C—
Medieval Latin Philology

CA—
Introduction

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What do we mean by Medieval Latin? How does it differ from Classical Latin and Vulgar Latin? How did the dialect of a small area of Italy come to be the principal medium for intellectual discourse for nearly 1,500 years? What does it mean that the language almost universally used for writing was not one normally used for speaking? When did Medieval Latin come to an end, and why?

The citizens of ancient Rome spoke the dialect of the region of Latium in central Italy. As the city's power increased, its language spread, first throughout Italy and then into the conquered and colonized areas of Gaul (on both sides of the Alps) and Spain. The colonists—soldiers, farmers, and administrators—did not speak with the Ciceronian clarity and elegance familiar to students of pure "Golden Age" Latin; they spoke demotic (that is, people's) Latin. The extent of the linguistic split between the literary language and its spoken form is uncertain; the difference may have been no more than that between the English of a high court judge and that of a laborer, or even between an individual's formal and informal styles. This demotic language, for which there is testimony in inscriptions, is known as Vulgar Latin. It was the ancestor of the vernacular Romance languages—Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Catalan, Provençal, Romanian, and others—but it is not what we mean by Medieval Latin. Formal Latin, conservative in its grammar and usages, was taught in schools (which preserved it from change) and was also used for writing; it is what we mean when we refer to Classical Latin. The gap between Vulgar Latin (whose development properly belongs to the study of Romance philology) and Classical Latin widened, until the latter seems to have been no more than the written form of the spoken language: a citizen of Seville might speak an early form of "Spanish" but record his words in Latin, although the spelling of the latter would bear little relation to the spoken form. Something like this has happened to English: our spelling system is based, in part, on pronunciations that have not been used since the fourteenth century (when the *kn* in *knife* and the *gh* in *right* and *through* actually represented sounds).

It was from the formal Classical Latin that Medieval Latin emerged. The literary language, unlike Vulgar Latin, was preserved from most of the ordinary changes that contribute to linguistic change, mainly because the basis of teaching was an established literary heritage of texts and authorities. It was codified in written grammars, was preserved in the texts of ancient authors such as Cicero and Virgil, was the language of record, and was taught in schools. It was the kind of Latin at which Charlemagne's reforms aimed, and was also the Latin that spread into non-Romance-speaking countries like Ireland, England, Germany, and Scandinavia. In theory, this kind of Latin, since it was taught from books, was immune to change; in practice, there were some changes, which are surveyed in this book.

The success of Latin as an almost universal language of Western Europe until the end of the Middle Ages was due to several factors and took place in several stages. When the Roman Empire officially adopted Christianity, its language—Latin—automatically became the official language of the Church. As missionaries spread the new faith throughout Europe, into both Romance and non-Romance countries, they took Latin with them, in the form of ritual, service books, manuals of pastoral care, and of course the Bible. The official status of Latin was enhanced as papal authority increased, and with it the ecclesiastical bureaucracy. Moreover, the educational system was geared to Latin. In ancient Rome itself, the formal teaching of Latin (particularly forensic oratory) was the basis of all education, and this practice was extended throughout the Empire. To be a citizen of the Roman Empire, or at least to participate in its administration, meant learning Latin. With Christianity, the educational system passed into the hands of the clergy, who ensured that literacy effectively meant Latin. Although *cleric* and *clerk* now designate different people, they were at one time the same word.

When society felt the need to record legal transactions (such as property transfers) in writing, it turned to the clergy to inscribe them. Normally, the clergy chose Latin for the purpose. In Anglo-Saxon England, some documents are in Old English, and after the Norman Conquest (when English was relegated to third position) French was often used. Usually, however, Latin was the language of record: it had been the preeminent instrument of thought and expression since antiquity and could exploit the phrasing of the Roman legal tradition. Especially, it had an established grammar and orthography, standards the vernaculars lacked until the sixteenth century or even later. Formal teaching in English grammar is, for example, a relatively recent development. This is why English changed considerably between 700 and 1400 and why the author of *Beowulf* would have found even Chaucer's English totally incomprehensible.

