

## Original Borrowings from the French in Chaucer's Translation of *Le Roman de la Rose*

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Geoffrey Chaucer has been called the "word wizard" (Mersand 2) of fourteenth century England. At a time when the English language was shifting, various, and colloquial, Chaucer adapted, borrowed, and coined words, in addition to re-using existing words in innovative ways. His extensive written vocabulary of about 8,000 words was twice that of his contemporary Gower (Burnley 134), and Chaucer introduced more Romance borrowings into the mother tongue than any other English writer of the period (Mersand 138). Since French and Latin were the customary mode of expression for government, business, education, and culture, Chaucer's decision to write in English symbolizes its rebirth as a national language (McCrum, Cran, and MacNeil 80). As he used English, he was also creating it.

Peck notes that Chaucer began his literary career as a translator of *Le Roman de la Rose*, and it remained his primary literary source throughout his life (33). For Chaucer *The Romaunt* was "'a sort of poetic Bible' (Legouis 54) from which he drew stylistic and rhetorical techniques, social situations, psychological insights, and literary modes" (Peck 1). Through the translation, he introduced to his English audiences a stylish wit and literary manner which he later claimed as his own (Peck 1). Although only the A-fragment of his translation remains, these 1705 lines attest a significant number of French words appearing apparently for the first time in English.

Using an early edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Joseph Mersand extensively researched Romance vocabulary in Chaucer's works and identified fifty-seven original English words of OFr. derivation in the translation of the A-fragment of *The Romaunt of the Rose* (58). However, Merete Smith's investigation of a restricted number of OFr. loanwords taken from all fragments of the poem casts doubt upon the significance of *The Romaunt* as a means of transference of words from OFr. to ME (92). My research based on Smith's sources, the *Middle English Dictionary*, the more recent edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and the Sutherland manuscript, disputes her conclusion. Accepting with most scholars 1366

as the probable composition date of the A-fragment, I have determined that forty-two or 9.3% of the approximately 450 OFr. loanwords in this manuscript are attested for the first time in English, with more than half in current use (see Table 1). These words appear to have been transferred during translation. Thirty newly attested words, or 6.6%, are not found in the original French version. Some are obvious adaptations from the French, while others may have been substituted from spoken English or coined by Chaucer for stylistic purposes. Another thirty-nine or 8.6% of the OFr. loanwords were already current in English but appear with a new sense in Fragment A. Thus, close to 25% of the OFr. loanwords in Fragment A are either new to English or used with a new English meaning. Chaucer's translation was therefore significant not only in transferring OFr. vocabulary, but also in expanding and reinforcing previously borrowed words.

Although many of these words were probably adopted for lack of an English equivalent, more often their use was socially motivated. Chaucer's popularity during his own time is evidence of the currency of many of the French words first attested in writing in his works (Mersand 10). Most of Chaucer's romance vocabulary was introduced during the height of his popularity at Court, apparently to satisfy aristocratic tastes (Mersand 138). According to Mersand's investigations, Chaucer abandoned many of these words after 1386 and some became obsolete, while other now significant words were picked up again much later by sixteenth century authors (15).

When categorized semantically, Chaucer's loanwords reflect the influence of the aristocratic, secularized French romance on fourteenth century England. The preoccupation of *The Romaunt of the Rose* is the religion of love. It is structurally organized as a Christian cosmos with its worshipers, its martyrs and angels, its God of Love, and its earthly paradise (Muscatine 15). The Lover is a cavalier in the service of love, seeking the ideals of beauty and perfection. Many words evoke a refined sensuality, in contrast to the religious or legal vocabulary adopted previously. More than half of the borrowings are "visual in appeal" (Mersand 61). The largest category, twenty-eight words, deals specifically with clothing, fashion, and personal adornment. Other visually descriptive words form the second largest category, twenty words relating to art, architecture, or appearance in general. Several words across the categories are tactile in nature. The senses of taste, sight, and hearing are stimulated by eighteen borrowings describing the garden. Auditory pleasure is also evoked in a smaller selection of seven words pertaining to music or dance, while five words are generally descriptive of sensual pleasure. In keeping with the classical ideal, five words denote perfection or balance while four others

are associated with instruction. The didacticism of the romance genre is implied in nineteen terms of social duplicity, which comprise the third largest category. For while the personifications of human vices have been banished from the garden, evil sometimes intrudes within.

