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‘Fer in the north; I kan nat telle where’:

Dialect, Regionalism, and Philologism

When J.R.R. Tolkien, in his famous analysis of the use of dialect in the *Reeve’s Tale*, termed Chaucer a “philologist,” he was affording him his highest compliment. What Tolkien meant, primarily, was that the distinctive speech Chaucer gave to the Cambridge clerks John and Aleyn was a precisely accurate rendering of a particular dialect of far northern England. But it is clear that identifying “Chaucer as a philologist” meant more than this to Tolkien. It meant that Chaucer was not merely interested in using linguistic differences for the sake of humor or characterization, but that he was interested in language in itself: “For Chaucer was interested in ‘language’, and in the forms of his own tongue.”ⁱ It meant, even more importantly, that Chaucer was *disinterested*. Tolkien’s effort was to show that Chaucer did not “just pander to popular linguistic prejudices,” but rather that he possessed that combination of expertise and dispassionate objectivity that sets the true scholar apart from the mass of humanity: “Chaucer deliberately relies on the easy laughter that is roused by ‘dialect’ in the ignorant or the unphilological. But he gives not mere popular ideas of dialect: he gives the genuine thing.”ⁱⁱ Thus, for Tolkien, “philology,” with its objective observation,

systematic analysis, and precise recording, is the opposite of “ignorance.” In fact, it is literally a higher calling. “Many may laugh,” he wrote, “but few can analyse or record.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Much of the analysis of the use of dialect in the *Reeve’s Tale* has similarly focused on its relative accuracy in depicting a dialect of northern English, and much of it has echoed Tolkien’s impression of Chaucer’s dialectologically disinterested and unbiased observation and representation, his impartial and objective interest in the speech habits of others. Nor is it my intention to challenge this. But from the perspective of more recent sociolinguistic theory, particularly that of Pierre Bourdieu, the ostensible objectivity of Chaucer’s social-scientific stance, what we might term his “philologism,” can be seen to grant him specific social advantages. Postmodern and postcolonial criticism has exposed the unseen workings of power by which certain individuals benefit from subject positions that may otherwise seem, even to themselves, neutral and objective. So it is with Chaucer; the “philological” inclination he shows in the *Reeve’s Tale* is informed by and contributes to a broader tendency to use generalizations of linguistic difference to construct hierarchized Northern and Southern regional identities within England, often much earlier than has previously been acknowledged. Only in this light can subsequent uses of dialect in English literature, notably in the Wakefield “Second Shepherds’ Play,” be properly understood.

1. Chaucer’s Southern Accent

The dialect writing in the *Reeve’s Tale*, apparently the first instance of what would become a great English tradition, has always been of interest to historians of English, but those who have studied it most extensively have paradoxically insisted on its

limited sociolinguistic significance. There are two main reasons for this, one internal and the other external. The external reason is that the late fourteenth century seems, to many historians of the language, too early to imagine the use of specific English dialects as markers of social status. Such hierarchization could only come with the establishment of a national standard, with greater conformity to the standard granting greater linguistic authority and greater variance marking social marginalization.^{iv} This standardization would be perfected with the elaboration of prescriptive grammatical systems based on neo-classical models in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and although its roots can be traced to political and cultural centralization in the sixteenth century or to the advent of print or even to the rise of several regular forms of written English, including Chancery Standard, in the mid-fifteenth century, most scholars doubt that any regularization of the language in the medieval periods meets the requirements of true standardization.^v Standardization consists not merely of a trends toward linguistic conformity but also of sociolinguistic phenomena involving the assertion and recognition of linguistic authority. Due to the variety of written as well as spoken English and the persistent cultural authority of languages other than English, primarily French, few linguistic historians recognize the emergence of standard English before the end of the Middle English period. Tim William Machan notes that Chancery, “lacking broad acceptance and still restricted in its domains..., was sustained neither by formal, published codification nor by cultivation in education, and a truly standardized written variety of English did not exist until the eighteenth century.”^{vi}

For Tolkien, therefore, the use of dialect in the *Reeve's Tale* is “a linguistic joke” inspired by “private philological interest,” a joke so private that even Chaucer’s

contemporaries did not get it.^{vii} In the clerks’ speech, Tolkien concludes, Chaucer renders the dialect of a specific place in far northern England— “the land beyond the Tees,” but still in Northumbria, not Scotland—and does so with such accuracy that his fifteenth-century copyists are not able to recognize or to maintain the distinctions.^{viii}

Norman Blake has shown that John and Aleyn’s dialect is less specific than Tolkien believed, and also that the fifteenth-century scribes of the *Canterbury Tales* often understood quite well the linguistic distinctions Chaucer was drawing between his characters and on occasion augmented them.^{ix} But Blake also maintains that the absence of a formal standard for English, at least before the rise of Chancery English, meant “the absence of regional dialect registers in medieval English literature.”^x The dialect writing in the *Reeve’s Tale*, therefore, is merely an attempt to paint some local color for the sake of genre, and even this conception of dialect differences is essentially foreign to fourteenth-century England: “To Chaucer it probably appeared that *fabliaux* ought to include some provincial speech, but this was an attitude which was imported from abroad rather than one which arose from the state of the language and the reactions of indigenous speakers to it.”^{xi}

Machan has recently tried to contextualize Middle English dialectology within a broader analysis of the “ecology” of medieval English, but this leads him, like Blake, to doubt the sociolinguistic relevance of the few instances of Middle English dialect writing. Differences among the innumerable variants of spoken Middle English, Machan finds, were dwarfed by the greater question of the place of English among other, competing languages, primarily French: “Indeed, both the diglossia of medieval England and the relative rigidity of the estates worked against the sociolinguistic utility—even viability—

of mapping any social rank onto any variety of English.”^{xii} While Machan is able to identify, starting in the fourteenth century, examples of dialect *awareness*, such observations of synchronic variations within Middle English do not amount to evaluations of the status, authority, or appropriateness of different dialects or regionalist generalizations about the characters of their speakers. To Machan, status distinctions among different dialects were unavailable to Middle English speakers: “[W]ithout widespread, institutionalized access to powerful domains such as education, government, and business and without the codification of printed grammar books and dictionaries—the very factors that established a tenacious connection between language and class in the early modern era—English remained without a standard variety, spoken or written, throughout the entire medieval period. Lacking these institutional supports and a standard variety, in turn, speakers of Middle English had neither the means to represent social stratification in language nor a sociolinguistic context in which such a representation could have been easily conceived.”^{xiii} In the few recognized instances of Middle English dialect writing, therefore, the authors cannot be using dialect differences to indicate class differences or generalized regional character. “Aleyn and John in Chaucer’s *Reeve’s Tale* and Mak in the *Second Shepherds’ Play*,” Machan writes, “clearly speak northern and southern English, respectively, utilizing a collection of primarily lexical, phonological, and morphological forms predominant in works known to have been produced in specific regions of England. But within the ecology of Middle English their language was not Northern or Southern.”^{xiv} This may be a rather surprising assertion with regards to the Wakefield Master, since Mak explicitly imitates the “sothren tothe” while assuming a Southern identity and making claims of class privilege, but with

regards to Chaucer it seems widely accepted. Scholars like Jeremy Smith, who has done much to reveal the regularization of written English in the fifteenth century and explain the enormous changes in spoken English at the end of the Middle Ages, shy from claims of the sociolinguistic significance of dialect awareness in Chaucer’s time.

“Contemporary references to accent tend to focus on the oddity of outsiders—such as the young students in *The Reeve’s Tale*, or Trevisa’s notorious addition to his translation of Higden’s *Polychronicon*—rather than on socially marked usages,” Smith writes.^{xv}

As Smith’s remarks suggest, it is not merely *a priori* assumptions about the chronology of English standardization that lead scholars to downplay the social significance of the use of dialect in the *Reeve’s Tale*; it is also the ambiguities of the relative status of the characters and their speech in the tale itself. Though Blake and Machan insist that readers are anachronistically imposing their own prejudices on the fourteenth-century text if they imagine that it opposes a Northern variant to a Southern standard, they nonetheless acknowledge that there is potential comedy whenever someone else’s manner of speech is represented. And Tolkien, while asserting Chaucer’s objective expertise, grants that the tale indulges popular impressions of the comic nature of Northern speech. In at least one instance, there is internal evidence that Chaucer does intend the clerks’ speech to seem not just different but comically so. It comes when John explains to Symkin why he and Aleyn, rather than their manciple, have brought the corn:

“Symond,” quod John, “by God, nede has na peer.