The use of Latin for the writing of history, philosophy, and treatises about the natural sciences is hardly surprising, since the authors of such texts continued a tradition from ancient Rome. Modern readers are sometimes surprised by the use of Latin for belles lettres, particularly poetry, and especially lyric poetry; we have, since the nineteenth century, been accustomed to look for "sincerity" and a "personal voice," and it seems strange that medieval writers should try to "express themselves" in a language they learned only at school. This is our misunderstanding: medieval authors sought to weave a texture of allusions (from religious or secular sources) and for this purpose Latin had an immensely long tradition, something that the vernaculars entirely lacked. We have more reason to be surprised at the use of Latin for technology—weaving, shipbuilding, architecture, farming, coining, handicrafts, etc.—since, clearly, medieval laborers, tradesmen, and artisans did not talk Latin in the field or workshop. In fact, the manifestations of technological Latin are mainly to be found in legal contexts or educational ones (that is, the Latin of technology is a product of the record clerk or the schoolteacher, not the practitioner).

Until the fourteenth century (at the earliest) the vernacular languages were held in very low esteem. Modern linguists now recognize that Black American and African dialects are distinct forms of English, with coherent morphological and syntactic structures. Nevertheless, at least at the moment, it is unlikely that they will be used to draft legal documents or to express theoretical ideas in science, economics, or politics: the standard forms of American or British English have the prestige of antiquity and the virtue of stability, just as Latin had in the Middle Ages. The high status of Latin and the low status of the vernacular go hand in hand, and reinforce each other. As the laity could not (until the rise of a middle class) read at all, let alone write, it hardly mattered that texts and documents were written in a language they could not understand. This caused a systematic exclusion of the non-literate, non-Latin classes: the clergy controlled communications and legal transactions. It also led to snobbery: one fifteenth-century writer (no doubt an English speaker) referred to English as the language of the plowman. Anyone with any pretensions to education and literacy throughout the Middle Ages was, almost by definition, nearly bilingual in Latin and his or her own vernacular, although no one spoke Latin as a native tongue.

The Nature of Medieval Latin

Medieval Latin, then, was the descendant of Classical Latin, the formal branch of the language of ancient Rome. As such, it was very conservative; as is mentioned elsewhere in this volume, Cicero himself would have been able to read most Medieval Latin with little difficulty, once he had accustomed himself to a few differences in spelling and some new vocabulary. The reason for this conservatism is that Latin was learned as a second language and its usage was inevitably referred to the authority of grammar books. Children learn their first language by ear and imitation; from the moment they begin to speak they quickly learn to generalize and to generate complex expressions, even from words they have heard only once. For example, they make plural nouns by adding /s/ or /z/, comparative adjectives by adding /er/, past tenses by adding /t/ or /d/ or /ed/; they produce compound tenses by using forms of the verb *be* and the present participle in *-ing* or by using forms of *shall* and *will,* and they negate by prefacing the verb with *do* or *did* and adding *not* to it. They learn all this from their parents or nurses and siblings, and later from companions; by age six they can probably form any sentence they need. At first they may generalize incorrectly, producing, for example, *fighted* (for *fought*), *brung* (for *brought,* by analogy with *sung*), *seed* (for *saw*), but the weight of custom quickly enables them to accommodate irregularities. In societies where there is no teaching of grammar (such as medieval England), analogy may overcome precedence; this is why we have *climbed* (Old English *clamb*), *wept* (OE *weop* *), *ships* (OE *scipu*), *brothers* (OE *brothru*).

Latin, however, was always learned from instruction, from teachers and texts (often with accompanying commentaries and glosses); there was no linguistic community that could agree on a newly generalized form. Thus Latin retained its five declensions of nouns, its four conjugations of verbs, and its three genders. Whereas French absorbed the neuter into the masculine (*hoc cor,* French *le coeur*), Medieval Latin retained the neuter. Whereas French developed a new future tense in - *rai,* Latin retained the *-bo, -am* patterns of Classical Latin. The grammar book was a constant point of reference, in the way that dictionaries are now used to perpetuate traditional spellings. The main grammar books—the *Ars minor* and *Ars maior* of Donatus and the *Institutiones grammaticae* of Priscian—were those that had been designed to de-scribe Latin of the classical and late classical periods, and so perpetuated the usages of those eras.