This discussion will concentrate on words relating to fashion, a domain where France holds sway to this day. As the largest category, this vocabulary is representative of the rich physical descriptions so abundant in Fragment A, while reflecting its emphasis on the material, as opposed to the spiritual, world. After the first twenty-five years, the fourteenth century in England was one of striking changes in costume (Yarwood 69), many of which are reflected in the new vocabulary borrowed by Chaucer. *The Romance of the Rose* is often quoted and illuminations of the manuscript are frequently reproduced in books on English costume.

Two words related to clothing construction appear early in the poem as the Lover prepares to leave town for the burgeoning countryside. He takes a silver needle from an "aguiler" (cf. *aguyler* l. 98/*aguillier* l. 92) or needle-case to baste up his sleeves. This word was formed by adding the "-ier" suffix to "aiguille," the word for needle, to denote its receptacle (Ewert 309). "Basting" (cf. *bastyng* l. 104/*cousant* l. 98) meaning "to sew together loosely," refers to the Lover's stitching up his sleeves in zig-zag lacing. Fourteenth century sleeve styles varied widely, but a voluminous sleeve was commonly gathered up by smocking or decorative stitching in order to be less cumbersome.

Five words denoting decoration of clothing occur in the lines describing the garment of the God of Love, whom the Lover encounters within the garden walls.

For not ycladde in sylke was he,  
But al in floures and *flourettes*,  
Ypaynted al with *amorettes*;  
And with *losenges* and *scochons*,  
With byrdes, lyberdes, and *lyons*,... (890-4)

"Floweret" (cf. *floreites* l. 879) or "little flower" is the diminutive formed by attaching the suffix "-et," or "-ette" to the root word "flower." This means of word formation has been adopted into English in such coinages as "farmette." "Amorette" (cf. *amoreites* l. 880) has the same structure and is the diminutive of "amour" or "love" in that it specifies a love-knot. "Lozenge" (cf. *losenges* l. 881), "scutcheon" (cf. *escuciaus* l. 881), and "lion" (cf. *lionciaus* l. 882) are common heraldic insignia and typical decorative motifs of the period. A lozenge is a diamond-shaped object or pattern, also appearing as a heraldic figure borne on a vertical axis. In

heraldry, a scutcheon or escutcheon is a "coat of arms" or by extension a shield-shaped ornament. These heraldic, geometric, and floral designs were often patterned on a large scale all over the garment in various colored and patterned forms (Yarwood 82), as indicated by the adoption of two related verbs. The gerund "meddling" (cf. *medelyng* l. 898/*diversite* l. 886) refers to the blending or combining of colors in the God of Love's garment, while the past participle "intermeddled" (cf. *entremedled* l. 906/*entremellees* l. 893) describes the "interspersing" of "many a *rose-lefe*..." l. 905 (cf. [*f*]eilles de roses l. 894). "Rose-leaf" itself occurs here as a newly coined compound word.

Heraldry is recalled in later lines by the "ensign" (cf. *enseigne* l. 1200/*enseigne* l. 1178) or banner of a knight. This is the only word copied without spelling change by the translator. "Ensign" is used today to denote a military or naval standard.

Other terms refer more specifically to the style of dress of the God of Love's noble companions. Diversion's sleeves are "decoped" (cf. *decoped* l. 843, *decopez* l. 827) or "cut in figures, slashed." These slashes could be large enough to conceal a dagger, as does the character False Semblant in later lines of the poem. The "suckeny" (cf. *suckeny* l. 1232/*sorquenie* l. 1210) or smock of Lady Openness is "rideled" (cf. *rydedde* l. 1235/*iointe* l. 1213), meaning "pleated, gathered, arranged in folds." For centuries previously dress had always been fundamentally in the form of loose, flowing draperies never held to the body by more than a girdle.

The word "Richesse" is first personified in Chaucer's translation to represent the character "Wealth," and the description of her attire transferred vocabulary for elaborate edgings and jewelled ornamentations popular with the fourteenth century English aristocracy. The robe of Richesse is trimmed in "ribanding" (cf. *rybanynges* l. 1077/*orfrois* l. 1059), denoting ribbons, ribbon-work, a border or edging. Her gown also has a band of "tasselled" (cf. *tassyled* l. 1079/?) gold. "Ribanding" and "tasselled" occur at the end of the poetic line and, while they do not appear in the French, were apparently current English words of French origin which Chaucer substituted as rhyme words.

