

“What, If Anything, Was Old English?”

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University of Poznań, Poland, 27 November 2021

Abstract: Conventionally, the Norman Conquest signifies a moment when English’s inflectional morphology atrophied, its syntax regularized, its lexicon grew radically, and its phonology altered in several significant ways. It is the moment when, in short, Old English became Middle English. All critics would acknowledge that the transition had to have been gradual and that in the history of the language the Norman Conquest serves largely symbolic purposes, as a memorable event that can be associated with significant language change rather than serve as its immediate cause. But the Old-to-Middle English transition still stands as a bedrock in English language scholarship; paired with a fifteenth-century Middle-to-Modern transition, changes associated with the eleventh century underwrite the tripartite model of language history that has dominated English language historiography since the nineteenth century. In this paper, I test the value of this tradition and its utility for English language scholarship by asking: How intelligible would eighth-century Old English speakers have been to their thirteenth-century counterparts? How would the answer affect any sense of English language periodization? My interest is less in asserting the absolute correctness of a new periodization than in demonstrating its possibility and the narrative implications of that possibility. I am not so much arguing that there was a single medieval stage for English as conducting a thought experiment about whether this could have been the case, about what its narrative consequences would be, and about the impact of such a narrative on periodization in general.