Nevertheless, despite conservative teaching methods, there was change: if there had not been, there would have been no need for the present book. Even in the classical period there had been changes: the "freezing" of the language took place only with the grammars of the fourth and fifth centuries. Parasyllabic nouns of the third declension adopted accusatives *-em* and *-es* (for older *-im, -is*); the subjunctive came to be used with *cum* even when no causal relationship was implied; prepositions were used more and more to give precision to case endings; prepositional phrases (even redundant ones, like *abhinc*) continued to be formed; vocabulary increased either by suffixing (nouns in *-tio, -itas, -culum;* adjectives in *-bilis;* verbs in *-to,* etc.) or by borrowing, especially from Greek. The poet Horace accepted Greek borrowings, though he disliked hybrid formations (a prejudice which, for some reason, was applied by some grammarians to borrowings by English!). Medieval Latin would become particularly tolerant of Graecisms, neologisms, and words taken from vernacular languages; there was no standard authority against which to check the status of a word, and so there was no lexical purism or hostility to innovations.

Such changes—analogical extension, suffixing, adoption of foreign words—are endemic to all living languages. The usual causes include careless pronunciation (which results in the loss or weakening of inflections or other unstressed syllables, as in *Wednesday*), overuse of words (which results in the constant need for reemphasis, as in words denoting excess, like *much, very, terribly*), and, paradoxically, a desire for greater precision (which led to the development in English of compound tenses).

As Medieval Latin was not a living language in the ordinary sense, the changes which it suffered were of a different type, though they have some parallels in the vernacular languages. It changed because it was being used constantly for new purposes in an ever-changing world.

1. The effect of Christianity was both early and almost universal and cannot be overstated; through this the vocabulary and syntax of an originally Hebrew and Greek Bible penetrated ordinary Latin. For the cleric or monk, the greatest exposure to Latin came in the daily rituals of Christianity, and by this route the idioms and phrases of the Vulgate Bible became part of the ordinary language (for example, the use of *quod, quoniam,* and *quia,* all meaning "that," to introduce indirect speech). The administration and rituals of the Church required a new and specialized vocabulary; at first, care was taken to avoid the pagan connotations of Roman religion, but later *pontifex* came to be an acceptable term for bishop. Some words need particular care: *frater* may mean "brother" (sibling), "brother-monk," or (later) "friar."

2. Speculation about the nature of divinity was not a Roman habit, so Christianity had to develop terms like *trinitas, persona,* etc. Similarly, Romans were not given much to philosophical abstraction (beyond moral platitudes), and, through the rediscovery of Aristotle, a new vocabulary and (occasionally) syntax began to appear. Other abstract sciences—physics, astronomy, astrology, alchemy, mathematics—owed much of their vocabulary (indeed, their very names) to Greek or Arabic. In some scientific and philosophical treatises, especially translations, the syntax was sometimes influenced by the original language.

3. The Middle Ages were technologically very inventive; they bequeathed us the clock and new techniques in agriculture, shipbuilding, weaponry, weaving, dyeing,

architecture, etc. When terminology in these areas was needed—usually for the purpose of making an inventory or will—a Latin-trained clerk would need an appropriate word; few clerks were classicists and most were too busy to seek out a word from an ancient source; they would instead simply latinize the word the workmen themselves used.

4. Workaday Latin was also needed to record legal transactions and court depositions. Standard transactions, like wills and land transfers, had their own well-established formulae, and scribes could hardly go wrong. When there was some narrative, however, as in a witness's report, the clerk had to write consecutive prose and sometimes became confused; it is in such cases that we find misuse of inflections.

5. The topic of ungrammatical Latin raises a related issue. In some parts of preCarolingian Europe, notably Merovingian Gaul, the old educational system had completely collapsed but the habit of using Latin for documents had not died out. In such areas the Latin can only be described as barbaric. This type of Latin can hardly be called a language, as it is no longer a system with agreed rules.

