Unhistorical Gender Assignment in La3amon’s Brut

A Case Study of a Late Stage in the Development of Grammatical Gender toward its Ultimate Loss
1. Introduction

1.1 A gap in linguistic gender scholarship

The Middle English period was undoubtedly one of great linguistic change. The change was so extensive and fundamental that what at the beginning of the period had been a language that even native speakers of English today have to learn like a foreign tongue was at the end Modern English (see Baugh/Cable 2002: 158). Both vocabulary and grammar were affected. Middle English saw an influx of words from French and Latin, an almost pure Germanic language being transformed into a mixed one. Grammatically, it was marked by a general reduction of inflectional endings, losing many synthetic traits and becoming highly analytic. Associated with this latter change, there was a particular change that makes English unique among the Indo-European languages: the loss of grammatical gender. This is often connected with the rise of natural gender to constitute gender shift, but the two are essentially independent, although closely related, processes and should be distinguished.\(^1\)

The origin and development of natural gender has been recurrently discussed by Moore (1921), Heltveit (1958), Baron (1971), Dekeyser (1980), Howe (1996), Platzer (2001), Curzan (2003), Stenroos (2008), and others since Classen (1919) first raised the issue, but no systematic study has so far been made of the loss of grammatical gender proper. There are passing remarks on the cause of the loss in most of the relevant research, including the works cited above, but it has not been made “fully clear” yet, as Markus (1988: 242-244) points out. He himself deals with the problem directly but rather in an impressionistic manner. Deviations from historically expected gender assignment, also, have continuously attracted the attention of

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\(^{1}\) Moore (1921: 103), after explaining the cause of the rise of natural gender, writes, “The cause of the loss of grammatical gender, however, must be sought elsewhere”.
scholars such as Morsbach (1913), von Glahn (1918), Ross (1936), Clark (1957), and Jones (1988); however, they do not adequately discuss their implications for the subsequent development and eventual loss of grammatical gender, their focus being primarily on the explanation of the deviations themselves. Filling this gap in gender scholarship is the aim of the present study.

Since the discussion of the development of demonstrative pronouns constitutes an integral part of this study, three works deserve special mention: Heltveit (1967), Rennhard (1962), and Millar (2000b). Heltveit (1967) and Rennhard (1962) are largely irrelevant owing to their focus on new plural forms and to the fact that they give consideration to singular forms, which are my primary concern, “chiefly insofar as they may throw light upon the conditions prevailing in the plur[al]” (Heltveit 1967: 12). In any case, the texts examined in the present study show no clear evidence of differentiation according to singularity or plurality (see 2.2.3, however, for a possible inchoate development thereof). Millar (2000b) deals with unhistorical gender forms, but his interest lies in the birth of the definite article rather than in the development of gender. His work, however, is directly concerned with the final stage of the loss of grammatical gender and will be addressed in chapter 4.

1.2 Gender marking in Old English

1.2.1 Sex and gender

Old English, like German and some of the Slavic languages, distinguishes three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. The distinction to some extent corresponds to biological sex, especially in the case of nouns denoting human beings; thus, *brōðor* ‘brother’, *cyning* ‘king’, and *hlāford* ‘lord’ are masculine, while *cwēn* ‘queen’, *hlæfdige* ‘lady’, and *sweostor* ‘sister’ are feminine.\(^2\) There are, however, many

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\(^2\) Corbett (1991: 8) in his comprehensive study of gender systems of over two hundred languages states that there is a semantic core to all gender systems.
exceptions. The compound *wīfmann* ‘woman’ is masculine, and *mægden* ‘maiden’ neuter. Animals are often assigned one particular gender without any regard to their actual sex as when *fisc* ‘fish’ is masculine, *mūs* ‘mouse’ feminine, and *lamb* ‘lamb’ neuter. While most neuter nouns refer to inanimate things, e.g., *land* ‘land’, *scip* ‘ship’, and *word* ‘word’, many inanimate nouns are classed as either masculine or feminine; thus, *mōna* ‘moon’, *stān* ‘stone’, and *wīsdōm* ‘wisdom’ are masculine, and *bōc* ‘book’, *sāwel* ‘soul’, and *sunne* ‘sun’ feminine. Since the meaning gives no hint as to the gender of most Old English nouns, it must be learned on the basis of formal criteria.

### 1.2.2 Nominal forms

There are two types of formal criteria that distinguish the gender of nouns. One is morphological, and the other morphosyntactic. Sometimes the morphology of nouns alone is enough to indicate their gender. Some lexical suffixes are associated only with a particular gender, e.g., *-scipe* with the masculine, *-nes(s)* with the feminine, and *-ett(t)* with the neuter (see Quirk/Wrenn 1994: 109-119 for a list of recurrent affixes), and there are two inflectional endings that are peculiar to some genders: *-as* to the masculine and *-es* to the masculine or neuter (see appendix A.1). These cases are, however, exceptional. Gender in Old English is, in effect, a covert category and in many cases cannot be distinguished by the form or meaning of nouns alone.

### 1.2.3 Agreement

This covert category is made overt by a morphosyntactic means: agreement. It is generally accepted that “the determining criterion of gender is agreement” (Corbett 1991: 4). Gender, which is not always shown by the meaning or form of nouns alone, is essentially a grammatical category and divides nouns into formal classes by means of the agreement they take. The number of classes distinguished is not necessarily three. The Romance languages, for example, have only two, and some Bantu languages up to twenty (see Corbett 1991 for