MIDDLE ENGLISH *WILLEN* AND THE PERFECT INFINITIVE

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1 Introduction

As language changes, some words and grammatical patterns become obsolete and disappear, while new ones are invented or borrowed. Yet others remain in the language but change their meaning, so that when reading older texts we may be deceived by their familiar form. In this paper I will consider one such pattern, the combination of the past tense form would with the perfect infinitive. This combination was possible in Middle English just as it is today, but as we will see below, not necessarily with the same meaning. The point of departure for my discussion will be the use of this pattern in The Nun's Priest's Tale, one of the best-known of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales.

2 The problem: Interpreting Chauntecler's dream

The Nun's Priest's Tale is a retelling of a classic beast fable, attributed to Aesop, in which a fox and a cock try to outsmart each other. Chaucer's version of the tale is a considerably expanded one, which contains a number of digressions on philosophy, history, and other subjects, as well as a long discussion on dream interpretation by the two protagonists, the cock Chauntecler and his favourite wife, the hen Pertelote. Their dispute is triggered by an incident at the beginning of the tale. One morning, Chauntecler wakes up from a horrible nightmare which he interprets as a sign that something bad is going to happen to him. In the dream, he sees a terrifying creature (i.e. a fox) which is out to kill him. He explains to Pertelote,

> Me mette / how that I romed vp and doun
> With-Inne oure yeerd / where as I say a beest
> Was lyk an hound / and wolde han maad arest

> Vp-on my body / and han had me ded
> (*NPT* 4088-91)[1]

Chauntecler and Pertelote then go on to discuss the value of the interpretation of dreams, something which Pertelote dismisses as pure superstition. In the end, however, it seems that Chauntecler is right; he is indeed attacked by a fox later in the tale.

But what will concern us here is not the interpretation of the content of Chauntecler's dream, but rather his language. Apart from being a good example of the tale's humourous tone – Chauntecler appears never to have seen a fox before – the lines quoted above also happen to contain some interesting grammatical patterns which have either disappeared or changed since the Middle English period (ME). The most obvious one, the impersonal *Me mette*, is of course not possible in Present-Day English (PDE), and has to be replaced by *I dreamt* (or *dreamed*) in a modern translation. Another is the past tense form *say*. This was common in ME, but later gave way to the variant *saw*, which is the one that survives into PDE.

Chaucer uses two idiomatic expressions which may sound odd to a modern reader. The first, *maken arest*, is translated 'to arrest, take into custody' by the Middle English Dictionary (MED), which also has attestations from Thomas Hoccleve's 'The Tale of Jereslaus's Wife' and a 15th-century oath book (MED *arē̆st(e* n.). Most modern translations of Chaucer's tale translate it simply 'seize'. The second expression, *han ded* (lit. 'have dead'), appears to have been a common idiom in ME. The dictionary translates it 'kill' (MED *dēd* adj. 2a), and has two late ME attestations in addition to the one from *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, from Lydgate's *Troy Book* and the romance *Athelston*.[2] It is unclear how long this ex-

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[1] The quotes from the *Canterbury Tales* in the following are from Furnivall's (1868-79) edition of the Hengwrt manuscript, unless otherwise noted. The Hengwrt manuscript is commonly assumed to contain one of the oldest versions of the text. Other manuscripts show only minor variations from the lines quoted above, the most significant one being the repetition of *wolde* in the last line: *Upon my body and wolde han had me ded* is found in a number of manuscripts (Pearsall 1984: 158).

[2] Other late ME attestations include Capgrave's *Chronicle of England* (Hingeston 1858: 275; 300), and the *Prose Merlin* (Wheatley 1865: 35). The earliest example I have been able to find is from the Caligula version of *Laȝamon's Brut* (manuscript c. 1275): "Euielin wes swiðe sari; þat him wes swa ilumpen. / þe oðer wolde him habben dæd; hit þuhte him swiðe hærd ræd" (Madden 1847: 348). It

pression remained in common use, and the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) does not appear to treat it separately. But it is attested after the ME period, as this example from Shakespeare shows:

> What if it be a poison which the Friar
> Subtly hath ministered to have me dead
> (*Romeo and Juliet* 4.3.24-25; Weis 2012: 299-300)

