

## The Language and Meaning of the College Motto

'*Manners makyth man*' is the motto of both the institutions founded by William of Wykeham, New College and Winchester College. Although no contemporary record attests to this, it is often thought that Wykeham devised it himself and appended it to his coat of arms.<sup>1</sup> We do not know when he first used either the arms or the motto, but his seal as Archdeacon of Lincoln displays the arms and he was appointed to this position in 1361. Neither is likely to predate his rise to prominence as Clerk of Works and Surveyor to Edward III in the late 1350s, and the motto, if indeed composed by him as a motto, cannot predate the arms. In English heraldry, however, mottoes are personal, they do not normally form part of a grant of arms, and their use with the coat is accordingly optional. The absence of the motto from the seal does not, therefore, necessarily indicate that the motto had not yet been devised. In 1367, Wykeham was appointed Bishop of Winchester, by virtue of which he also became Chaplain to The Order of the Garter at Windsor and entitled to the use of the famous motto, *Honi soi qui mal y pense*. He could hardly have felt a need to add to this a superfluous one of his own with which to clutter his arms. We may accordingly date Wykeham's creation of his motto most probably to the period between the late-1350s and 1367.

Dictionaries of proverbs record fairly numerous late Middle English examples of *manner(s) makyth man* which are not directly linked in any way to Wykeham. The earliest, listed both by *The Middle English Dictionary* and by Whiting, is in *The Proverbs of Wisdom—Euer maner makeþ man*—in a manuscript dated by both to before 1400 but not earlier than 1375, although manuscripts, of course, may contain texts earlier than the manuscripts themselves and lists of proverbs by their nature contain material of earlier date than the lists.<sup>2</sup> Douce MS 52, a mid-fifteenth century manuscript, contains another collection of proverbs which also includes *maner makys man*.<sup>3</sup> And Caxton in his Prologue to *The Book of Good Manners* (1487) says that 'accordyng to an olde prouerbe he that is not manerd is no man, for maners make man'.<sup>4</sup> Wykeham may well then have borrowed a known alliterative saying for his own purpose rather than manufacturing it himself. If so, the adage may be considerably older, though it cannot possibly be older than the late twelfth century when the loan word *manere* is first recorded in English and, as something of a gap may be presumed between the date of the adoption of a foreign word and its appearance in idioms in the receiver language, an early thirteenth century date provides a likelier earliest date.

The earliest datable appearance in college is found on the small silver seal which bears the initials of John London, Warden from 1526 to 1542: *Manner + Makyth + Man*,<sup>5</sup> and nearly the same spelling is found in a stained glass window of c. 1560 in the Warden's Lodgings: *Maner Makyth Man Q[uod] D[icit] Byshop Wykham*. A sixteenth century stained glass window on the north side of the nave of

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<sup>1</sup> His arms are: argent, two chevronels sable between three roses gules, seeded or, barbed vert.

<sup>2</sup> See *MED manere*, sense 5 (c), *Prov.Wisd.* 43 and B. J. Whiting, ed., *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases From English Writings Mainly Before 1500* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968), M362. A variant reading of this gives *Euer maner and clothyng makeþ man*.

<sup>3</sup> Also listed in Whiting M362.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from *The Prologues and Epilogues of William Caxton*, ed. W.J.B. Crotch, EETS os 176 (London, 1928), p. 99.

<sup>5</sup> I am very grateful to Caroline Dalton, the former College Archivist, for drawing my attention to this seal, which is described in *The Treasures of New College, Oxford*, p. 12. .

Bradford Peverell church, near Dorchester, where the motto appears on a scroll above the arms in the form *manare makythe man*, represents its earliest known use outside College. This church was given by Wykeham to Winchester College in 1395.<sup>6</sup> These three earliest examples of the motto all display the singular form of the first noun. The standard orthography now found in College, however, is *manners*. This form is morphologically plural but may have functioned syntactically as singular with collective sense.<sup>7</sup> In southern dialects of Middle English *-eth* (variously spelled) is the inflection of the third person singular *and* plural of the present indicative of verbs, but midland dialects characteristically distinguish singular *-eth* from plural *-e(n)*. The founder, born at Wickham in Hampshire and educated at Winchester, was a southerner and so would have said *manner maketh man* and *manners maketh man*. Oxford, however, in the south midlands and bordering southern dialect areas, was situated in an area where both *-eth* and *-e(n)* might occur in the plural, so that a local would have said *manner maketh man* but either *manners maketh man* or *manners maken man* (or *manners make man*). Accordingly, if the current standard form was the original one, then both its subject and verb were ambiguous in number whether its original dialect was southern or south midlands. However, there are pointers to the conclusion that the original form was singular: the singular form *manner* in the earliest example of the proverb and in the earliest examples of the motto, together with the absence from Wykeham's foundations of unambiguous verbal plurals in *make(n)*.

