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Some evidence for bloody as an Anglo–Norman intensifier.

When one looks for the etymology of the word bloody in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), an intriguing discussion ensues around its use as an adjectival intensifier, the origin of which is ‘uncertain and disputed.’¹ To clarify, an adjectival intensifier is a word used to increase the force of an adjective, such as ‘absolutely’ in the phrase ‘that is absolutely brilliant’. The OED suggests a range of possible origins for bloody as an intensifier, from oaths pertaining to Christ’s blood to an evolution of the phrase ‘bloody drunk’ which, it is argued, ‘reflects attitudes to the Catholic dogma of transubstantiation [...] and the drinking habits of priests during the Reformation’. The first attestation that the OED gives for bloody acting as an intensifier is from c.1540, in Liber Officialis Sancti Andree: ‘Sayand and allegand zow ane commown bluidy huir’ [Saying and alleging you a common bloody whore]; although this reference is in Middle Scots.²

Regarding the semantics and function of bloody in early English, the Dictionary of Old English gives blodig as an adjective to mean ‘bloodthirsty’, ‘cruel’, and ‘murderous’ alongside the more obvious ‘bloodstained’ sense.³ This semantic overlap is something that continues into the Middle English Dictionary entry for blodi, which offers ‘[o]f blood’, ‘consisting of blood’, and ‘full of blood’ alongside ‘savage’, ‘harsh’, ‘warlike’ and ‘bloodthirsty’.⁴ An example of this can be seen in Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde, where it is written that the Trojans and the Greeks ‘mette With blodly strokes’ (l.1759).⁵ Whereas the dictionary evidence confirms that the English bloody was a negative adjective, there is no evidence in the Old and Middle English citations to suggest that blodig/blodi, functioned as an intensifier within an insult or otherwise.

Towards the end of the OED entry, we are advised to compare the development of bloody with the evolution of the French word sanglant from merely pertaining to corporeal blood to acting as an ‘extreme intensifier’. Certainly, it appears that the development of bloody and sanglant is parallel; however, I wish to posit that these words are more intimately linked in their development. Further to this, I would like to suggest that bloody as an intensifier may have arisen from contact between English and the Anglo-Norman dialect of French.

¹ All references to the OED entry are taken from ‘bloody, adj., n., and adv.’, OED Online, (Oxford, 2016), <<http://www.oed.com.eresources.shef.ac.uk/view/Entry/20448?rskey=J5ZsMR&result=1>> (accessed between 15 December 2016 and January 15 2017). All translations unless otherwise stated are my own.

² Liber Officialis Sancti Andree, ed. J H Forbes (Edinburgh, 1845), 139.

³ ‘blodig, adj.’, Dictionary of Old English: A to H online, eds. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto, 2016), <<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca.eresources.shef.ac.uk/doi/>> (accessed between 15 December 2016 and January 15 2017).

⁴ ‘blodi, adj’, Middle English Dictionary, (Ann Arbor, 2014), <<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/m/mec/med-idx?type=id&id=MED5276>> (accessed between 15 December 2016 and January 15 2017).

⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, ‘Troilus and Criseyde’, in The Riverside Chaucer, 3 ed. (Oxford, 2008), 583.

In her study of Old French insults, Dominique Lagorgette has remarked that sanglant is, crucially, a specifically Anglo-Norman word.⁶ Indeed, it appears twice in the Anglo-Norman Manières de Langage (a group of Anglo-Norman conversation manuals composed in 1396, 1399, and 1415). Significantly, it is used in these texts as an intensifier, in insults such as ‘senglant merdous garcion’ [bloody filthy rogue, p.25], and ‘senglent filz de putaigne’ [bloody son of a whore, p.54]⁷, neither of which usages can be construed as merely adjectival. Lagorgette has furthermore remarked upon the curious usage of ‘sanglant paillart’ [bloody bastard] in the Continental French farce Pathelin. Remarkably, she notes, the phrase appears when Pathelin, babbling in various French dialects in an attempt to appear mad, is speaking in the Norman dialect. Pathelin’s wife, Guillemette, attempts to explain away his strange utterances, saying ‘Celuy qui l’apprint à l’escole/ Estoit Normand [...]’⁸ [This which he learnt at school/ was Norman]. Moreover, in his speech, Pathelin swears by Saint George, who seems to have first enjoyed status as a patron saint of England during the reign of Edward III.