Hym boes serve hymself that has na swayn,

Or elles he is a fool, as clerkes sayn.

Oure manciple, I hope he wil be deed,

Swa werkes ay the wanges in his heed;
 And forthy as I come, and eek Alayn,
 To gryndeoure corn and carie it ham agayn;
 I pray yow spede us heythen that ye may.” (I.4026-33)^{xvi}

All of the most distinctive features of John and Aleyn’s dialect are on display in this passage: the phonological (*na* for *no*, *swa* for *so*); the inflexional (*werkes* in the third-person present indicative, instead of *werketh*); and the lexical (*heythen* for *hennes*.)^{xvii}

But one particular lexical feature stands out: the use of the word “hope” to mean “anticipate” or “fear.” Chaucer deliberately employs this regional idiom, recognizably foreign to his prime readership, in such a way as to make it seem ridiculous: “Oure manciple, I hope he wil be deed.”^{xviii} Here is evidence, then, that Chaucer, however accurately he portrays the regional dialect of the clerks, is inviting laughter at their unfamiliar speech, and encouraging the reader to assume that they are comically rustic rubes.

Indeed, this is the role that John and Aleyn seem to play in the first part of the tale. In the preceding *Miller’s Tale*, Nicholas declares that “A clerk hadde litherly biset his whyle, / But if he koude a carpenter bigyle” (I.3299-3300), and John the carpenter obligingly proves himself a gullible yokel. John and Aleyn are equally confident that they can outwit the local miller, but they are immediately and easily bested by Symkyn, who needs only to set their horse loose to foil their hopes of exposing his deceit. Any reader who has assumed that their outlandish accents mark them as rubes has been given evidence to justify the assumption. In fact, even modern critics sometimes suggest that

John and Aleyn’s dialect is innately comical, indicative of the clerks’ incompetence and evidence of the “lowness” of the tale and its teller.^{xix}

But the relative status of Chaucer’s clerk is quite ambiguous. It is they, after all, who are receiving the Cambridge education. Even after sending them chasing after their borrowed horse while he steals their corn, so that when they return bedraggled from the field they must beg hospitality from their abuser and even offer to pay for it, Symkyn mocks them not for their rusticity but for the abstraction and sophistry of their philosophical training:

Myn hous is streit, but ye han lerned art;

Ye konne by argumentes make a place

A myle brood of twenty foot of space.

Lat se now if this place may suffise,

Or make it rowm with speche, as is youre gise. [I.4122-26]^{xx}

John and Aleyn’s subsequent conversations are marked by just such academic reasoning, unnecessarily complex and hermetically theoretical; Aleyn, quite unlike the ostensibly bookish Nicholas, is revealed as the kind of intellectual who feels compelled to cite a legal principle in order to justify to himself his own fornication: “For, John, ther is a lawe that says thus:/ That gif a man in a point be agreved,/ That in another he sal be releved” (I.4180-82). And in the end, the clerks return to their college with their grain restored and their libidos slaked, while the miller is injured both in his body and, more dearly, in his preciously guarded lineage.

Whatever the initial impression of their speech, therefore, the tale would seem ultimately to leave the two dialects it dramatizes on equal footing. Chaucer invites social

prejudices based on linguistic differences only to challenge and undermine them. What is Chaucer’s use of dialect in the tale, then, but *philological*, as Tolkien originally suggested? Is it not an objective observation and transcription of linguistic variety, interested in speech but disinterested in the relative status of its different registers, and in fact sedulous to dramatize their equal standing?

Following Tolkien, many critics have seen the tale as embodying Chaucer’s, or the Reeve’s, linguistic capacity, its facility in representing “foreign” speech forms. Robert Worth Frank, Jr., calls the tale a “glorious glossary.”^{xxi} David Benson, defining the tale’s essential features within the “drama of style” of the greater work, points to the dialect of the clerks as evidence of the “Reeve-poet’s particular skill with language.”^{xxii} Benson’s view is supported by Christopher Cannon’s lexical analysis of the *Canterbury Tales*.^{xxiii} And it is extended even further, into the realm of Middle English linguistic ecology, by Machan. Noting as others have that in a few instances the Reeve himself seems to use linguistic forms typical of his native Norfolk, Machan argues ingeniously for the Reeve as a philologist: the dialect writing in the tale is a feature of “Oswald’s linguistic strategies,” and evince a character with “a high degree of metalinguistic awareness,” which would be appropriate, Machan claims, to a man of the Reeve’s station in late-fourteenth-century Norfolk.^{xxiv}

But the significance of Chaucer’s use of dialect writing cannot be limited to the single tale in which it occurs or to its fictional teller. Cannon argues that Chaucer’s poetry makes implicit claims for its own stylistic superiority: “By presenting traditional forms as alternatives and grading them, Chaucer presents *his* English as the salvific form that can extract the good from the bad and become the best.”^{xxv} Chaucer’s performances

of “linguistic capacity”^{xxvi} are exhibitions of his linguistic *capaciousness* – ostensible proof, that is, that his English comprehends and supercedes all other variants. Cannon’s focus is on lexicography and style, but I believe the *Reeve’s Tale* bears out his argument in the realm of dialect.

If such a critique of linguistic self-promotion seems to imply self-interested calculation on Chaucer’s part, then it is all the more important to take note of those sociolinguistic models that reveal the potential symbolic profit available even to unintentional participants in a privileged subject position. We can depersonalize this claim to linguistic pre-eminence, showing it to be an unconscious participation in broad cultural assumptions about region, status, and dialect, and in the case of the *Reeve’s Tale*, we can specifically locate the mechanism in the privileged subject position of the “philological” observer.

2. The Strategy of Condensation

Pierre Bourdieu understands the world of language by way of the same model he constructs for the social universe as a whole, as an arena of constant competition among individual agents for profit in an endless series of overlapping fields. Agents unconsciously internalize and reduplicate social conventions that can work against their own interests in the competition for symbolic and material profit; they can also profit from privileged subject positions of which they are not consciously aware.

The arena of verbal exchange, therefore, is a marketplace, and every transaction produces a profit: “The construction of a linguistic market creates the conditions for an objective competition in and through which the legitimate competence can function as

linguistic capital, producing a *profit of distinction* on the occasion of each social exchange.”^{xxvii} The key for Bourdieu is that in the social context of language there is always a dominant competence. In any linguistic environment there are innumerable modes and registers, and any given individual is capable of employing a variety of forms with some competency, but all of the aware of the dominant competence and of its superior social status. “The dominant competence,” Bourdieu writes, “functions as linguistic capital, only in so far as certain conditions (the unification of the market and the unequal distribution of the chances of access to the means of places of expression) are continuously fulfilled, so that the groups which possess that competence are able to impose it as the only legitimate one in the formal markets (the fashionable, educational, political and administrative markets) and in most of the linguistic interactions in which they are involved.”^{xxviii} Each verbal exchange reveals some participant’s greater access to the dominant competence. Though each participant has a sense of what abilities and strategies produce symbolic profit—a feel for the game, as Bourdieu figures it—this understanding is largely unconsciously habituated, and a speaker may therefore accrue profit in despite of his or her conscious or stated intentions.

