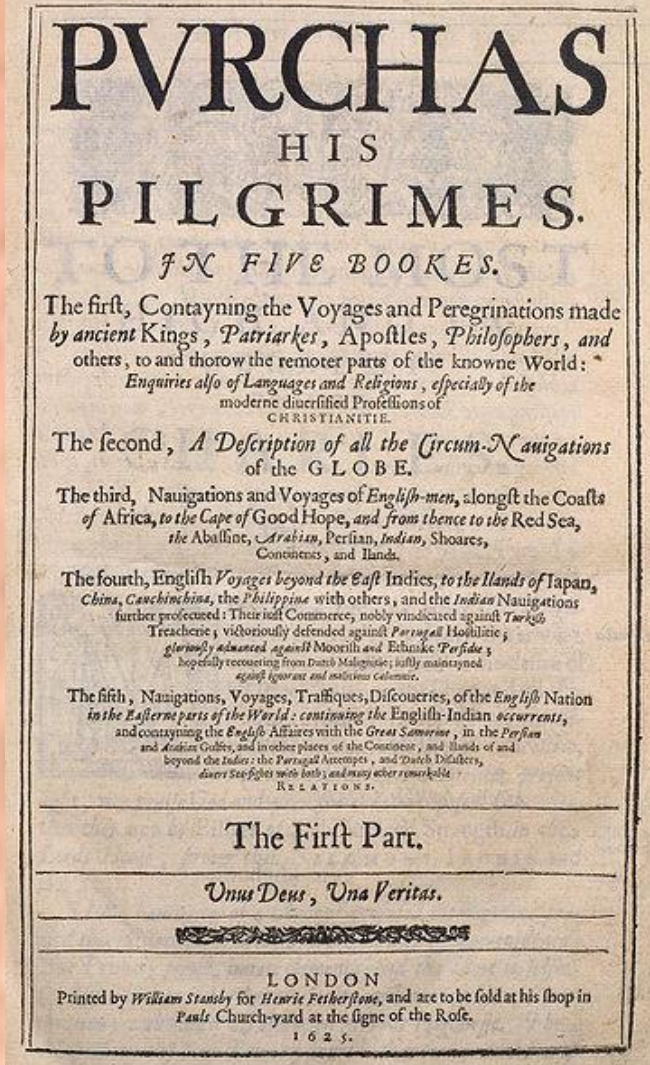# Chapter 8: The Early Modern English Period, 1500-1800

Part 2: Forms, Syntax, and Usage: The Lead-up to ENGL 530

Grammatical Changes

- All plurals for new words are regular (-s or –es)
- A few irregular plurals survive
- The *his*-genitive develops to spell out the –s in the genitive singular. By analogy a *her*-genitive and a *their*-genitive develop.
  - Especially seen with proper names and especially after proper names ending in sibilants: "characters as red as Mars his heart;" "Margery Brewys her mark;" "the House of Lords their proceedings"

- Group genitive: '*s* is added to the last word in the word group, not to the word it actually inflects [*the King of England's army*= the (King + genitive) of England army, not "the King's army of England"]
  - 's is an *enclitic* ending—attached to the closest word, not to the word it morphologically modifies.
- Uninflected genitives: *Ladychapel, chrissake* (the elision and loss of the dental in "christ" leading to the loss of the genitive 's before the sibilant in 'sake'). Especially happens with nouns that originally were feminine in Anglo-Saxon grammar or nouns ending in –s sounds ("for conscience sake")

Adjectives and Adverbs

- Loss of strong/weak distinction but sometimes the survival of a silent –e on the end ("quite")

- The only adjectives that still have to agree in number with the nouns they modify are *this/these* and *that/those*

- Increased use of analytical forms for comparatives and superlatives (*more/most* rather than *–er/-est*); sometimes double comparison exists in EModE

Pronouns

- Grammatically, the part of speech that changes most in the EModE period
- *I* is almost always capitalized
- *My/mine* and *thy/thine* (with *mine/thine* being used before vowel SOUNDS)
- Loss of second person singular pronouns (*thou, thee, thy, thine*); second person plural pronouns extend to cover the declension
    - No distinction like French *tu/vous* or German *Du/Sie*
    - Translators of KJV deliberately retained archaic pronouns *thee, thou, thine*
- Neuter nominative singular loses its initial [h]: now *it* instead of *hit*
- Second person singular agreement (*you was,* not *you were*) until the school-mastering grammarians got hold of it in the late 18th century
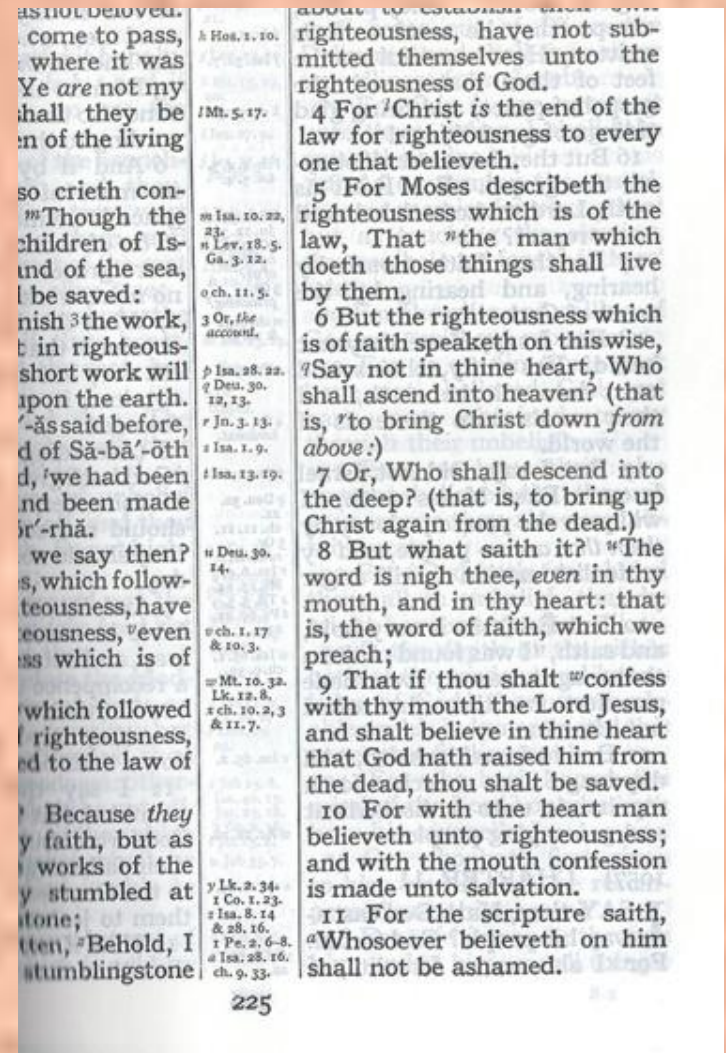
Relative and Interrogative Pronouns