Thus, there can be little doubt that the fox in Chauntecler's dream was up to no good. Yet when it comes to the auxiliary verbs *wolde* and *han*, different translators have offered different interpretations, and there seems to be some uncertainty about exactly how to understand the situation. For instance, in Coghill's (1950) translation the fox 'tried or seemed' to try to catch Chauntecler, and in the last line the hypothetical clause indicates what would have happened if it had succeeded:

> I dreamt that roaming up and down a while
> Within our yard I saw a kind of beast,
> A sort of hound that tried or seemed at least
> To try and seize me ... would have killed me dead!
> (Coghill 1950: 4)

In Sisam's explanatory notes to the tale we also find a hypothetical reading: "Where I saw a beast [that] was like a dog, and that would have seized me and killed me" (Sisam 1927: 34). *A Chaucer Glossary*, on the other hand, glosses the phrase *wolde han had me ded* as 'wished to kill me' (Davis 1979: 32). The verbal cluster is thus taken to refer to the fox's intentions rather than a hypothetical state of affairs. Wilcockson opts for a similar interpretation in his prose translation:

> I dreamt that I was walking to and fro in our yard, when I saw an animal that looked like a dog, and wanted to seize my body and kill me. (Wilcockson 2008: 557).

So while the translations all agree to render the idioms *maken arest* and *han ded* as

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would have been interesting to see if the expression is also used in the other version of the *Brut* (Otho MS.), but unfortunately the line in question is missing from the manuscript.

'seize' and 'kill' (or 'kill dead'), there are competing interpretations of the verbal cluster *wolde han*. In order to decide on the most plausible one, we will have to consider the ME verb *willen* and the perfect more closely.

3 The meanings of *willen* in Middle English

Before we move on to ME, let us first have a quick look at the auxiliary *will* in PDE. Like other auxiliaries *will* does not have one single meaning, but is used in a number of different functions: it can be used as a future-tense marker, it can express propensity or habitual action, it can be an epistemic marker of probability, and it can express various degrees of volition (e.g. intention or willingness) on the part of the subject.[3] These uses can be illustrated with example sentences from Quirk et al. (1985: 213; 228-229):

> FUTURITY
> *He will be here in half an hour*
>
> PROPENSITY
> *Oil will float on water*
>
> PROBABILITY
> *That'll be the postman* [on hearing the doorbell ring]
>
> VOLITION
> *I'll do it, if you like*

In addition, the past tense form would has a few uses of its own. Like the past tense forms *could* and *might*, it can be used to express tentativeness, e.g. in polite requests. It can also be used as a 'mood marker' to express hypothetical meaning, either with or without a conditional clause. Quirk et al. (1985: 233-234) give the following examples:

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[3] It is an open question exactly how many different meanings *will* has, and how they shade into one another. Quirk et al. subsume the uses FUTURITY, PROPENSITY and PROBABILITY under the heading PREDICTION, and further distinguish three different degrees of VOLITION. Huddleston and Pullum (2002: 188-194), on the other hand, group PROPENSITY and VOLITION together, as dynamic modal meanings, and FUTURITY and PROBABILITY as epistemic modal meanings.

TENTATIVENESS
Would you lend me a dollar?

HYPOTHETICAL MEANING
If you pressed that button, the engine would stop [with conditional clause]
I'd hate to lose that pen [without conditional clause]

In the late ME period, i.e. around the time of Chaucer, *willen* also had a variety of different functions, as is clear from the many meanings distinguished by OED and MED. In fact it seems that most of the functions that we can distinguish for PDE *will* were already possible in late ME:

FUTURITY
Whanne wol the gayler bryngen oure potage?
'When is the jailer going to bring our stew?'
(?c1375-a1390) Chaucer *CT.Mk.*(Manly-Rickert) B.3623 (MED *willen* v.1, 27.a)

PROPENSITY
A tree þat is drye wil rather brek þan bowe.
'A tree that is dry will break rather than bend'
c1460 *Tree & Fruits HG* (McC 132) 62/13 (MED *willen* v.1, 25.a)

PROBABILITY
I am aferd there wylle be sumthyng amys.
'I am afraid something will be (*or* is) amiss'
c1450 *Cov. Myst., Assumption* 349 (OED *will* v.1, 15.d)

But there is an important difference when it comes to expressions of volition. In PDE, volitional uses of *will* tend to shade into future meanings so that '[v]olition is better regarded as an implicature overlaid upon futurity' (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 193). An example like *I'll do it, if you like* is not so much an expression of what the speaker wants as it is a promise to actualise the state of affairs 'do it' in the (near) future – with the implicature that the speaker is also willing to do so. In ME, on the other hand, *willen* had a much wider range of volitional functions, and was used in contexts where today we would use verbs like *want*, *wish*, or *desire*.