One of Bourdieu’s prime examples of such an unintentional route to sociolinguistic profit is a phenomenon he calls “the strategy of condescension,” which, he says,

consists in deriving *profit* from the objective relation of power between the languages that confront one another in practice... in the very act of symbolically negating that relation, namely, the hierarchy of the languages and those who speak them. Such a strategy is possible whenever the

objective disparity between persons present (that is, between their social properties) is sufficiently known and recognized by everyone (particularly those involved in the interaction, as agents or spectators) so that the symbolic negation of the hierarchy (by using the ‘common touch’, for instance) enables the speaker to combine the profits linked to the undiminished hierarchy with those derived from the directly symbolic negation of the hierarchy—not the least of which is the strengthening of the hierarchy implied by the recognition accorded to the way of using the hierarchical relation.^{xxix}

Bourdieu illustrates this concept (which, one must admit, is in desperate need of illustration) with an anecdote about the mayor of Pau, a town in the Pyrenean province of Béarn (and, although he does not identify it as such, Bourdieu’s home province.) In Béarn, as in much of provincial France through the mid-twentieth century, large portions of the population spoke primarily local dialect rather than standard French. Bourdieu notes a report in a French-language newspaper of a ceremony in honor of a Béarnais poet at which the mayor spoke partly in the Béarnais dialect, a gesture which, according to the printed account, “greatly moved” the audience.^{xxx} It may seem to us, as it apparently did to the mayor’s contemporary audience, that by speaking in dialect in this public and official context he has struck a blow for the legitimacy of Béarnais as against the hegemony of standard French. Bourdieu points out, however, “In order for an audience of people whose mother tongue is Béarnais to perceive as a ‘thoughtful gesture’ the fact that a Béarnais mayor should speak to them in Béarnais, they must tacitly recognize the unwritten law which prescribes French as the only acceptable language for formal

speeches in formal situations.”^{xxxix} The mayor’s capacity to offer his apparent challenge to this law derives from the same linguistic authority that undergirds the status of standard French itself. He has advanced degrees and other trappings of cultural status that evince his fluency in French and demonstrate his qualification for public office. The same Béarnais words that the mayor speaks would have no cultural value coming from the mouth of a local speaker who did not have the same *bona fides* vouching for his access to the dominant competency. So the mayor gains a profit of distinction from his use of the subordinate language that simultaneously depends on and denies its subordinate status.

For the mayor of Pau and his listeners in twentieth-century France, the unassailable authority of Paris French is universally recognized, maintained by a vast and intricate network of cultural privilege, and institutionalized throughout the systems of education, governmental bureaucracy, and public media. The absence, or at least the paucity, of such formal and institutional linguistic authority in medieval England has led language historians to deny the cultural supremacy of London dialect over other forms in Chaucer’s time. But as important as institutional structures, in Bourdieu’s model, are the individual “players of the game” themselves, who construct power paradigms through their actions, as well as internalizing received distinctions. Chaucer is one such player, and the *Canterbury Tales* participates in the construction of a linguistic hierarchy. For all of the “variety” that has been recognized as the hallmark of Chaucerian style virtually from the beginning, the dialect of the work—of the authorial voice of the pilgrimage frame, of all of the pilgrims, of all of the characters within the various tales—is of a piece. The speech of the merchant of Seynt-Denys in the *Shipman’s Tale* is seasoned with

fragments of French (“*Quy la?*” [VII.214]) for local color, and the Miller, in his Prologue and his Tale, employs in many ways registers distinct from those of the Knight or the Parson, but all of them use the same English, Chaucer’s own Southern dialect. So do all the characters in the *Summoner’s Tale*, though it is set in Yorkshire. The single exception, the variant dialect of John and Aleyn in the *Reeve’s Tale*, proves the rule.^{xxxii}

For while the conflict between the miller’s speech and the clerks’ speech in the *Reeve’s Tale* leaves neither victorious, the greater drama plays out between the clerks’ speech and Chaucer’s. If the work as a whole were a collection of voices speaking in a variety of dialects, they could reasonably be recognized as having equal standing. But in fact Chaucer’s unique use of a variant dialect is subsumed into the dialect of the greater work. There may be little external to the work to grant that dialect superior status, but the *Canterbury Tales* itself works to make it the standard, and therefore to cast variants as exceptional. The work itself, furthermore, as a compendium of fictional and poetic styles, genres, and modes, helps to establish the Chaucerian dialect’s standing as a literary language. The one-time appearance of a variant dialect in the *Canterbury Tales* does not elevate Northern dialect to the status of a literary language. On the contrary, it serves to demonstrate that only the London dialect is the proper form for artistic expression, all other dialects becoming variations from the norm.

Crucially, the Chaucerian dialect functions as a dominant competency in that it is not universally accessible.^{xxxiii} The characters in the *Reeve’s Tale* speak their different dialects to each other without any suggestion of status, or any problems of comprehension, which is fortunate, since each can presumably speak only in his or her own dialect; John and Aleyn must be able to speak Latin, but in English than can speak

only their native tongue. Chaucer, on the other hand, has access to all of these competencies. Bourdieu stresses that there is no profit to speaking an unauthorized language unless the audience is aware that the speaker is not doing so out of *necessity*.^{xxxiv} Just as the mayor of Pau in speaking in Béarnais gains a symbolic profit that is not available to most of his Béarnais-speaking audience, Chaucer profits from his use of Northern dialect when John and Aleyn do not. Chaucer is master of his own language in all of its registers, including its most elevated forms of poetic style, and he can also perform the speech of others. There is an inherent symbolic profit in this performative capacity, to be able, like Shakespeare’s Prince Hal, “to drink with any tinker in his own language.”^{xxxv} But in Chaucer’s case it is elevated to the “strategy of condescension” when he gains further profit in the very act of denying the existence of the linguistic privileges even as he benefits from them. Even as the *Reeve’s Tale* negates any presumed hierarchies among the dialects it represents, the *Canterbury Tales* demonstrates that Chaucer’s literary language is capacious enough to include all other forms of the language, which now must be perceived as variant and non-normative.

It is clear enough that Chaucer’s modern readers understand the dialect differences in the tale to conform to Bourdieu’s concept of relative competence within the authorized language. The evidence is in the critical responses to the *Reeve’s Tale*. Robert Worth Frank, Jr., in one of the best-known essays on the tale, comments that “Simkin speaks English competent enough to play with sophisticated argument; it is the clerks who speak a tongue uncouth and not quite acceptable.”^{xxxvi} Simon Horobin, in the latest and most sophisticated philological analysis of the tale, writes, “Chaucer’s representation of dialect was no doubt further constrained by the nature of his Southern,

courtly audience, who would perhaps have had difficulties comprehending the more extreme provincialisms of Northern speech.”^{xxxvii} This is surely true—but it further demonstrates that one of the effects of dialect writing in the *Reeve’s Tale* is to mark the clerks’ dialect as “extremely provincial,” and thereby to grant Chaucer’s speech cultural centrality.

Ultimately, it is, I think, quite accurate to call Chaucer a “philologist” in the *Reeve’s Tale*, but not in the purely laudatory sense that Tolkien bestows the epithet. We should not speak of Chaucer’s “philology,” that is, without addressing his “philologism.” The idea and the term “philologism” can be traced to the early-twentieth-century writings of V. N. Vološinov. To Vološinov, “philologism,” which is the linguistic impulse itself, is an “abstract objectivism” that constructs object of linguistic study as dead, static, and alien.^{xxxviii} Inherent in Vološinov’s analysis is a critique of the unconscious biases fostered by the training and expertise of the social scientist.^{xxxix} Similar concepts inform Michelle Warren’s recent coinage of the term “post-philology,” which she formulates as an analogue of “postmodernism” and “postcolonialism,” and as a reaction, primarily, to the nationalist origins of modern philology. Post-philology would “address the complex relationships among political, linguistic, and literary histories.”^{xl} Philology is, of course, integral to the Orientalist project as Said defines it; the central chapters of *Orientalism* focus on the professionalization of Semitic linguistics and the scientific classification of Near Eastern languages.^{xli} The “philologism” of the *Reeve’s Tale* derives from the impartiality and objectivity of its observation of foreign speech, which grant Chaucer the authority to represent it, to improvise within it, and to incorporate it as a foreign variant within his own language—which in turn takes on the status of the dominant competence.

Vološinov claims to be describing a trans-historical phenomenon: “Philologism is the inevitable distinguishing mark of the whole of European linguistics as determined by the historical vicissitudes of its birth and development. However far back we may go in tracing the history of linguistic categories and methods, we find philologists everywhere. Not just the Alexandrians, but the ancient Romans were philologists, as were the Greeks... Also, the ancient Hindus were philologists.”^{xlii} Vološinov does not mention, and might not recognize, medieval philologists, but surely they existed and belong in the list. When Tolkien, therefore, remarks Chaucer’s resemblance to a philologist, he is accurately detecting Chaucer’s “philologism.” Chaucer’s representation of multiple linguistic competencies, despite its apparent impartiality and empirical accuracy, nonetheless—perhaps unintentionally—grants Chaucer a privileged subject position and in fact inscribes the hierarchies of linguistic distinction that it seems to deny.

