7. Middle English IV – East Midlands and London dialects

7.1 The origins of present-day Standard English

One of the reasons for learning about the development of the English language is to understand the relationship between the dialects and Standard English in present-day English. In the conglomeration of different dialects that we call 'Middle English', there is no one recognised standard form. If we were to study the political, social and economic history of England in relation to the language, we would observe that the conditions for a standard language were beginning to emerge by the late fifteenth century. From the sixteenth century onwards, there is evidence that people were actively discussing the need for a standard in spelling, pronunciation and grammar. This naturally raised the question of which dialect or variety of the language to use for the standard.

One definition of a standard language, in modern sociological terms, is,

The Standard is that speech variety of a language community which is legitimised as the obligatory norm for social intercourse on the strength of the interests of dominant forces in that society.

(Sociolinguistics, Norbert Dittmar, 1976)

that is, the choice is made by people imitating those with prestige or power in their society, while the latter tend to prescribe their variety of the language as the 'correct' one to use. A standard language is not superior in itself as a language for communication – all dialects are regular and 'rule-governed' – but in its adoption and development it is the language of those with social and political influence, although advocates of a standard will often claim an intrinsic superiority for it.

In 1589, the poet George Puttenham published a book called The Arte of English Poesie. In it, he gave advice to poets on their choice of language.

It must be that of educated, not common people, neither shall he follow the speach of a craftes man, or other of the inferior sort, though he be inhabitant or bred in the best towne and citie in this Realme. But he shall follow generally the better brought vp sort, ... ciuill and graciously behauoured and bred;

The recommended dialect was therefore Southern, not Northern or Western:

...the usuall speach of the Court, and that of London and the shires lying about London within 1x. myles, and not much above.

(A longer extract from Puttenham's book is given in Text 81.)
This defines the literary language already in use in the sixteenth century, and clearly describes it as the prestigious language of the educated classes of London and the South-East. London was the centre of government, trade and commerce, and so the language of the 'dominant forces' in society would carry prestige, and others would seek to copy it. This is a simplified explanation of a complex state of affairs, but it helps to explain why the educated London dialect formed the basis of the standard language as it developed. If the centre of government and commerce had been York, no doubt the Northern dialect would have formed the basis for Standard English today.

The London dialect in the late fourteenth century derived from a mixture of ME dialects, but was strongly influenced by the East Midlands dialect in particular. London naturally attracted large numbers of men and women and their families from other areas of the country to find work, bringing their own dialectal speech with them. Historians have identified a considerable migration of people from the East Midlands to London from the late thirteenth century to the mid-fourteenth century, some of whom must have become the 'dominant social class' whose language carried prestige and was imitated by others. But because people from other parts of the country also migrated to London, there are also features of Southern and Kentish in the London dialect.

So present-day Standard English derives in its origins from the East Midlands dialect of ME, and this explains why it is comparatively easy to read Chaucer's English of the late fourteenth century, as well as other East Midlands texts. It will not be necessary therefore to examine the texts in this chapter in the detail given to those already described. You can apply the same principles of analysis to them, if you wish.

### 7.2 A SE Midlands dialect

*The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* was one of the most popular books written in the fourteenth century, with over 300 manuscripts having survived, but its title is misleading. The original book was written in French in the 1350s by a doctor of Liège called Jehan de Bourgogne. He probably never travelled outside France and based the stories on other men's travel writings, filling them out from his own imagination. It is believed that he adopted the name Sir John Mandeville and wrote a preface claiming to be an Englishman born in St Albans, although the facts are not known for sure. The text in English is a translation from the French by an unknown English writer using a SE Midlands dialect. It cannot be a translation by the French author, because it is sometimes an inaccurate rendering.

Another version was written in verse form. The verse was originally in a NE Midlands dialect, but the only surviving manuscript is in a 'modernised version' of the fifteenth century. It gives us some idea of the standard literary language that had evolved at that time, and the style that writers were beginning to use. Unfortunately, part of the manuscript that corresponds to Text 47 is missing, but enough remains for comparison.

**TEXT 47 – The Travels of Sir John Mandeville (i)**

**SE Midlands dialect**

Now schall I seye 3ou sewyngly (= *in what follows*) of contrees and yles 3at ben be3onde the contrees 3at I haue spoken of. Wherfore I seye 3ou, in passyng be the lond of Cathaye toward the high Ynde, and toward Bacharye, men passen be a kyngdom 3at men clepen Caldilhe, 3at is a full fair contre. And 3ere groweth a maner of fruyt, as 3ough it weren gowrdes; and whan 3ei ben rype, men kutten hem ato, and men fynden withinne a lytyll best, in flesch, in bon, and blode as 3ough it were a lytilllomb, withouten wolle. And men eten bothe the frut and the best: and 3at is a gret mervueylle. Of 3at frute I haue eten, all3ough it were wondirfull: but 3at I knowe wel, 3at god is merueyllous in his werkes.