- *Who* (OE hwā) comes to be the relative 'who,' referring to humans only in the 16th century
- *That* (restrictive relative) and *which* (nonrestrictive relative) appear in almost equal frequencies in speech
- The *that/which* rule comes from Fowler's *English Usage* (1905); a late example of *schoolmastering*

Cases of Pronouns

- Example of linguistic anxiety
- Attempts to regularize usage in 17th and 18th centuries
- Hypercorrection often applied ("They invited Mary and me" becomes "They invited Mary and I")
  - *I/me* often shaky after forms of the verb "to be"
  - *Who/Whom* started worrying people in the late 15th century—still a great deal of variation today

Snapshots at jasonlove.com

Who

Who

Who

Or is it whom?

Verbs

- Virtually all new verbs borrowed in as weak verbs with 3 principal parts

- Most strong verbs disappeared or developed alternate (weak) forms (*dove/dived*)

- Confusion over related forms such as *lie/lay* and *sit/set* (look these up in the *OED*)
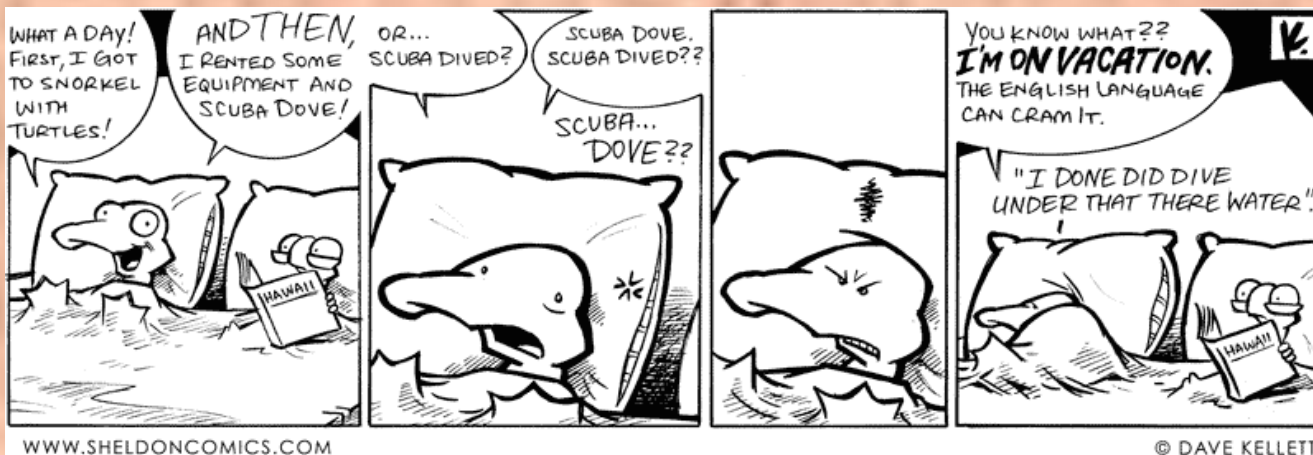
The Progressive Aspect of Verbs

- Largely due to loss of *on* as a preposition before the participle used as gerund; caused by phonological leveling (no longer "They are a-dancing")

- Starts to happen in 16th c.

- Extension of *be-* forms with present participles: *I am working; they are dancing*

- By 18th c. has extended to passive voice: *The house is being built*. Earliest example of this is 1762; makes it into grammar books by 1802, though still being attacked as "careless" usage into late 19th c.

More about verbs

- The inflectional endings largely disappear (though the silent –e spelling may be retained)

- Second- and third-person singular forms start to collapse

- Concord with the 2nd person plural of "to be" is very irregular

- "Do-support" *('The lady doth protest too much')* is frequent

Contractions

- *Don't* is the mystery contraction
- *Ain't* (for *am not*—possibly with a scribal variation on minims)—originally may have been a high-class status form
- '*twill*'= 'it will' gradually replaced with "it'll"
- '*ve* enclitic for "have" is an 18th century phenomenon: "He could've done it"
- Phonological spelling "he would of done it"-- an example of *eye dialect*

Prepositions

- Elision and leveling of unstressed prepositions leads to *a-* forms and some others: "*aboard*"=on board; "*abed*" = in bed; "once a day" = once in a day

- More fuss about ending sentences with prepositions, which you can't do in Latin but can do nicely in English—it just drives the prescriptive grammarians crazy. Another example of schoolmastering!