3. Northernisms and Northernism

It is important to remember that the “strategy of condescension” does not depend for its effect on the conscious intention of the agent. It grows out of one’s habituated “sense of the game,” which leads one to seek social advantages that one may not consciously aspire to—that one may, in fact, think one is resisting or denying. Similarly, “philologism” refers to the symbolic profit the linguist accrues in the process of exercising what he imagines to be his objective and impartial expertise. In his most philological moments, therefore, Chaucer’s literary practice is informed by and contributes to subtle but widespread and deeply ingrained linguistic assumptions and

performances. He neither invents this mode of Middle English philological representation nor practices it alone.

While rejecting the stratification of Middle English dialects by relative social status, at least before the second half of the fifteenth century, scholars recognize numerous instances of dialect *awareness*, when speakers or writers betray a consciousness of distinctions between different types of English.^{xliii} The best known is William Caxton’s prologue to the *Eneydos*, in which he illustrates the challenge of writing and compiling vernacular books for a contemporary English audience with an anecdote of a merchant trying to buy eggs:

For we englysshe men / ben borne vnder the domynacyon of the mone.
 whiche is neuer stedfaste / but euer wauerynge / wexyng one season / and
 waneth □ dyscreaseth another season / And that comyn englysshe that is
 spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes
 happened that certayn marchauntes were in a shippe in tamyse for to haue
 sayled ouer the see into þeland / and for lacke of wynde thei taryed ate
 forlond. and wente to lande for to refreshe them And one of theym named
 sheffelde a mercer cam in to an hows and axed for mete. and specyally he
 axyd after eggys And the good wyf answerde. that she coude speke no
 frenshe. And the marchaunt was angry. for he also coude speke no
 frenshe. but wold haue hadde egges / and she vnderstode hym not / And
 thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde haue eyren / then the good wyf
 sayd that she vnderstod hym wel / Loo what sholde a man in thyse dayes

now wryte. egges or eyren / certaynly it is harde to playse euery man / by
cause of dyuersite □ chaunge of langage.^{xliv}

Caxton means this story to demonstrate the irreducible multiplicity of contemporary English. It is clear, also, that he takes all of the forms of the language to be of equal standing; the lack of a formal standard, in fact, is the root of his complaint: “what sholde a man in thysse dayes now wryte?” And it hardly seems likely that even Caxton intended this winning anecdote to be taken as historical fact, given its lack of detail, its vague invocation of circumstance (“in my dayes happened that certayn marchauntes...”), and its perfect punchline, in which the wife accuses the merchant of speaking French, the English speaker’s omnipresent embodiment of linguistic otherness. There is also the fact that of innumerable variations among the different Middle English dialects, this story hinges on a simple lexical difference: “egges,” a form common in the north, as opposed to “eyren,” more common in the south. As soon as another merchant substitutes the southern form, the linguistic confusion disappears and the wife “vnderstod hym wel.” It is telling, therefore, that the anecdote provides only two specific details: the Thameside setting, locating the wife’s speech, and the merchant’s surname: “sheffelde.” He is, apparently, a Yorkshireman. Caxton evokes this anecdote in order to illustrate the multiplicity of contemporary dialects, but it actually dramatizes a dichotomy, and this dichotomy is imagined as an opposition of the North and the South.

A similar tendency can be found in many of the instances of dialect awareness in Middle English. The most notorious example is in Trevisa’s translation of Higden’s *Polychronicon*:

...men of þe est wiþ men of the west, as hyt were vnder þe same party of heuene, acordeþ more in sounynge of speche þan men of þe norþ wiþ men of þe souþ. þerfore hyt ys þat Mercii, þat buþ men of myddel Engelond, as hyt were parteners of þe endes, vnderstondeþ betre þe syde longages, norþeron and souþeron, þan norþeron and souþeron vnderstondeþ eyþer oþer...

Al þe longage of þe norþhumbres, and specialych at 3ork, ys so scharp slytting and frotyng and vnschape þat we souþeron men may þat longage vnneþe vnderstonde. Y trowe þat þat ys bycause þat a buþ ny3 to straunge men and aliens þat spekeþ straungelych and also bycause þat þe kynges of engelond woneþ alwey fer fram þat contray...^{xlv}

As Ronald Waldron explains, the first of these two paragraphs is Higden’s interpolation, while the latter follows quite closely his source in William of Malmesbury, and Trevisa’s translates both faithfully. Waldron suggests, therefore, that while William clearly thinks of himself as southern, Higden, a Cheshire native, imagines himself a man of “myddel Engelond,” and Trevisa’s sympathies are unclear.^{xlvi} Still, William’s perspective is duly transmitted from the twelfth century to the fifteenth and from Latin into English, and with it his “philologism”: linguistic observation, with its pretenses of objectivity and expertise (explaining phonological difference by proximity to foreign speakers) leads to chauvinistic dismissal of the tongue more foreign to the observer and more remote from the seat of cultural power and authority—here, the English kings. The result is that, though the speakers at the two linguistic poles are presumably mutually unintelligible, it

is the northern speech that is characterized as “so scharp and slyttyng and frotyng and vnschape.”

In reality, Middle English speech was multifarious, and English people were aware of local variation. They were not, however, always as ready as Higden was to conceive of themselves as occupying individual points in a linguistic continuum. Richard Beadle has shown, for instance, that “the East Anglian counties, and more particularly Norfolk, were perceived to be linguistically, and... somewhat culturally distinct from early times.”^{xlvii} Among Beadle’s evidence are examples of scribal translation of source texts into their own dialect. In one instance, Thomas Bareyle, a Norfolk scribe, adds this colophon to a copy of Richard Rolle’s *Form of Living*: “Here endith the informacion of Richard the Ermyte þat he wrote to an Ankyr, translate oute of Northowrn tunge into Sutherne that it schulde the betir be understondyn of men that be of the Selbe countre.”^{xlviii} East Anglia, the region of which Norfolk forms the northern portion, is in relation to the greater geography of England neither northern nor southern but, precisely, eastern. Norwich is as remote from London as it is from Hampole. If, as Beadle persuasively demonstrates, spoken and written Norfolk English was manifestly distinct from other dialects throughout the Middle English period, then why would Bareyle characterize his Norfolk translation of Rolle’s Yorkshire text as “translate oute of Northowrn tunge into Sutherne”?

It seems that many Middle English speakers habitually conceived their language differences along a North-South axis, turning observed pluralities into generalized dualities. Inevitably, these dualities cast one element as normative and dominant and the other as variant and subordinate. Indeed, the inherent hierarchy of the binary can be seen

as the motivation for its construction rather than an incidental result. As much as writers from Malmesbury to Caxton emphasize the incomprehensibility of Northern speech to Southern ears, it may be that North-South differences are emphasized less because they inhibit communication than because the northernmost forms are *sufficiently* different to *justify* a dichotomy. This may explain why the John and Aleyn’s speech is the only sustained use of dialect-writing in the *Canterbury Tales*. I say sustained because there is at least one other example, in the speech of the Reeve himself, as in the first line that he speaks in his prologue: “So theek... ful wel koude I thee quite” (I.3864). “Theek”—“may I thrive”—is an East Midlands form, appropriate to the Reeve, who, we are told in the General Prologue, is from Baldeswelle in Norfolk. Oswald is a linguistic kinsman of Thomas Bareyle. However, as Douglas Gray notes, Chaucer “does not consistently represent the speech of the Reeve in his own person; only a few indications of pronunciation (e.g., *lemes*, *abegge*) suggest East Anglia.”^{xlix} Why is Chaucer’s depiction of Oswald’s Norfolk dialect so much less thorough than his representation of the “Northern” dialect of John and Aleyn? And why does he attempt this kind of linguistic characterization nowhere else?¹ Whatever the reasons, Chaucer’s handling of the Reeve’s and the clerks’ dialects in the *Reeve’s Prologue and Tale* is revealing. Of the two variant dialects, the more northerly one is the one that is at greater variance with the standard dialect of the work as a whole. This one is more recognizable to readers and, apparently, easier for the author to imitate consistently. Chaucer’s abbreviated attempt to depict Oswald’s dialect therefore points to the significance of the clerks’ speech: unlike Norfolk speech or any other contemporary dialect, it is different enough from Chaucer’s own speech to be sustainably mimicable. The differentness of their speech must therefore

stand for all linguistic difference within Middle English. The tale does not merely dramatize objectively real linguistic differences. It uses the most extreme linguistic variations available in order to maintain distinctions. It is telling, therefore, that Chaucer locates John and Aleyn’s home in the unidentifiable town of “Strother,” telling us only that is “Fer in the north; I kan nat telle where” (I.4015). He tells us nothing more because nothing else matters. The clerks, and their speech, are simply “Northern,” and in being Northern they are remote, foreign, unknown, and vague. A master of language like Chaucer, however—a “*grand translateur*,” as Deschamps famously dubbed him—can control the foreign tongue and present it in a tamed and generalized form for the delectation and edification of the Southern reader. Chaucer’s interest in Northern dialect, particularly in its seeming accuracy and objectivity, constitutes a kind of “Northernism,” and Chaucer’s role resembles Said’s description of the Orientalist:

The Orientalist can imitate the Orient without the opposite being true.