For instance, it could take a direct object noun phrase or a complement clause, and when occurring with an infinitive it could have a stronger volitional meaning, where PDE uses *want to* (or, more politely, *would like to*).

> VOLITION: NP OBJECT
> *Thei seide thei wolde the londe and the contrey for her oncle.*
> 'They said that they wanted (*or* desired) the land and the country for their uncle'
> a1500(?c1450) *Merlin* (Cmb Ff.3.11) 192 (MED *willen* v.1, 1.b)

> VOLITION: COMPLEMENT CLAUSE
> *Ialous folk been perilouse eueremo, Algate they wolde hir wyues wenden so.*
> 'Jealous people are always perilous; in any case they'd wish that their wives thought so'
> (c1390) Chaucer *CT.Rv.*(Manly-Rickert) A.3962 (MED *willen* v.1, 1.g)

> VOLITION: 'WANT TO'
> *'Yet woll I wete,' quod he, .. 'From whense she came, and what she is'.*
> '"Yet I want to know," he said, .. "From whence she came, and what she is"'
> c1440 *Generydes* 4432 (OED *will* v.1, 5.)

The last example shows clearly how the semantics have changed – in PDE a phrase like *I will know* is of course possible, but the meaning is predictive rather than volitional. Furthermore, the past tense form *would* is not generally used to denote intention in PDE (Quirk et al. 1985: 232), and when it denotes willingness, it is normally restricted to non-affirmative contexts:

> *I had no money on me but he wouldn't lend me any.*
> (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 197)

The affirmative equivalent to this would rather be 'I had no money on me but he was willing to lend me some'. In ME there do not appear to have been any such restrictions on the past tense of *willen*, so just like the present tense form could mean 'want to', *wolde* could express past intention, 'wanted to':

Lucifer .. was hidde from þe gret clerenes of paradise because he wold be liche vnto God his maker.
'Lucifer was kept from (*or* deprived of) the great splendor of Paradise because he wanted to be equal to God, his creator'
c1470 *Bible F.*(Cleve-W q091.92-C468) 45/3 (MED *willen* v.1, 9.f)

Interestingly, OED has a late 19th-century attestation with this meaning where the author seems to be commenting on its use, indicating that it must have been considered old-fashioned or unusual at the time:

They asked us if we would have tea, and as we 'would', they took us into an adjoining room.
1876 in Marchioness Dufferin *Canad. Jrnl.* (1891) 291 (OED *will* v.1, 25.a)

Thus, it is clear that the ME form *wolde* does not necessarily correspond to PDE *would*, and when translating or glossing an older text one has to choose between alternative readings according to the context. But what, then, about the combination of *wolde* and the perfect infinitive? In order to determine this we have to consider the development of the perfect as well.

4 The perfect infinitive

The English periphrastic perfect consists of a form of the auxiliary *have* plus a past participle. Huddleston and Pullum (2002) analyse the PDE perfect as a 'non-deictic' past tense because it always expresses past states of affairs in relation to some other point in time. For instance, in (a) below, where *have* is in the present tense, the state of affairs 'do my work' is presented as anterior to the present. The perfect is generally agreed to have developed out of structures with a direct object and a complement past participle, as in (b), which were reanalysed so that the participle became the main verb and *have* an auxiliary, rather than a verb of possession (cf. Fischer 1992:

a. *I have done my work*
b. *I have my work done* (= 'I have my work in a done or finished condition')
(OED *have* v., VI.)

