

## The Use of Relative Pronouns in *The Canterbury Tales*

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The usage of relative pronouns has changed from Old English to Modern English. Late Middle English, in particular, saw the evolution of interrogative pronouns adopting the role of relative pronouns. This paper examines the usage of relative pronouns exhibited in *The Canterbury Tales*, and sheds light on the change in the use of relative pronouns in late Middle English. The analysis of relative pronouns in later Middle English depicts the course of change that relative pronouns took and the prevalence of *wh*- relative pronouns in early Modern English.

**Key words:** relative pronouns, Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, Middle English, history of English

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This paper examines the use of relative pronouns in late Middle English through an analysis of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. It compares the usage of the relativiser *that* and *wh*- relativisers and demonstrates the transition from Old English to late Middle English.

Chaucer was a prominent and prolific writer in late Middle English. His writings were influential to the English language of the time. By discussing the linguistic tendencies observed in his magnum work, this paper illustrates the use of relative pronouns in late Middle English. The relative pronouns that are discussed are *that*, *which*, *who*, *whom* and combinative relativisers using the aforementioned relative pronouns.<sup>1</sup> The usage of combinative relativisers provides clues to the development of relative pronouns in English. By using both an edited text and an electronic edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, the usage of the relativisers as well as their frequency is examined.<sup>2</sup>

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## 1. Background

In Old English there were three types of relativisers: 1. *þe*, 2. *se þe*; *seo þe*, 3. *þæt þe*. The first type was prominent and eventually became *that*, while the other types ceased to be used. From early Middle English onwards, *that* emerges as the dominant relativiser, taking on the Old English tradition. During the course of Middle English, interrogative pronouns of *wh*-forms start to function as relative pronouns. It is only in early Modern English that *wh*-forms rival *that* as relative pronouns, when the loose divide between restrictive and non-restrictive functions came into being.

Mustanoja's description of the functions of relative pronouns is probably adequate and most relevant to this paper.<sup>3</sup> He states that the relativiser *the* (antecedent of *þe*) disappeared in the course of the thirteenth century and that became the predominant relativiser for both animate and inanimate referents. Mustanoja notes the existence of the combinative relativisers *which that*, *the which*, and *the which that*. He states *which that* as 'common in Chaucer' and that 'it becomes rare by the end of the fifteenth century'.<sup>4</sup> Mustanoja notes *the which* is 'not particularly common in Chaucer and the proportion between *which* and *the which* in Chaucer's work is approximately 9:1'.<sup>5</sup>

Considering the role combinative relativisers played in the development of relative pronouns in English, the usage of *the which*, along with *which that* and *the which that* should not be undermined, despite the lower frequency of its use. In fact, Mustanoja notes the increase of *the which* in fifteenth century prose. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were a time when functions and forms of relativisers were in constant change.

## 2. Data Analysis

The analysis of the usage of relative pronouns in *The Canterbury Tales* is the focus of this section. The use of relative pronouns is discussed as they are divided into certain patterns: 1. *that*, 2. *which*, 3. *who*, 4. *whom*. We will also discuss combinative forms such as *which that*. Although there exist other relative pronouns, the scope of this paper includes only the relativisers mentioned above.

### 2.1. *That* as a Relative Pronoun

*That* is the most prominent relative pronoun used in *The Canterbury Tales*. In the history of English, the most prominent pronoun changes are from *þe* in Old English to *that* in Middle English, and then to *which* in the Renaissance. The variety of constructions *that* displays in *The Canterbury Tales* is wide. Its uses are versatile and far wider than other forms, functioning both as animate and inanimate relativisers. *That* is also used both restrictively and non-restrictively. In this paper, a detailed analysis of the relative pronoun *that* will not be conducted. This decision is based on the following: 1. from foregoing studies it is evident *that* was already established as a relativiser in late Old English (It is displayed in its high frequency and wide variety

of it use),<sup>6</sup> 2. the purpose of this paper is to illustrate the development of relative pronouns in later Middle English and thus focus must be placed on the evolving usage of *wh*-forms as relativisers.