What he says about the Orient is therefore to be understood as description obtained in a one-way exchange: as *they* spoke and behaved, *he* observed and wrote down. His power was to have existed among them as a native speaker, as it were, and also as a secret writer. And what he wrote was intended as useful knowledge, not for them, but for Europe and its various disseminative institutions.^{li}

Philology is, in this conception, instrumental to Orientalism; it serves to help the West to dominate the East by defining it. But “philologism” can be said always to possess these qualities. The pretenses of social-scientific objectivity inherent in philology construct the linguistic object of study as a mute, static, and inert other, and correlatively establish a

privileged subject position for the speaker. What Said attributes to the Orientalist, therefore, also applies to Chaucer. He can imitate his Northern clerks, though they would not be able to imitate him. His record of their speech seems accurate and therefore based on personal observation, implying a familiarity with his subjects, but it is a unidirectional familiarity that amounts to a position of power. And the power resides ultimately in the fact that, whatever the familiarity between the representatives of different linguistic competencies, only one of them will carry away from the encounter the opportunity to represent the other. This representation is objective, accurate, for the purpose of “useful knowledge”—but the knowledge is useful to groups already in socially superior positions, whose authority is further legitimated by its access to philological knowledge.

Debates over the “accuracy” of Chaucer’s depiction of John and Aleyn’s dialect obscure the fact that this supposed dialect was never spoken by anyone anywhere. It is, rather, a generalized representation of an imagined dialect. This “dialect” was not spoken by any actual individuals in any real place at any specific time.^{lii} Nor was the precise representation of actual speech Chaucer’s intention, as he declares when he states that Strother is “Fer in the north, I kan nat telle where.” He does not know where Strother is, and he does not care, except in so far as it is “Northern.” He is not trying to delineate a specific local dialect; rather, he is using differences to make generalizations. Such generalizations are most readily constructed as North-South binaries. The greatest philological power, however, derives from the pretense that these generalizations are neutral, making both writer and reader complicit in the power of social-scientific authority and expertise to make generalizations and to benefit from them.

To some extent this “Northernism” is perpetuated when modern philology asserts that the dialect introduced into the *Reeve’s Tale* is characterized by “Northernisms.” To call a linguistic feature a “Northernism” is itself a regionalist generalization. It takes particular linguistic features as givens of a geographical area when in fact defining a dialect always entails combining a set of generalizations that in effect generate a region. It is itself a philologic reification of a social construct. This is the essence of “philologism.” As Vološinov says, “The *isolated, finished, monologic utterance*, divorced from its verbal and actual context and standing open not to any possible sort of active response but to passive understanding on the part of the philologist—that is the ultimate ‘donnée’ and the starting point of linguistic thought.”^{liii}

Chaucer is generating a regional identity through an accretion of linguistic generalizations. In fact, he is creating two regional identities, constructing “Southernness” through its contrast with “Northernness.” It is not only in the *Reeve’s Tale* that Chaucer engages in this kind of regionalist generalization. In his prologue, the Parson protests to the Host, “But trusteth wel, I am a Southren man;/ I kan nat geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf,’ by lettre” (X.43-44). The Parson apparently has not read Ralph Hanna’s pugnacious essay in the *Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, disproving that alliterative poetry was an exclusively regional phenomenon, providing evidence instead of the production of alliterative verse throughout England, including in London. Hanna concludes, “Alliterative poetry, although it had a vital circulation in Chaucerian surroundings, does remain Chaucer’s Other. But this Otherness essentially occupies a space of consciousness, not of geography.”^{liv} The *Canterbury Tales* contributes to the creation of a geography of consciousness, a map of regionalist generalizations overlaid

on the physical landscape of late-medieval England. Chaucer participates in the construction of “Northernness” as a state of physical, linguistic, economic, social, political and geographical otherness within the English language and the English nation.^{lv}

4. The Wakefield Master as a Philologist

It is in a “Northern” text, however, that we encounter the first instance of English dialect writing that indisputably dramatizes gradations of social status. “We have to wait until the Wakefield Second Shepherds’ Play, usually dated to the first half of the fifteenth century,” writes Jeremy Smith, “before there is fairly clear indication that southern speech has a higher social status than that of the north.”^{lvi}

In delineating that status hierarchy, the Wakefield play proudly asserts the positive value of déclassé Northernness. The play performs a linguistic burlesque intended to affirm community by defining outsiders, and it therefore employs strategies of mimicry that generally imply a degree of social superiority and control. But the Second Shepherds’ Play also reveals that its author or authors, as well as its assumed audience, share with Southern authors assumptions about the relationship between Northern and Southern speech. It thus unintentionally perpetuates status distinctions that it claims to critique and reject.

After they have made their initial complaints against lords, wives, and the weather, the shepherds of the Wakefield play are joined by the nefarious Mak. In a vain attempt to hide his identity as a sheep-stealer, Mak pretends to be a southern gentleman by adopting a southern dialect:

What! ich be a yoman,

I tell you, of the king,
 The self and the some,
 Sond from a greatt lording,
 And sich. [291-95]^{lvii}

Mak’s southern speech is not merely a regional disguise; he is trying to avail himself of the symbolic capital that accrues to the London dialect. It is above all a class marker, connoting links to the landholding class, the aristocracy, the higher clergy, and even the monarchy.^{lviii} Mak therefore demands from the shepherds the respect due to his station, and his speech becomes self-consciously elevated:

Fy on you! Goyth hence
 Out of my presence!
 I must haue reverence.
 Why, who be ich? [204-7]

It is tempting—indeed, it is the intended effect of this vignette—to see Mak’s assumed accent as marking him as a corrupt outsider for varying from the “natural” speech of the shepherds and presumably of the audience.^{lix} We would then take the south Yorkshire dialect of the manuscript as a whole as a “natural” marker of the play’s community. In doing so, however, we may overlook the fact that the pageant stages this linguistic opposition in order to create an idea of communal identity. Bourdieu shows that the idea of a region is formed in the same way as the idea of a nation, and that all dialects, including regional forms as opposed to authorized national languages, are boundary-defining performances. “Nobody would want to claim today that there exist criteria capable of founding ‘natural’ classifications on ‘natural’ regions, separated by ‘natural’ frontiers,” Bourdieu says. “Regionalist discourse is a *performative discourse* which aims to impose as legitimate a new definition of the frontiers and to get people to know and recognize the *region* that is thus delimited in opposition to the dominant

definition, and which is misrecognized as such and thus recognized as legitimate, and which does not acknowledge that new region.”^{lx}

Of course, the most obvious feature of Mak’s imitation of southern speech is its inconsistency. Like a Hollywood star affecting a Southern accent, Mak gets it right only about half the time; he keeps forgetting to say “Ich” for “I,” for instance. But this partial competence, apart from being comical, is sociolinguistically appropriate. Bourdieu notes that “the social mechanisms of cultural transmission tend to reproduce the structural disparity between the very unequal *knowledge* of the legitimate language and the much more uniform *recognition* of this language.”^{lxi} The social effects of dialects in a stratified linguistic system require all the parties to recognize the social distinction, the symbolic capital, represented by speech patterns that can be successfully employed by only an elite few. Therefore, when Mak says with mock indignation, “Why, who be ich?” the shepherds have a ready reply. They know who Mak is, and they also know who he is pretending to be. They all recognize the elevated vocabulary and the assumptions of class privilege in Mak’s southern speech as easily as they spot its variant pronouns and declensions. Far from being cowed, however, they immediately reject Mak’s speech as foreign, pretentious, and self-righteous:

1 Pastor. Why make ye it so qwaynt?
 Mak, ye do wrang.

2 Pastor. Bot, Mak, lyst ye saynt?
 I trow that ye lang.

3 Pastor. I trow the shrew can paynt,
 The dewyll myght hym hang!

Mak. Ich shall make complaynt,
 And make you all to thwang

At a worde,

And tell euyne how ye doth.