Further to this, there are two further attestations of sanglant in the Anglo-Norman corpus which are ambiguous in their function.⁹ These come from La Estoire de Seint Aedward le Rei, which was written c.1245: ‘Morz est li senglant felun’ [dead is the bloody felon, l.3331] and ‘Delivré ad la terre Deus/ Des sanglanz Daneis bastarz’ [deliver to the earth, Lord/ the bloody Danish bastard, ll. 4750-1]. The precise function of these attestations is uncertain, since they could either be an intensifier or an adjective to mean ‘bloodthirsty’. However, it is precisely this type of semantic ambiguity that is integral to the evolutionary process of a given word or phrase.

There is yet another ambiguous attestation to point out, one that predates the appearance of the intensifier sanglant in the Manières de Langage, but which (significantly) appears in Continental French. The extract comes from the Miracle de la marquise de la Gaudine (c.1350):

‘LE DYABLE. Haro ! que j’ay le ventre plain De dueil et de sanglante rage Quant je ne puis en mon servage Mettre la femme du marquis !’¹⁰

THE DEVIL. Ah ! I have a gut full of grief and bloody rage since I cannot place the wife of the marquis into my servitude !

This appears in MS Bibliothèque National de France, Français, 819-820, which is a manuscript containing Continental French drama. This attribution is described in the Dictionnaire du Moyen Français as ‘intensif et dépréciatif de l’extrême’ [extremely intensive and depreciative].¹¹ However, it

⁶ Dominique Lagorgette, ‘Insultes et registres de langue dans les Manières de langage : transgression et effets d’oralité’, Diachroniques, iii (2013), 140

⁷ All quotations taken from the Manières de Langage (1396, 1399, 1415), ed. Andres Kristol, ANTS 53, (London: 1995)

⁸ La farce de maistre Pierre Pathelin, (Paris : 1723), 61-62,

<<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=tRBJAAAACAAJ&pg=PP7#v=onepage&q&f=false>> (accessed 22 January 2017). A caveat here is that, just before the utterance of ‘sanglant paillard’, Guillemette goes on to mention a grandmother ‘[q]ui fut attraitte de Bretagne’ [who was from Britain/Brittany]. However, this interjection does not seem to mark a change in Pathelin’s shift from Norman to another variant of French.

⁹ Results discussed here are to be found in ‘sanglant, adj.’, AND1 Online edition, ed. William Rothwell, <<http://www.anglo-norman.net/D/sanglant>>, (Accessed 8 January 2017). La Estoire de seint Aedward Le Rei, ed. K. Y. Wallace, ANTS 41, (London,1983) is consultable online via the AND.

¹⁰ Miracles de Nostre Dame par personnages, ii, (Paris : 1877), 131.

¹¹ ‘sanglant, adj.’, DME, (Lorraine, 2015), <<http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/sanglant>> (accessed between 8 January 2017 and 15 January 2017).

is equally plausible that 'sanglante' here acts as an adjective meaning 'savage'. Certainly, the Manières de Langage attestation of sanglant is the first unambiguous record of sanglant functioning as an intensifier, rather than merely an adjective. Other examples of the intensifying sanglant appear also in Continental French usage, but only after the Anglo-Norman attestations. Moreover, later attestations in texts such as the Choix de pièces inédites relatives au règne de Charles VI have their action in the Northern region of France, and one can thus argue that the speakers are either conversing in Norman or are familiar with the dialect.¹² Indeed, it is important to state that the Manières de langage were in fact designed to encourage English activity in Normandy, with a view to consolidating English presence in recently-won lands in the North of France during the Hundred Years War. This is argued by Douglas Kibbee and Rory Critten, the latter of whom explicitly relates the 'heyday of the Manières de langage' to 'some of the most spectacular English successes' in the Hundred Years War.¹³ Later adoption into Continental French should thus be considered a natural consequence of language contact. As the evidence from Pathelin demonstrates, sanglant as an intensifier endured as a trope to indicate the Norman dialect. Furthermore, a Norman reading of sanglant imbues these later Continental attestations with an ironic meaning. Attestations such as from the Chronique de Charles VII, where the French call the 'Angloiz et Normans' by the insult 'senglans, puans, mezeaulx porriz' [bloody, putrid, rotting lepers], are transformed by a Norman reading into an instance wherein the French are insulting the English in their own tongue.¹⁴

On the basis of these collected observations, sanglant should perhaps be considered as an Anglo-Norman phrase, or certainly a Norman phrase, rather than simply 'Old French'. The presence of Anglo-Norman constructions independent of Continental norms should not be surprising, and would indeed reflect William Rothwell's observation that