Languages can occur in several forms. There is a "common language" understandable by all members of the linguistic community—the language in which, say, a judge, a biochemist, and a teenager communicate with each other. In Medieval Latin this would correspond to the general Christianized Classical Latin mentioned in (1) above. Then there are the specialized languages in which, say, biochemist talks to biochemist; these correspond to the special kinds of latinity that arose from the needs of (2) and (3) above. There are also other varieties of language within the common language, namely chronological and regional dialects. Chronologically, English is divided, for convenience, into Old English, Middle English, Early Modern English, and Present Day English. Geographically, English can be subdivided almost infinitely: within the British Isles (evident in pronunciation, vocabulary, morphology, and syntax) there are Scottish, Northern, Welsh, cockney (London), and Western; outside Britain there are American, South African, West Indian, Australian, and many others.

In Medieval Latin, however, chronological and regional developments were always subject to arrest and reform according to traditional grammar. Charlemagne's educational reforms arrested the decline of latinity in many parts of Europe, and the eventual rise of humanism removed even the biblically sanctioned deviations from Classical Latin syntax, substituting classical authority. Two features of orthography, *e* for both *ae* and *oe* (and occasional back-spellings of *ae* for *e*), and *ci* for *ti* after a vowel, were widely prevalent from about 1100 to 1450, but eventually even these yielded to humanist respelling. Sometimes a Latin spelling may reflect a chronological development in the corresponding vernacular: in Middle English, after about 1100, a double consonant came to indicate a preceding short vowel (since a double consonant caused a preceding long vowel to shorten); in the late fourteenth century *er* was lowered to *ar* in some words (accounting for *parson* beside *person*); both these spellings occasionally occur in contemporary Latin. Nevertheless, they are aberrations, and most scribes tend to spell in the traditional way.

Similarly, spellings occasionally represent local pronunciations. For Classical Latin *ignis,* southern France and Italy sometimes have *inis,* but northern France and England have *ingnis;* in neither case, however, are such spellings universal, even within their areas. Obviously, when a word is borrowed into Latin from a vernacular, it will normally be from the vernacular spoken by the author or scribe (except, perhaps, for sailing and trading terms, which would have a wider currency).

Regional (and for that matter chronological) developments are hard to discern in syntax or phrasing, though many attempts have been made to find the vernacular "substratum" of an author's latinity. Generally, one needs an accumulation of evidence; *ad* meaning "at," *habeo* used to form the perfect tense, *volo* used to indicate futurity, and *eo* ("go") plus infinitive to indicate intention, might together indicate an English author, but each alone would be insufficient evidence. What does emerge, however, is that the historian of Medieval Latin as a language needs to be aware of parallel developments in the vernacular languages, in pronunciation, spelling, syntax, and vocabulary.

In summary, the only form of Medieval Latin that could be called "common," in the sense of an agreed language of communication amongst all users of the Middle Ages, is the Latin described by the early grammarians with an admixture of Christian features (in vocabulary and syntax). Otherwise, there are simply local, specialized, or individual variations.

Medieval Latin did not "end"; it was gradually replaced by what we call Humanistic Latin or "Neo-Latin" (see ch. CH). Under the influence of such writers as Lorenzo Valla (d. 1457), the old bases of linguistic authority were changed from the fourth-century grammarians and Christian Latin to the ancient classical authors, especially Cicero. Naturally, individual idiosyncrasies of spelling, syntax, and morphology were eradicated, and such standard features of Medieval Latin as *e* for Classical Latin *ae* and *oe,* or *ci* for *ti,* disappeared. The arrival of Neo-Latin can be detected in spellings such as *aemulus* and *ratio,* but mainly by the absence of constructions such as *dixit quod, dixit quia, dixit quoniam.* The lexicon was gradually purified to include only words used by classical authors, except that in Church Latin and in scientific and technological Latin there was (and still is) some latitude. In verse, rhyme was eschewed by the humanists, but it survived for a long time in monumental inscriptions.

The pace at which this happened varied from country to country. In England the humanist movement began in earnest with the arrival of Italian scholars at the beginning of the reign of Henry VI (1422–61, 1470–71). Interestingly, the *Life of Henry V* (1413–22) by Tito Livio Frulovisi, written with classical spellings, was retranslated back into Medieval Latin by one of its scribes! The pronunciation of Latin, however, was not reformed until the end of the nineteenth century, and this reform took two directions. Schools and universities adopted the "restored" Classical Latin pronunciation; the Roman Catholic Church and its educational institutions adopted an Italianate pronunciation, whose dissemination was especially promoted by Pope Pius X (1903–14).

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