I Pastor. Bot, Mak, is that sothe?

Now take outt that Sothren tothe,

And sett in a torde! (300-12)

No, the shepherds are not fooled and are justifiably mistrustful of Mak. They reject Mak’s speech and indignantly reassert their own discourse. In keeping with the egalitarian tone of the play, and of the manuscript as a whole, the shepherds proudly assert the self-worth of the local speakers. Here we see the Wakefield Master as a sociolinguist, showing forth objectively recognized differences of regional dialects and dramatizing their social operation in claiming status and privilege.

At the same time, however, the shepherds’ response to Mak’s pretensions reveals something further. With its vulgarity and its threat of violence, it exemplifies what Bourdieu characterizes as the typical regionalist, lower-class, and particularly masculine response to speech perceived as elevated. Bourdieu notes that “in the case of the lower classes, articulatory style is quite clearly part of a relation to the body that is dominated by the refusal of ‘airs and graces’ (i.e., the refusal of stylization and the imposition of form) and by the valorization of virility—one aspect of a more general disposition to appreciate what is ‘natural’.”^{lxii} Not only do the shepherds reject Mak’s speech, but also they use their own language to assert as positive values those qualities—rusticity, lack of education and sophistication, physical labor—that signify their lack of material and symbolic capital.^{lxiii} Nowhere is this clearer than when the first shepherd puts an end to Mak’s masquerade by ordering him to “take outt that Sothren tothe, / And sett in a torde!” The shepherd’s vulgarism seems innocuous enough, but we should remember that for Bourdieu speech is a key element of the *habitus*, the nexus of instituted and learned social tendencies that shape not only behavior but the body itself; “articulatory

style,” therefore, is part of “*an overall way of using the mouth.*” Bourdieu relates this to the dual conceptions of the mouth in French as *la bouche* (“more closed, pinched, i.e. tense and censored, and therefore feminine”) and *la gueule* (“unashamedly wide open... i.e. relaxed and free, and therefore masculine”).^{lxiv} *La gueule*, Bourdieu says,

designates a capacity for verbal violence, identified with the sheer strength of the voice...It also designates a capacity for the physical violence to which it alludes, especially in insults (*casser la gueule, mon pong sur la gueule, ferme ta gueule*—‘smash your face in,’ ‘a punch in the mouth,’ ‘shut your face’) which, through the *gueule*, regarded as both the ‘seat’ of personal identity...and as its main means of expression...aims at the very essence of the interlocutor’s social identity and self-image.^{lxv}

The first shepherd’s impulsive reaction to Mak’s assumed dialect, the urge to take out the Southern “tothe” and put in a turd, is a Middle English example of the same phenomenon: the threat of physical violence directed towards the mouth that embodies the greater status of authorized speech. It is through the rejection of speech that carries the greatest cultural authority and status that individuals of lower status most comprehensively signal their acceptance of a language system’s inherent hierarchies. The first shepherd’s reply to Mak, the threat of responding to elevated talk by replacing the tooth with excrement, exemplifies what Bourdieu elsewhere calls an “opposition of distinction”:

censorship turned into second nature, and the *outspokenness* which flouts the taboos of ordinary language—the rules of grammar and politeness—and hierarchical barriers... and which is defined by “the relaxation of articulatory tension”... and of all the censorships which propriety imposes, and particularly on the tabooed parts of the body, the belly, the arse, and

the genitals and, perhaps above all, on the relation to the social world which the tabooed parts make it possible to express, through the reversal of hierarchies... or the demeaning of what is exalted (grub, guts, shit).^{lxvi}

In this brief episode the Wakefield pageant introduces an imitation of another speech into its own South Yorkshire dialect and allows their idioms to play off one another. The one is presented as elevated, artificial, foreign, fey, and connected to wealth and power, the other as native, honest, bluff, colloquial, virile, and rooted in the work and world of common men. The effect of this interplay is important for this very communal mode of theater. It serves to define the community of the drama in terms of region and class. It is a community of northern, rural, common layfolk, and it is defined by a common dialect. This speech unifies not only the characters in the play but also the audience with them. Mak, by trying to talk like a Southern gentleman, helps to initiate a discourse of South Yorkshire regionalism. Yet in Bourdieu’s conception of the sociological function of unauthorized dialects, there is an underlying irony to the defiant tone of the episode. In rejecting Mak’s “Sothren tothe,” the shepherds, and the drama they inhabit, are actually affirming their recognition and even acceptance of the relationship between Northern and Southern dialects and the gradations of status that they symbolize. The “Second Shepherds’ Play” does not perform the authorization of the audience’s language, but rather it valorizes their linguistic marginalization.

It is conceivable that a work like the Wakefield pageant could perform the opposite function, and serve to establish Yorkshire dialect as an authorized language with claims to equal status as the London dialect. Doing so, however, would require more than just asserting the value of provincial speech. As Bourdieu says of the mayor of Pau, “If Béarnais (or, elsewhere, Creole) is one day spoken on formal occasions, this will be by virtue of its takeover by speakers of the dominant language, who have enough claims to linguistic legitimacy (at least in the eyes of their interlocutors) to avoid being suspected of resorting to the stigmatized language *faute de mieux*.”^{lxvii} To truly challenge

the dominant status of the competing dialect, the Wakefield dramatists would have to use social mechanisms that grant authority and status to define their tongue as dominant rather than as provincial.

What would such a valorization look like? It might take the form of the most time-honored strategy, the attempt to demonstrate the flexibility, gravitas, and cultural centrality of a language by showing that it can bear the weight of nationalist epic. It might, then, look something like this:

Our antecessowris that we suld of reide
 And hald in mynde thar nobille worthi deid,
 We lat ourslide throw verray sleuthfulness,
 And castis us evir till uthir besynes.
 Till honour ennemyis is our haile entent:
 It has beyne seyne in thir tymys bywent.
 Our ald ennemys cummyn of Saxonys blud,
 That nevyr yeit to Scotland wald do gud
 Bot evir on fors and contrar haile thar will,
 Quhow gret kyndnes that has beyne kyth thaim till.^{lxviii}

These are the opening lines of the *Wallace*. Hary writes “hald” for *hold*, “haile” for *whole*, “ald” for *old*. He uses “I” as the first-person pronoun and forms the third-person present indicative with “-es”. When John and Aleyn use such forms, they are labeled “Northernisms.” When a Wakefield shepherd say “I,” he recognizes it as the personal pronoun of a provincial rustic. Scotland is even more northerly than Strother (wherever that might be), but Hary claims to speak for a nation, not a region, and makes no apologies for his dialect as he seeks to distinguish his race from the “ald ennemys... of Saxonys blud.”

The status of native language and literature in late-medieval Scotland is an extremely complex topic and not one I hope to explicate here. Gavin Douglas, in the

prologue to his translation of the *Aeneid*, seems to echo Trevisa when he complains of writing “With bad harsk spech and lewit barbour tong.”^{lxix} But Douglas seems intent on redeeming his language through the *translatio imperii* implicit in his classical translation, which, he says, is “Written in the langage of Scottis natioun.”^{lxx} Just as complex as Scottish linguistic insecurities is the literary and cultural relationship of Scotland and England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. But a writer like Douglas seems at least implicitly aware that the status of a variant dialect can be lifted only by making it standard rather than variant.^{lxxi} The Wakefield shepherds do not even imagine this as a goal for their Northern tooth.

In medieval England, Chaucer and his predecessors as well as his successors, North and South, were engaged, consciously or not, in a process of dialectical and regional stratification, creating “Southernness” and “Northernness,” linguistically, geographically, and socially. The *Second Shepherds’ Play*, which appears to be the initial instance of the use of dialect with social consciousness, is in fact a reaction to a tradition by then already longstanding and becoming ever more entrenched— and even that reaction, in seeking to speak for those dispossessed by the privileges of the dominant competence, ends up reinscribing its assumptions.

ⁱ J.R.R. Tolkien, “Chaucer as a Philologist: *The Reeve’s Tale*,” *Transactions of the Philological Society* (1934): 1-70 (1).

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 3.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 4.

^{iv} On the process of linguistic standardization, see Einar Haugen, *The Ecology of Language*, ed. Anwar S. Dil (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972); James Milroy and Lesley Milroy, *Authority in Language: Investigating Language Prescription and Standardisation* (London: Routledge, 1985).