'This French of England was no mere imitation of the language of the mainland, but was capable of developing its own morphological and semantic structures without reference to the 'correct' French of the Continent.'¹⁵

Calques from Anglo-Norman into English are also common, and there are multiple recorded calques and loan words from Anglo-Norman into Middle English. William Rothwell has identified a few Anglo-Norman loan words into the English vulgar register, for example, bastard, coward, and vile, among many others.¹⁶ Laura Wright furthermore discusses calques from Latin and Anglo-Norman into English within the context of macaronic business documents.¹⁷ Addressing calques within language pedagogy, Andres Kristol has commented on a fourteenth-century trilingual translation exercise in MS Oxford Magdalen 188:

¹² Choix de pièces inédites relatives au règne de Charles VI : publiées par la Société de l'histoire de France, ii, (Paris, 1863-1864), 48.

¹³ Rory Critten, 'Practising French Conversation in Fifteenth-Century England', The Modern Language Review, cx.4, (2015), 927-945, 937. See also Douglas Kibbee, For to speke Frenche trewely : the French language in England, 1000-1600: its status, description, and instruction, (Amsterdam; Philadelphia : 1991), 61.

¹⁴ Chronique de Charles VII, roi de France, ii, (Paris, 1858), 30. Indeed, all of the words in this phrase are attested in the Anglo-Norman Dictionary.

¹⁵ William Rothwell, 'The Anglo-French element in the vulgar register of late Middle English', Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, xcvi (1996), 423-436, 425.

¹⁶ Rothwell, 'The Anglo-French element in the vulgar register of late Middle English', 423-436.

¹⁷ See in particular Laura Wright, 'The Contact Origins of Standard English' in English as a Contact Language, eds. David Schreier and Marianne Hunt, (Cambridge, 2013), 58-74.

'Le texte anglais ... exploite à fond tous les emprunts que le moyen anglais a faits à l'anglo-normand, pour calquer de très près, souvent mot à mot aussi, le texte français.' ¹⁸

The English text... makes use throughout of all the borrowings that Middle English adopted from Anglo-Norman, in order to closely calque, often word-for-word, the French text.

Moreover, a cursory glance through the bilingual fragments of the Manières de langage and Caxton's Dialogues reveals multiple calques such as 'je prenge congié a vous'/'I take leue of you'¹⁹ and 'Ore tenés le chemin a le main sinestre'/'Nowe hold the waie on the lift hande'.²⁰ Within the context of these findings, the absence of an intensifier use for blodi from the Middle English record is perhaps odd, given that an Anglo-Norman calque would be expected to appear during this period. Perhaps blodi simply did not make the written record in this way, or the texts that contained it do not survive to us. But in the absence of positive evidence, this mystery must remain unresolved.

However, in light of the evidence, the hypothesis that I propose is that the presence of Anglo-Norman supported the semantic and grammatical development of bloody in English. Before the appearance of Anglo Norman, English did not use bloody as an intensifier, but rather, as an adjective denoting either 'covered in blood' or 'cruel' (and its synonyms). The potential for this evolution already existed in English, due to the semantic ambiguity of bloody, but it is perhaps the influence of the Anglo-Norman sanglant that influenced the shift towards an intensifier use for bloody. In this vein, it also seems significant that the intensifier use of bloody exists in the English language, whereas sanglant does not hold this function in present-day French.²¹

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¹⁸ Andres Kristol, 'L'Intellectuel "anglo-normand" face à la pluralité des langues: le témoignage implicite du ms.Oxford, Magdalen 188f, in Multilingualism in Later Medieval Britain: Proceedings of the 1997 Aberystwyth Colloquium, ed. D. A. Trotter, (Cambridge, 2000), 44

¹⁹ William Caxton, Dialogues in French and English, ed. Jean Gessler, (Bruges, 1931), 9

²⁰ Östen Södergård, 'Une "Manière de Parler": Ms. Cambridge, Bibliothèque de l'Université, li 6.17', Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, liv (1953), 211

²¹ As for the Germanic languages, the only other instance of this word being used as an intensifier is the German blutig, meaning 'absolutely'. This usage is, however, rare, and is not attested as early as Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm's Deutsches Wörterbuch (Leipzig, 1854), <<http://woerterbuchnetz.de/DWB>> (accessed 23 December 2017). The Dictionnaire Étymologique de l'Ancien Français <<http://deaf-server.adw.uni-heidelberg.de/>> attests to some 2036 German loan words into Norman, 1966 of which are exclusively Anglo-Norman words. This is potential evidence for language contact between the languages of Medieval Germany and Anglo-Norman.