## 2.2. Which

Although *that* was the most prominent relative pronoun in Old English, *wh*- relative pronouns were more frequently used from Middle English. Of all *wh*- relativisers, *which* was most frequent in *The Canterbury Tales*. Though less frequently used, the combinative relativisers *the which*, *which that*, and *the which that* provide an insightful understanding into the historical development of relative pronouns. They filled the void in late Middle English for the function of relativisers in reference to nominative inanimate nouns, when *who* had not yet been fully developed for that function.

### 2. 2. 1. Independent Which

There are 366 instances of *which* in *The Canterbury Tales*. Along with *that*, *which* was a common relative pronoun to refer to animate nouns. The usage most frequently noted was the use of *which* with a preceding preposition. Although *that* is the most common relativiser in *The Canterbury Tales*, *which* exceeds *that* in its use with prepositions. The following is the number of occurrences of *which* with prepositions: 57 with *in*, 102 with *for*, 31 with *thurgh*, 14 with *with*, 99 with *of*, 3 with *at*, 16 with *to*, 13 with *on*, 11 with *by*, and 1 with *unto*. *After the which* and *after that which* are attested in *The Canterbury Tales*, however there are no occurrences of *after which*. As the high frequency of *which* with prepositions indicates, it is not commonly used as a relativiser referring to a nominative noun since the use of a preposition assumes an accusative or dative case.

The higher frequency of *which* with prepositions is because *that* functions as both a determiner and as a relative pronoun. For example, in a phrase like ‘with that...’, one cannot be sure if *that* is a determiner, while in ‘with which...’ one is most certain *which* is a relativiser. To choose *that* as a relativiser used with a preposition, there is high chance the reader/hearer would be confused that *that* might be a determiner. To avoid such a risk, *which* probably was a better choice in use with prepositions. The independent *which* in *The Canterbury Tales* is a preferred relativiser when used with prepositions and it is often used in reference to objective inanimate nouns.

### 2. 2. 2. Which that

Both *which that* in *The Canterbury Tales* and *who* in Modern English are used as the subject and object of a sentence and in reference to animate nouns. There are 156 instances of *which that* in *The Canterbury Tales*. *Which that* is a common relativiser for animate referents in Middle English, as witnessed in *The Canterbury Tales*. Of all the instances of *which that*, 62 have an animate referent. The following is an example of *which*

*that* used as an object and referring to an animate noun:

So shyneth in his white baner large,  
 That alle the feeldes glyteren up and doun;  
 And by his baner born is his penoun  
 Of gold ful riche, in which ther was ybete  
 The Mynotaur, which that he wan in Crete.  
 (*The Knight's Tale*, p. 38, ll. 976-9)<sup>7</sup>

The referent of the relativiser *which that* is *The Mynotaur* and it is the object of the verb *wan* 'conquered'. In Modern English, either *who* or *whom* could be used but *whom* is preferred to be most specific about the syntactic relations in the sentence.

The usage of *which that* in *The Canterbury Tales* demonstrates it is a versatile relativiser, functioning as either a nominative relativiser or accusative/dative relativiser. In what follows, we will see an example of *which that* functioning as a nominative relativiser referring to an animate noun:

Of every servaunt which that serveth here.  
 Wel koude he hewen wode, and water bere,  
 For he was yong and myghty for the nones,  
 And therto he was long and big of bones  
 To doon that any wight kan hym devyse.  
 (*The Knight's Tale*, p. 45, ll. 1421-5)

The referent of the relativiser *which that* is *every servaunt* and it is the subject of the verb *serveth* 'serves'. In Modern English the relative pronoun *who* would be appropriate, since the referent is nominative and animate. The reason *which that* is used rather than *who* is because *who* had not developed its function as a relative pronoun by late Middle English. This restrictive use of *who* will be discussed in 3.3

### 2. 2. 3. *The which*

There are 31 instances of *the which* in *The Canterbury Tales*. In most of the citations of this type the referent is inanimate. The distinction between *which that* and *the which* is that the latter is commonly used to refer to inanimate nouns. The number of the cases of *the which* referring to an animate nouns is as few as 3 while in 28 instances *the which* refers to inanimate nouns. Below is one example where *the which* refers to an animate noun:

To this sentence answered anon dame Prudence, and seyde, “Examineth,” quod she, “youre conseil, and lat us see the which of hem han spoken most reasonably and taught yow best conseil.