^v See Arthur O. Sandved, “Prolegomena to a Renewed Study of the Rise of Standard English,” in *So meny people longages and tonges: Philological Essays in Scots and Mediaeval English presented to Angus McIntosh*, ed. by Michael Benskin and M. L. Samuels (Edinburgh: M. Benskin & M. L. Samuels, 1981), pp. 31-42, 383-384; M. L. Samuels, “Spelling and Dialect in the Late and Post-Middle English Periods,” in Benskin and Samuels, *So meny people longages and tonges*, pp. 43-54, 384-385; J. D. Burnley, “Sources of Standardisation in Later Middle English,” in *Standardizing English: Essays in the History of Language Change*, ed. by Joseph B. Trahern, Jr. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Simon Horobin, *The Language of the Chaucer Tradition* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2003), pp. 13-15.

^{vi} Tim William Machan, *English in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 97.

^{vii} Tolkien, “Chaucer as a Philologist,” 2, 3.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, 58.

^{ix} See N.F. Blake, *Non-standard Language in English Literature* (London: André Deutsch, 1981), 33: “All we can say definitively is that Chaucer gives a portrayal of northern language which is so generalized that it cannot be localized with accuracy, though it may be located north of the Ribble-Humber line. At the same time it is clear that many scribes knew more about the northern dialects than Chaucer included in the speech of the undergraduates and so modified their speech accordingly.”

^x N.F. Blake, *The English Language in Medieval Literature* (London: Methuen, 1979), 46. Blake does, however, concede that, on the evidence of Hidgen’s *Polychronicon* and Trevisa’s translation, by the late fourteenth century, “Dialect prejudice was beginning to emerge and language was now available as a marker of social class and of humour” (*Non-standard Language*, 27).

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 45.

^{xii} Tim William Machan, *English in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 95.

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 100-101.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, 104.

^{xv} Jeremy J. Smith, “John Gower and London English,” in *A Companion to Gower*, ed. Sian Echard (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 61-72 (66). On the standardization of English, see also by Jeremy Smith, “The Use of English: Language Contact, Dialect Variation, and Written Standardisation During the Middle English Period,” in *English in Its Social Context: Essays in Historical Sociolinguistics*, ed. by Tim William Machan and Charles T. Scott (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 47-68, and “Standard Language in Early Middle English?” in *Placing Middle English in Context*, ed. by Terttu

Nevalainen, et al. (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 2000), 125-139; as well as John Hurt Fisher, “Chancery and the Emergence of Standard Written English in the Fifteenth Century,” *Speculum* 52 (1977): 870-99; Arthur O. Sandved, “Prolegomena to a Renewed Study of the Rise of Standard English,” in *So meny people longages and tonges: Philological Essays in Scots and Mediaeval English Presented to Angus McIntosh*, ed. by Michael Benskin, and M. L. Samuels (Edinburgh: Benskin & Samuels, 1981), 31-42, 383-384; Simon Horobin, *The Language of the Chaucer Tradition* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2003); J.D. Burnley, “Sources of Standardisation in Later Middle English,” in *Standardizing English: Essays in the History of Language Change in Honor of John Hurt Fisher*, ed. by Joseph B. Trahern, Jr. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 23-41.

^{xvi} Citations of the *Canterbury Tales* refer to Larry D. Benson, ed., *The Riverside Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

^{xvii} See J. A. Burrow and Thorlac Turville-Petre, *A Book of Middle English*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), p. 6.

^{xviii} See David Burnley, “Lexis and Semantics,” *The Cambridge History of the English Language, Volume II, 1066-1476*, ed. by Norman Blake (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 411.

^{xix} Thus, in one of the best-known articles on the tale, Robert Worth Frank, Jr., asserts, “Part of the fun is the fact that the characters and their actions are, as Professor Higgins said of Eliza Doolittle, ‘so deliciously low.’” (“The *Reeve’s Tale* and the Comedy of Limitation,” in *Directions in Literary Criticism: Contemporary Approaches to Literature*, ed. by Stanley Weintraub and Philip Young (University Park: Pennsylvania State

University Press, 1973), pp. 53-69 (57).) Frank’s citation of the greatest linguist in English dramatic history is revealing of his philological perspective. If he and Chaucer, and us as readers, are likened to Professor Higgins, then John and Aleyn are Elizas: “The use of dialect is a brilliant device.... Its primary effect is to label them as ‘outlanders,’ if not precisely ‘low,’ certainly comic to Chaucer’s London audience and disarmingly ‘sely’ to Simkin and possibly ‘low’ in his eyes as well” (58).

^{xx} See Blake, *Non-standard Language*, pp. 28-29.

^{xxi} Frank, “The *Reeve’s Tale* and the Comedy of Limitation,” p. 63.

^{xxii} C. David Benson, *Chaucer’s Drama of Style: Poetic Variety and Contrast in the Canterbury Tales* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), p. 99.

^{xxiii} Christopher Cannon, *The Making of Chaucer’s English: A Study of Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 127.

^{xxiv} Machan, *English in the Middle Ages*, pp. 121-30 (122, 124).

^{xxv} *Ibid.*, p. 137.

^{xxvi} Cannon, *The Making of Chaucer’s English*, p. 150.

^{xxvii} Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. by John B. Thompson, trans. by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), p. 55. All italics in quotations of Bourdieu are his.

^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, 56-57.

^{xxix} *Ibid.* 68.

^{xxx} *Ibid.* See also John Thompson’s “Editor’s Introduction,” pp. 18-19.

^{xxxi} Bourdieu, “Language and Symbolic Power,” 68.

^{xxxii} The other possible exception is Oswald the Reeve himself, who seems to speak partially in Norfolk dialect, about which more below.

^{xxxiii} Given Bourdieu’s insistence that all the members of a language group must recognize the symbolic value of competencies that gain profit for a minority, it is important to address whether Chaucer’s uses of divergent dialect were recognizable to his contemporaries. Tolkien calls Chaucer’s dialect writing a “philological joke” that was lost on his fifteenth-century scribes, and it is commonly observed that the Paris manuscript, copied in the North Midlands *circa* 1430, gives the work as a whole Northern linguistic features, thereby erasing the distinction between the speech of the clerks and that of the miller. But Simon Horobin has recently demonstrated that most of the 15th c. manuscripts do in fact retain the Northern quality of the clerks’ speech as distinct from the dialect of the miller and of Chaucer. See “J.R.R. Tolkien as a Philologist: A Reconsideration of the Northernisms in Chaucer’s *Reeve’s Tale*,” *English Studies* (2001): 97-105.

^{xxxiv} Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power* 69.

^{xxxv} William Shakespeare, *Henry IV, Part I*, II.iv.18-19. *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. by G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

^{xxxvi} Frank, “The *Reeve’s Tale* and the Comedy of Limitation,” 62.

^{xxxvii} “Tolkien as a Philologist,” 104.

^{xxxviii} V. N. Vološinov, “Language, Speech, and Utterance,” *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, translated by Ladislav Matejka and I. R. Titunik (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), pp. 65-82 (67, 73). Vološinov may or may not have been a

pseudonym of Mikhail Bakhtin; see Matejka and Titunik, “Translators’ Preface, 1986,” pp. vii-xii.

^{xxxix} See Pierre Bourdieu, “The Economics of Linguistic Exchange,” *Social Science Information* 16 (1977): 645-668 (663 n.1).

^{xl} Michelle R. Warren, “Post-Philology,” in *Postcolonial Moves: Medieval through Modern*, ed. by Patricia Clare Ingham and Michelle R. Warren (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 19-45 (31).

^{xli} Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979). See particularly pp. 123-166.

^{xlii} Vološinov 71.

^{xliii} See Machan, *English in the Middle Ages*, pp. 86-96.

^{xliv} *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, ed. by W.J.B. Crotch, EETS O.S. 176 (London: Oxford University Press, 1956 (1928)), p. 108.

^{xlv} *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis together with the English Translations of John Trevisa and an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. by Churchill Babington and J. R. Lumby, RS 41, 9 vols. (London: Longman, 1865-1886), vol. 2, p. 163.

^{xlvi} Ronald Waldron, “Dialect Aspects of Manuscripts of Trevisa’s Translation of the *Polychronicon*,” *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts*, ed. by Felicity Riddy (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), pp. 67-87 (68-69). See also Machan, *English in the Middle Ages*, pp. 95-96.