But there have clearly been changes in the use of the perfect forms from ME to today. In PDE, the perfect infinitive, just like other perfect forms, is used to express states of affairs anterior to another point in time. Since the infinitive is tenseless, the time reference is determined by the linguistic context. Thus, in (c) below the perfect infinitive denotes a writing action that took place anterior to the past, in (d) an action anterior to the present, and in (e) an action anterior to the future reference point 'next week'.

    c. *He was believed to have written it the previous week*
    d. *He is believed to have written it last week*
    e. *He hopes to have written it by next week*
    (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 140)

However, in late ME, a rather different use of the perfect infinitive occurred. In past-tense contexts it could be used to mark an unrealised state of affairs simultaneous with – not anterior to – the finite verb. Visser writes that there are "numerous examples" of this after *for to* and other expressions of purpose (Visser 1963-73: §2050). An example of this type is found in the 14th-century metrical romance *Gamelyn*:

    Gamelyn com þerto · for to haue comen in
    And þanne was it ischet · faste wiþ a pyn
    (French and Hale 1930: 218)

In PDE, a regular infinitive would be used: 'Gamelyn came there [to the gate] in order to get inside', or, in Rickert's translation, "He came there for to enter, and found himself barred out" (Rickert 1908: 95). According to Mustanoja (1960: 517), this "peculiar ME use" of the perfect infinitive is especially common after *wolde*, but is also found in other expressions of purpose, will, intention, expectation, etc. Mustanoja mentions two examples from Chaucer:

    And on hir bare knees / adown they falle
    And wolde haue kist his feet ther as he stood
    (*KnT* 1758-60)

> But faire and wel / she creep in to the clerk
> And lyth ful stille / and wolde haue caught a sleepe
> (*RvT* 4226-27)

Our first thought may be to translate these lines into the formally equivalent expressions 'would have kissed his feet' and 'would have gone to sleep'. But these are not the only possible translations. Since ME *wolde* could also have intentional meaning and the perfect infinitive did not necessarily mark the state of affairs as anterior to the finite verb, 'wanted to' or 'intended to' are also possible PDE translations of *wolde haue/han* – and, in fact, seem more appropriate in these two cases.

On the other hand, a hypothetical use similar to the one we know from PDE was also possible in ME. Again Mustanoja (1960: 517) has two examples from Chaucer:

> *if I nadde spoken … Ye wolde han slayn youreself*
> 'if I hadn't spoken … you would have killed yourself'
> (*Troilus and Criseyde* iv 1234)

> *with how mochel woldestow han bought the fulle knowynge of thys?*
> 'with how much would you have bought the full knowledge of this?'
> (*Boethius* ii p 8,43)

As the volitional use of *willen* became weaker, this "strictly conditional use" (OED *will* v.1, 40.a) became the dominant one. But the 'non-anterior' use of the perfect infinitive continued into the Modern English period in other expressions, and appears to have been a thorn in the side of many early prescriptivists. Visser quotes a number of (primarily 19th-century) grammarians' statements about the pattern, most of whom condemn its usage:

> 'Last week I intended to have written' is a very common phrase; the infinitive being in the past time, as well as the verb which it follows. But it is evidently wrong; for how long soever it now is since I thought of writing, 'to write' was then present to me (Murray 1805: 277; cit. Visser 1963-73: §2154)

Perhaps such prescriptive attitudes have furthered the decline of the pattern, but it should be noted that many of the writers faulted for using it (e.g. Johnson and

Milton) are from before the 19th century, and one grammar mentions that it "was common in Elizabethan English" (Nesfield 1898: 169; cit. Visser 1963-73: §2154). So perhaps the non-anterior perfect infinitive had already started to decline before the 19th century.

5 Conclusion

As I hope to have shown in the preceding sections, two linguistic changes are relevant to the combination of *wolde* and the perfect infinitive in Chaucer. Firstly, there is the semantic shift in *willen*, which was commonly used to mean 'want to' in ME, a function which has now been taken over by other verbs. Secondly, a change has happened to the perfect infinitive, so that it is now not normally used for states of affairs simultaneous with the finite verb. This means that the combination of the two forms, as found in Chauntecler's dream, has at least two different functional equivalents in PDE:

> *wolde han maad arest*
> 'would have seized'
> or 'wanted to seize'

Hence, when reading or translating a text like *The Nun's Priest's Tale*, we may be faced with ambiguities that are hard or even impossible to resolve with certainty. So how, then, should we translate Chauntecler's words? In this particular context, the recounting of the contents of a dream, I would argue that the volitional reading is the more likely one: it seems rather more natural to recount the vision of an animal that "wanted to seize my body and kill me" (Wilcockson 2008: 557), than of one that "would have seized me and killed me" (Sisam 1927: 34) without a contradiction ('but...') or a conditional ('if...'). But regardless of which of these translations one prefers, paying close attention to such linguistic ambiguities can both improve our understanding of Chaucer's texts and the history of the language in general.

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