(*The Tale of Malibee*, p. 226, l.1264-5)

In the citation, *the which* is the agent of the verb *spoken*. This is a clear indication the function of *the which* is animate.

#### 2. 2. 4. *The which that*

Of the combinative usages of *which*, *the which that* is the least common in *The Canterbury Tales*. There are five instances of *the which that*. The usage of *the which that* is similar to *which that* in a sense it is used to refer to animate nouns. The following is an example where *the which that* refers to an animate noun:

Now was ther of that chirche a parissh clerk

The which that was ycleped Absolon.

(*The Miller's Tale*, p.69, ll. 3312-3)

In the passage above, *the which that* refers to the ‘parish clerk’ which is an animate noun.

Although the number of occurrences of *the which that* is low, the high ratio of its use referring to animate nouns indicates it was a deliberate choice. Therefore, *the which that* can be considered to have been an easy replacement to *which that*.

#### 2. 3. *Who and its Related Relativiser*

In this section, we examine the usage of *who* and its combinative relativisers. *Who* as exhibited in *The Canterbury Tales* is entirely interrogative. There are no instances of the use of *who* as a relative pronoun. There are only two instances of *who that* in *The Canterbury Tales* used as relativisers. Both of these occurrences of *who that* are used in a similar sentence structure starting with ‘Looke who that’ as illustrated below:

Looke who that is moost pacient in love,

He is at his advantage al above.

(*The Franklin's Tale*, p. 179, ll. 771-2)

In line 772, the combinative relativiser *who that* refers to ‘He’ in *The Franklin's Tale*. Although there are only two instances, *who that* can function as a relativiser.

*Who* in late Middle English still inherits the Old English tradition as an interrogative noun.<sup>8</sup>

#### 2. 4. *Whom* and its Related Relativiser

In *The Canterbury Tales*, two types of relativisers are found that contain *whom*: 1. independent *whom* and, 2. a combinative form *whom that*. In *The Canterbury Tales*, there are 56 instances of *whom*, of which the independent use of *whom* is 43. 18 occurrences are with the combinative form of *whom that*. When we compare the usage of these two types of relativisers, both the syntactic patterns and the frequency of occurrences are compatible. Both are animate and used with or without prepositions. Because of the original sense the interrogative pronoun *whom* has, they are used either as accusative or dative.

The high frequency of *whom that* compared to *who that* may be attributed to the earlier development of *whom* as a relative pronoun. Historically speaking, *whom* is considered to have taken a relative function earlier than other *wh-* forms, as early as early Middle English. By late Middle English, *whom* had already been established as a relative pronoun.

#### 3. Conclusion

The examination of the use of relative pronouns in *The Canterbury Tales* provides evidence for the development of relative pronouns in late Middle English and early Modern English. Certain types of combinative relativisers filled in the functional gap where independent relative pronouns were not capable. Most notable is the relativiser in reference to nominative animate nouns. *Who* had not yet developed as a relative pronoun and there was a need for an animate nominative relativiser. Although *that* was used for such a function, a need still existed for more choice. Until *who* functioned fully as a relative pronoun in early Modern English, combinative relativisers were adopted.

*That* was a dominant relative pronoun with regards to its wide variety of usage and function. *Which* is considered a strong alternative to *that* but its usage was restrictive and rarely used to refer to a nominative referent that was animate. Thus, a need existed for a relativiser other than *that* to refer to a nominative referent that was animate in order to alleviate the workload that bore.

Placed in the context of the history of English, *who* in late Middle English is still mostly used as an interrogative. Therefore, when there was a need for an animate relativiser, *which that*, *the which*, or *the which that* were used instead. Regarding the drive for *wh-* pronouns to become relative pronouns, Fischer points out the use of interrogative pronouns in indirect questions.<sup>9</sup> Fischer claims by using *wh-* pronouns in sentences like 'They knew who did it', the function of *who* and its boundary between an interrogative pronoun and a relative pronoun becomes blurred. Fischer suggests this was the beginning of the rise of *wh-* forms as relative pronouns. Fischer's argument that the use of interrogative pronouns in indirect questions paved the way for them to be used as relative pronouns is plausible.