^{xlvii} Richard Beadle, “Prolegomena to a Literary Geography of Later Medieval Norfolk,” in Riddy, ed., *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts and Texts*, pp. 89-108 (92).

^{xlviii} Hope Emily Allen, ed., *English Writings of Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1931; reprint Gloucester: Alan Sutton, 1988), p. 84.

See also Beadle, “Prolegomena,” 93; Machan, *English in the Middle Ages*, 87.

^{xlix} From the explanatory notes to the *Reeve’s Tale* in the *Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 848-849.

See also Norman Davis, Review of J.A.W. Bennett, *Chaucer at Oxford and Cambridge*, *Review of English Studies* 27 (1976): 336-337. Simon Horobin, however, finds greater evidence for Chaucer’s depiction of Norfolk dialect in the Reeve’s speech, conceding nonetheless that his “depiction of Northern speech was much more thorough.”

“Chaucer’s Norfolk Reeve,” *Neophilologus* 86 (2002): 609-612 (611). See also Juliette Dor, “Chaucer and Dialectology,” *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 20 (1987): 59-68.

^l One might wonder if Chaucer at some point intended that each of his pilgrims would speak in a geographically distinct manner. If so, then we perhaps he was unable to accomplish such a diversely polyvocal representation; perhaps he was not enough of a “philologist” to make the *Canterbury Tales* into a kind of *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*. But outside of the *Reeve’s Prologue and Tale*, there is no evidence for any such project.

^{li} *Orientalism*, p. 160.

^{lii} Machan (*English in the Middle Ages*, 117) relates this representation of speech to the kind of “colourless regional language” described by M. L. Samuels in “Spelling and Dialect in the Late and Post-Middle English Periods,” *So meny people longages and tonges*, pp. 43-54.

^{liii} Vološinov, *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, 73 (italics his).

^{liv} Ralph Hanna, “Alliterative Poetry,” *The Cambridge History of Medieval English Literature*, ed. by David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 488-512 (511). Machan denies that the Parson can be making a regionalist distinction in these lines, claiming that “the plentiful existence of alliterative poetry in fifteenth-century southern manuscripts argues strongly against just such putative chauvinism” (*English in the Middle Ages*, 95). But of course the point is that Chaucer makes such a claim when it is not empirically true. I believe that other poets may also use alliteration in verse as a marker of regional affiliation and social status. John Lydgate’s “Mumming at Hertford,” introduced by John Shirley as “a disguysing of þe rude vpplandisshe people compleynyng on hir wyves, with þe boystous aunswere of hir wyves” (*The Minor Poems of John Lydgate, Part II: Secular Poems*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, EETS, o.s. 192 [1934; reprint, London: Oxford University Press, 1961], p. 675), John Lydgate introduces a host of rude mechanicals, all abused husbands and domineering wives. These couples are depicted in language that is evocatively, and comically, alliterative, as in the presentation of Thom the Tinker’s wife:

Hir name was cleped Tybot Tapister.

To brawle and broyle she nad no maner fer,

To thakke his pilche, stoundemel nowe and þanne,

Thikker þane Thome koude clowten any panne. [121-24]

The clashing consonants of the alliteration are meant to evoke Tyb’s bruising abuse of Thom and to echo Thom’s beating of his tins, but in addition Lydgate almost seems to be mimicking the verse style associated – in the imagination of the southern elite, at least – with the rural north. Conversely, Lydgate shows that although he is a “southren man” like

Chaucer's Parson, he *can* “geeste ‘rum, ram, ruf’ by lettre.” In this context, the rustic couples are associated with language that is clearly, as Shirley says, “rude” and “upplandishe” – unlearned, rustic, provincial, common, and not ours. The language is also exceptionally rich in entertaining and extravagant colloquialisms. Norman Blake remarks, “The absence of regional dialect registers in medieval English literature is echoed by the absence of argot, slang, archaisms or class dialects as markers of character or indices of atmosphere in descriptions” (*The English Language in Medieval Literature*, 46). And Machan asserts, “Nothing in the record of Old or Middle English, moreover, implies the kind of correlation between regional variety and social stratification present in the geographic and linguistic implications of Latin *rusticus*, which from the republic period signifies both a rural dweller and someone who is course, awkward, clownish, or linguistically backward” (*English in the Middle Ages*, 94-95). I would suggest that Lydgate’s “Mumming at Hertford” does use slang as a class marker in a literary context, and that “upplandishe,” as used by Shirley, is a close corollary to *rusticus*.

^{lv} Wendy Scase has hypothesized that John and Aleyn’s use of dialect is a “theatrical,” a *performance* that “announces that they are not from the area, and therefore cannot yet know of Symkyn’s reputation for dishonesty.” “Tolkien, Philology, and the Reeve’s Tale: Towards the Cultural Move in Middle English Studies,” *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 24 (2002): 325-34 (333). It is an intriguing notion, though the clerks persist in their dialect even when Symkyn and his family are sound asleep and snoring loudly around them. But if it is true, then the clerks are also participating a regionalist linguistic hierarchy, in which Northernness is a performance of rusticity, provinciality, and naivety,

and Southernness, by contrast, is a normative national identity, which can be performed, as Chaucer does, for cultural profit.

^{lvi} Smith, “Gower and London English,” p. 66.

^{lvii} Martin Stevens and A.C. Cawley, eds., *The Towneley Plays*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) EETS S.S. 13.

^{lviii} See Blake, *The English Language in Medieval Literature*, p. 45. Of Mak’s attempted impersonation Blake says, “There is little doubt that his use of the of the southern dialect is an indication of the growing prestige of the standard London speech, an influence which can be traced in other fifteenth-century records. Its occurrence shows how the development of the standard would foster an attitude of elitism among those who spoke it so that they would look down on those who failed to conform” (46).

^{lix} See, for instance, Lynn Forest-Hill, *Transgressive Language in Medieval English Drama: Signs of Challenge and Change* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p.67.

^{lx} Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, pp.222-23.

^{lxi} *Ibid.*, 62.

^{lxii} *Ibid.*, 86.

^{lxiii} Mak is using dialect to demand subservience. Bourdieu goes on to say that popular speech like slang “constitutes *one* of the exemplary, and one might say ideal, expressions...of the vision, developed essentially to combat feminine (or effeminate) ‘weakness’ and ‘submissiveness’, through which the men most deprived of economic and cultural capital grasp their virile identity and perceive a social world conceived of purely in terms of toughness” (96). Bourdieu is here extending into sociolinguistics the

sociology of Paul Willis, whom he credits. See also the useful explanation by John B. Thompson, “Editor’s Introduction,” *Language and Symbolic Power*, p.22.

^{lxiv} *Language and Symbolic Power*, p. 86.

^{lxv} *Ibid.*, 87.

^{lxvi} Bourdieu, “The Economics of Linguistic Exchange,” 663.

^{lxvii} Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 69.

^{lxviii} *The Wallace: Selections*, ed. Anne McKim (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2003).

^{lxix} *The Poetical Works of Gavin Douglas, Bishop of Dunkeld, with Memoir, Notes, and Glossary*, ed. by John Small, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: W. Paterson, 1874), vol. 2, p. 3, l. 21.

One might wonder, when Douglas refers to his “lewit barbour tong,” whether he is thinking not only of the seeming barbarity of a language being turned for the first time to classical epic, but also of the language of John Barbour, author of the *Bruce*, the original Scottish epic.

^{lxx} Vol. 2, p. 6, l. 21.

^{lxxi} Douglas is as determined as Hary is to distinguish the Scottish from the English, and he does so purely in the arena of language. He devotes much of his first prologue to an attack on Caxton and his *Eneydos*—in the preface to which Caxton had extemporized on the unbridgeable differences between northern and southern English:

...Wilþame Caxtoun, of Inglis natioun,
In proys hes prent ane buke of Inglis gros,
Clepend it Virgill in Eneados,
Quhilk that he says of Franch he did translait,

It has na thing ado tharwith, God wait,

Ne na mair lyke than the devill and Sanct Austyne... [P. 7, l. 26- p. 8, l. 1.]

For Douglas, Caxton’s inferior translation and his debased scholarship and particularly his “Inglis gros” elevate Douglas’s own work and justify the cultural autonomy of Scotland and of “Scottis.”