With the tasselled gold of Richesse's band are ornamental knobs of "ameled" (cf. *amyled* l. 1080/*naelee* l. 1061) or "enamelled" gold. An abundance of other precious stones are set in her "chevesaile" (cf. *chevesayle* l. 1082/*ceveçaille* l. 1063), the jewelled collar of her garment. At the end of her belt is a "mordant" (cf. *mourdant* l. 1094/*mordanz* l. 1077) or "ornamental hooked clasp," in this case set with a precious stone. In the circlet of gold upon her head are many other jewels, including "jagounces" (cf. [*i*]agounces l. 1117/*iagonces* l. 1097). This word has

evolved into the modern "jargon" or "jargoon," a red or reddish-orange precious stone related to jacinth, a variety of the mineral zircon.

Decorations of the head and hair form another subset of borrowed words. Idleness greets the Lover at the garden gate wearing a "chaplet" (cf. chapelet l. 563/chapel l. 551) or wreath for the head. Usually a garland of flowers or leaves, a chaplet might also be a circlet of gold or precious stones as worn by Richesse. The chaplet of Idleness is of gold embroidery, but in a later line (l. 908) that of the God of Love is of roses. A quite different headcovering is worn by Hate as she is portrayed on the outside of the garden wall. "Towel" (cf. towale l. 161/toaille l. 151) has the new sense here of a cloth used as an article of dress, such as a simple, draped peasant head-dress.

Costly materials and fur linings were high fashion of the period (Yarwood 69). The apparel of Richesse provides the borrowed term "tissue" (cf. tyssue l. 1104/tesu l. 1084) in its now obsolete sense of "a rich kind of cloth, often interwoven with gold or silver." The word "fur," however, has a less elegant turn as first attested in English. The evil Avarice, depicted on the garden wall near Hate, is wearing a coat with a rough "fur" (cf. furre l. 228/?) trimming of lambskin.

Three terms are used to imply their converse. "Wyndre" (cf. wyndre l. 1020/de soi tifer l. 1006) with its variant past participle "wyntred" (cf. wyntred l. 1018/guignee l. 1004) means "to trim, deck, or embellish oneself," as with cosmetics. In his description of the character Beauty, the poet claims that "no *wyntred* browes had she/...for it neded nought/To *wyndre* her, or to paynte her ought" (1018-20). The term "well-arrayed" (cf. wel arayed l. 472/bien vestuz l. 461) describes what the poor man is not. "Missit" (cf. missate l. 1194/seoit...mal l. 1170), "to be unbecoming," is used negatively in the description of Generosity. For although she had just made a gift of her gold brooch to another lady, the open collar disclosing her milk-white flesh "*missate* her nought" (l. 1194) or was not unbecoming.

While we cannot draw conclusions for all fragments of *The Romaunt of the Rose*, we can state that the A-fragment is significant as a vehicle of transference of words from OFr. to ME, and additionally as a means of expanding and reinforcing previously borrowed vocabulary. When categorized semantically, these newly attested or innovatively re-used loanwords demonstrate the influence of the secularized, aristocratic French romance on fourteenth century England. Many of these borrowings are sensually evocative. The largest category of words is visual in appeal and relates to clothing, fashion, and personal adornment. Finally, while "Chaucer" is a French surname meaning "a maker of coverings for legs

and feet," our poet of bourgeois origin embellished his native English and gave it wings.

TABLE 1  
DIRECT BORROWINGS OF FRENCH WORDS IN FRAGMENT A

Mersand†	Smith	Kaufman	Original French
aguiler (98)		aguyler (98)	aguillier (92)
aleys (1377)		aley (1377)	alies (1352)
		almandres (1363)	alemandiers (1337)
ameled (1080)		amyled (1080)	naelee (1061)
amorettes (892f.)		amorettes (892)	amoreites (880)
apparaunte (5 f.)		apparaunt (5)	aparant (5)
	armure (4197)		armeüre (3859)
	attour (3718)		(atour) (3433)
	bokell (1086)		boucle (1069)
	bootes (7260)		botes (11942)
	burnette(s) (226, 4756)		bruneite (214)
	*camelyne (7365)		cameline (12045)
	cercle (1108)		cercles (1088)
	*chapelet (563)	chapelet (563, 565)	chapel, chapelet (551, 555)
chevisaille	*chevesayle (1082)	chevesayle (1082)	ceveçaille (1063)
	cote (226)		cote (214)
	coverchiefe (7367)		cuevrechief (12047)
covertly (19 f.)		covertly (19)	covertement (19)
	crowne (3201)		corone (2983)

