there are some examples of this characteristic such as the adjective word 'wele' and the noun word 'worlde', the determinant words 'alle' and 'boþe'. In Modern English they are on behalf of words: 'well', 'world', 'all', 'both' respectively.

Welneȝe of al þe wele in þe west iles¹⁶. With all the wel of the worlde they woned ther samen¹⁷. Bot of alle þat here bult, of Bretaygne kynges¹⁸. And oft boþe blysse and blunder¹⁹.

2.2 The present participle of verbs in English

Additionally, there are some suffixes about the verbal present participle in Middle English such as '-ende'/'-inde', but in Modern English they have become -ing, in the text the suffix is spelt-yng²⁰.

Fro the kyng watz cummen with knyghtes into the halle. The numerous words of the extract are from Germanic origin (Anglo-Saxon) which develop straightly from Old English to Middle English. For example, wele (OE 'wela'), welneȝe (OE 'welneah/welneh' ME 'nearly'), borȝ (OE 'burg'), brondez (OE 'brond'), bicomme (OE 'becuman'), brittened (OE 'brytnian'), athel (OE æthele), trewest (OE 'trew'), erthe (OE 'eard'), kynde (OE '[ge]- kinde'). There are also some words influenced by French orthography such as quile (instead of while) or quen (instead of when)^[1]. Þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondez and askez. Hit watz Ennias þe athel, and his highe kynde. Þat siþen deprecd prouinces, and patrounes bicomme. In terms of the lexical borrowing in Middle English, the majority of the words are original from Old Norse and Norman French. Nonetheless, there are still a small quantity of words from Latin which are related to the mythological or historical characters and places.

The borrowing lexical from Old Norse are: askez (ON 'aska'), biges (Uncertain Scandinavian origin), brent (ON 'brenna'), bonkkes (from ON 'banki'), blunder (ON 'blunda'), boþe (ON 'báðir', cp. ODan. 'bód'), bigged (past participle of bigges, ON 'byggva'), bult (Uncertain Scandinavian origin, cp. Swedish 'bulta'), attle (ON 'ætla'), fro (ON frá), neven/nevenes (ON 'nefna'), ferlyes (ON 'ferligr'), gret (from ON, cp. OI 'grjot'), skete (Unknown Old Norse origin, cp. OI 'skjotr'), stad (ON 'staddr'), skyfted (Unknown Old Norse origin, cp. OI 'skifta'), tit (ON 'titt'), tulkes (ON 'tulkr'), kayred (ON 'keyra'), hap (ON 'happ'), glaum (ON 'glaumr'), þay (ON 'þeir'), lyftes (from ON 'lypta') and wylle (ON 'villr').

Þe borȝ brittened and brent to brondez and askez. Fro riche Romulus to Rome ricchis hym swyþe. As hit is stad and stoken.

The Latin etymology is Romulus and Rome, Ticius and Felix Brutus, because they all refer to Roman mythology. From the text, there are some words' etymon from Greek, for instance, nome (from Classical Greek 'νόμος' nomos).

And neuenes hit his aune nome, as hit now hat. Another fairly distinctive form is the present participle before the spread of the ending -ing. In the north, there is lovande, in the Midlands lovende, and in the south lovinde. In later Middle English the ending -ing appears in the Midlands and the south, thus obscuring the dialectal distinction^[2]

2.3 Pay attention to the present participle in English grammar

At the same time, there is one of characteristics in English grammar that should be noticed which is the present participle. Initially, about the present participle, the suffix -ing which was spelt -yng in Middle English replaced -ande and -ende. The former was the early suffix of the present participle in Northern in Middle English, and the latter was in West Midland. Another significant feature in connection with participles is the past participle drops the -ge prefix, for example, it developed from 'gemæte' in Old English to 'mete' in Middle English. Secondly, about noun plurals, adding -s or -es to the root of the words forms plurals such as homes, trammes, ferlyes. Besides this feature, some cases of inflectional endings are retained, a case in point is -ez/-z in the extract. The -ez of Arthurez is retained which is a genitive inflectional suffix in Late Middle English And an outrage awenture of Arthurez wonderez^[3]

3 Conclusion

In conclusion, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight was finished in the late Middle Ages which there were some linguistic changes at this time. In addition, the text is primality composed in the Northwestern dialect so that it is why there are some features that differ in respects of orthography, lexical borrowing, and morphology to other varieties of Middle English.

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