However, it must be noted there was another aspect to the development of relative pronouns in Middle English. For *who* to be a full-fledged animate relative pronoun, the combinative form of *who that* had to pave the way. All combinative relativisers function in such a manner. Since *that* already was used as a relative pronoun, the element of relativity was added to the phrases *who that*. Once the combinative form *who that* was established as a relativiser, it became possible for *that* to be omitted and for *who* to function as a relativiser.

The examination of relative pronouns in *The Canterbury Tales* suggests the transitional period when the single form of *who* is in the process of acquiring the function of relativiser. *Who* began to be used increasingly as an independent relativiser in early Modern English.

As an antithesis, one might argue that metrical constraints induced the usage of combinative relativisers. In this argument, if words or phrases of more than one syllable were necessary, *which that*, *the which*, or *the which that* were used. Although an element of the usage of combinative relativisers could be attributed to metrical constraints, an analysis of *The Canterbury Tales* suggests it is not the only reason. *The which that* is used where there is no metrical constraints. The following example is a case in point:

Now comth the synne of hem that sowen and maken discord amonges fol, which is a synne that Crist hateth outrely. And no wonder is, for he deyde for to make concord./And moore shame do they to Crist than dide they that hym crucifiede, for God loveth better that freendshipe be amonges folk, than he dide his owene body, the which that he yaf for unitee. Therefore been they likned to the devel, that evere is aboute to maken discord.

(*The Parson's Tale*, p. 309, ll. 642-3)

*The Parson's Tale of The Canterbury Tales* is written in prose style. In the citation, *the which that* is used where no metrical constraints existed. This is an indication the combinative relativiser was an established phrase used both in verse and prose

After the examination of *wh-* combinative relativisers, we noted a functional divide between the combinative relativisers that include *that* and those who do not include *that*. Both *which that* and *the which that* can commonly be used referring to an animate noun. However, *the which* is commonly used referring to inanimate nouns. As was discussed previously, *which* when used independently as a relative pronoun, more frequently refers to inanimate nouns. *That* had already been an established relativiser to refer to an animate noun by late Middle English. By adopting the word in the making of such phrases as *which that*, or *the which that*, *which* was able to function as a relativiser.

The examination of the use of relativisers in *The Canterbury Tales* shows combinative relativisers were used for three reasons: 1. to fill in for a gap that existed, particularly in reference to nominative inanimate

nouns, 2. to alleviate the workload of relativisers that are predominantly used, 3. metrical constraints. In comparison, *whom* and *whom that* seemed to have established themselves as relativisers than *who* and *who that*. The first and second reasons are factors that can be further investigated from a historical perspective with linguistic analysis of works earlier and later than Chaucer.

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<sup>1</sup> The author of this paper has coined the term 'combinative relativiser' to refer to a relativiser made up of more than two words one which includes a relative pronoun in its formation.

<sup>2</sup> The edition used for analysis in this paper is *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed., Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). The electronic edition is from the Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/>).

<sup>3</sup> Tauno Mustanoja, *A Middle English Syntax* (Helsinki: Societe Neophilologique, 1960).

<sup>4</sup> Muatanoja, p. 197.

<sup>5</sup> Mustanoja, p. 199.

<sup>6</sup> See Section 2 of this paper.

<sup>7</sup> All the citations in this paper are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn, ed., Larry D. Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). The pagination and lineation follow those in the edition.

<sup>8</sup> Mustanoja, p. 199 states: 'In reference to person that or which is used instead of the nominative *who* throughout the ME period. Only a few sporadic occurrences of strictly relative *who* are recorded before the 15th century...'

<sup>9</sup> Olga Fischer, 'Syntax', in *The Cambridge History of the English Language*, Vol. 2, ed. by (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 298

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## チャョーサーの『カンタベリー物語』における関係代名詞の用法

十重田和由\*

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本稿の目的はチャョーサーの『カンタベリー物語』における関係代名詞の用法について分析することである。中英語後期の代表的な作家であるチャョーサーの作品で 사용되는関係代名詞の用法はすなわち、中英語後期の関係代名詞の用法について示唆することとなる。中英語後期および近代英語初期はwh-関係代名詞の用法に変化がみられ、英語における関係代名詞の歴史を探るうえで重要な時代である。様々な関係代名詞の型を分析することにより英語の関係代名詞の歴史の一側面を明らかにする。

キーワード：関係代名詞、チャョーサー、『カンタベリー物語』、中英語、英語史

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