date-tree (1364 f.)	date-tre (1364)	datier (1339)
decoped (843)	decoped (843)	decopez (825)
delectable (1440 f.)		délitable (1420 f.)
delytous (90 f.)	delytous (90)	deliteus (84)
embatailled (139 f.)		bataillié (131)
enclos (138 f., 480 f.)		clos (131, 468)
endouted (1664)	endouted (1664)	(doutasse) (1631)
	enlumyned (1695)	enlumne (1659)
enseigne (1200 f.)	enseigne (1200)	enseigne (1178)
	ententyfe (436)	ententive (428)
	entermedled (906)	entremellees (893)
	espyrituell (650)	esperitables (638)
flourettes (891 f.)	flourettes (891)	floreites (778)
floutours (763 f.)		fléutéors (751 f.)
frounceles (860)	frounceles (860)	sanz frounce (844)
	garnement (2256)	garnement (2143)
guerdon (1526)	guerdon (1526)	guerredoné (1492)
	habit (6153)	(habit) (11019)
habyten (660 f.)	habyten (660)	abitent (659)
	hayre (438)	haire (430)
jagounces (1117 f.)	[iagounces] <sup>1</sup> (1117)	iagonces (1097)
losenges (893)	losenges (893)	losenges (881)
	mantel (224)	mantiaus (212)
masonrye (302 f.)	masonrye (302)	mesiere (292)

mavis (619)	mavise (665)	mauvis (654)
miscounting (196 f.)	mys[countyng] <sup>2</sup> (196)	(maiscompter) <sup>3</sup> (181)
moisture (1424)	moisture (1424)	moute (1396)
mourdaunt (1094)	*mourdaunt (1094)	mourdaunt (1094)
	mytre (6470)	mitres (11220)
peches (1374)	peches (1374)	pesches (1348)
	pers (67)	perses (63)
portraiture (141 f.)	portreytures (141)	(pourtraitures) <sup>4</sup> (133)
pryse (887 f.)		prisier (879 f.)
	purpure (1188)	porpre (1164)
	refraynyng (749)	refrez (733)
resemblable (985 f.)	resemblable (985)	resemblabes (971)
retourne (382 f.)		retorner (374 f.)
	robe (888)	robe (877)
	sacke (457)	sac (448)
	/samette/samyte (836, 873)	samit (820, 861)
Sarsinesse (1188 f.)		Sarrazinesche (1170 f.)
saverous (84 f.)	savorous (84)	(savoureux) <sup>5</sup> (80)
scochouns (893 f.)		escuciaus (885 f.)
(Fair-) Semblaunt (963)		(Biau-) Semblaunt (953)
sukkenye (1232 f.)	*suckeny (1232)	suckeny (1232)
	surmount (667)	sormonter (655)

timbestere (769 f.)		tymbestere (769)	timberesses (754)
tissu (1104)	*tyssue (1104)	tyssue (1104)	tesu (1084)
	tres(s)our (568, 3717)		treçoer (558)
tretys (1216 f.)		tretyse (1216)	tretiz (1195)
	vayle (3864)		voile (3564)
		vilaynously (1498)	vilmant (1466)
		wyntred (1018)	guigniee (1004)

†Mersand's research is based upon Méon's edition of the manuscript.

\*Of Smith's 26 direct borrowings, these six are attested for the first time in English in the *Romaunt*. Note that five of the six are from Fragment A.

<sup>1</sup>Appears as "ragounces" in both the Glasgow MS and Thynne's edition; subsequently edited to "iagounces"; appears as "jagounces" in Méon's edition"

<sup>2</sup>Appears as "myscoveting" in Thynne's edition.

<sup>3</sup>Appears as "mesconter" in the Méon edition.

<sup>4</sup>Appears as "escritures" in the Méon edition.

<sup>5</sup>Appears as "doucereux" in the Méon edition.

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