

The What Ifs.....?

One of the temptations of hindsight is to spend an idle hour revisiting significant events in the past and speculating how things might just have turned out differently, - the irresistible “what ifs...” of history.

What if, for example, Harold had defeated William of Normandy at the Battle of Hastings, sending the French invaders packing back across the Channel? How might our life today be very different? For starters there would be no Norman castles, cathedrals or parish churches, and especially no Domesday Book. But their absence we would not be aware of. What you haven’t experienced you don’t miss. Of far greater significance would be the effect on the English language, and the way we speak it today.

For some 200 hundred years post 1066 this country was ruled by a French speaking elite through a French language bureaucracy. The Anglo-Saxon majority could like it or lump it. Any protests were brutally put down by the Norman military machine, as we know to our cost in Yorkshire, which “was laid waste.” Presumably there must have been some contact on a linguistic level between the “colonial” rulers and their unwilling subject citizens and several outcomes were possible. French could in time completely replace Anglo-Saxon as the nationally accepted language. Or vice versa. The French elite would have to accept that they had no choice but to govern through the language of the majority of the citizens. Neither of these happened. Instead, slowly but surely, over several centuries there came about a fusion of the two languages. French words were grafted on to the Anglo-Saxon. In particular a lot of our abstract vocabulary comes from the French, - all those words ending in “-ion”, for example. But the 100 most commonly used words in English today are still Anglo-Saxon in origin. In fact, in many respects we have a dual vocabulary for the same objects, one word from the Anglo-Saxon and one from the French, although there is often a very subtle difference between the Anglo-Saxon word and its French counterpart. It is this that has made the English such a rich and complex language. Viz.

Anglo-Saxon	French
finger	digit
stream	river
wood	forest
stool	chair
thoughtful	pensive

The subtle difference is particularly evident in the last example - “thoughtful” from Anglo-Saxon “think”, “pensive” from French “penser”. But now they don’t mean the same thing. Someone looking “pensive” is not the same as someone looking “thoughtful.” Just as a “stool” is not the same as a “chair”.

Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales” was one of the first literary works written in the English language, (rather than in Latin or French). Now, in the 1350s, some 300 years after the Norman invasion, we can see in the opening lines of the Prologue how French words have become an accepted part of

what is now called Middle English. It is possible, however, that at this time they were still pronounced in a French-sounding way.

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour,
Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,

So how might modern English sound had this French invasion not happened? Modern German, which did not suffer a visit from France, can give us a clue. Our word “book” is Anglo-Saxon, and in German it is “Buch”. But we use a French word, “library”, to describe a collection of books. In German, which did not have this option, such a collection is called a “Bücherei”, which suggests that without 1066 we would all be going to a “bookery” to borrow our books. Similarly, instead of being treated in a “hospital”, (French “hôpital”), we might find ourselves in a “sick house”, (German “Krankenhaus.”) A “generous” person, (French “généreux”), would instead be a “freegiver”, (German “freigebig.”). “Passage” would be a “throughway”, (Durchgang.) etc. etc....

What if, indeed?

So here’s one for you to try at home:

What if Henry VIII had been a faithful and loyal husband to Katherine of Aragon and had never lusted after Anne Boleyn.....? Reformation, anybody?

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