Authorities disagree about the motto's meaning, in particular, the exact sense of 'manners'. *OED* ascribes to it in this idiom the sense 'a person's habitual behaviour or conduct, esp. in reference to its moral aspect; moral character, morals', but the *MED* gives it the more narrowly social sense 'a way of conducting oneself toward others; outward behavior, deportment, bearing...proper conduct, good manners' where no explicit link is drawn with moral principles.<sup>8</sup> Both are found quite early in adaptations of the proverb: *manner(s) and clothing make(s) man* occurs several times in fifteenth century texts and illustrates the superficial interpretation, but *grace and manerz make a man* in Rawlinson MS C813 from the end of the same century appears to show the deeper or broader sense. In practice, the two are often hard to distinguish in late Middle English,<sup>9</sup> but the founder, a bishop and, by all early accounts, a pious Christian, is unlikely to have selected a motto without strong moral import, still less would he have given such a one to an institution for the education of

<sup>6</sup> See J. E. Brown, 'Bradford Peverell', *The Dorset Year Book* 37 (1943-4), p. 41, and G. H. Moberly, *Life of William of Wykeham* (Winchester, 1893), pp. vi and 306, n. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Examples of nouns in Middle English of this type (as seen in Modern English *news*) are given by T. F. Mustanoja, *A Middle English Syntax, Part I Parts of Speech*, Mémoires de la Société Néophilologique de Helsinki, 23 (Helsinki, 1960), pp. 64-5.

<sup>8</sup> Despite *MED*'s definition, it would be a mistake to think that people of this period thought matters of deportment and good manners to be divorced from moral concerns. Caxton, for example, in the same Prologue to *The Book of Good Manners* states that he was enjoined to translate the book 'that it myght be had and vsed emonge the people for thamendement of their maners and to thencreace of vertuous lyuyng' and he beseeches his readers 'that they may the better lyue in this present lyf that after this lyf they and I may come to the euerlastyng lyf in heuen': see Crotch, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

<sup>9</sup> Other Middle English nouns straddle similar social and moral divides in their semantic range (presumably for similar reasons) and similar ambiguities result: *courteisie*, 'refinement of manners' but also 'benevolent or humane disposition or chivalrous conduct', *gentilesse* 'nobility of birth or rank' but also 'nobility of character', *nobleie*, 'high rank or birth' but also 'highness of nature or conduct', and so forth.

clerics.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, English mottoes seem to have had their origins in war cries such as *Dieu et mon droit* (the royal motto), or *De par Homont, ich dene* (that of the Black Prince),<sup>11</sup> terse expressions uttered in the direst need of a principle for which one was prepared to die; and their pre-Tudor development still preserved a memory of them as authoritative injunctions or exhortations,<sup>12</sup> so that if *manners makyth man* enjoyed an earlier life as a saying (which appears quite likely) with the primary sense as given by *MED* (which is certainly not impossible), then its generic metamorphosis into motto would have invested it with more serious import. Thomas Chaundler, Warden of New College 1454-75, translated it as *mores componunt hominem* in his *Collocuciones* (c. 1461-2), so making the moral sense explicit.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, if the investigation is confined to the meaning of the words *as motto*, then *OED*'s view is much the more probable.

Mottoes, being personal,<sup>14</sup> were frequently chosen by the bearer for a reason with individual pertinence—a pun on one's name, an autobiographical allusion, or a moral of peculiar relevance. In an age in which a man was so largely defined by his rank, a motto such as ours might well have been chosen by someone not of high rank who yet rose to high position in order to indicate that worth rather than birth makes a man. This political implication is brought out most clearly by the late example in *The London Prodigall* (1605): 'For thers an old saying: Be he rich, or be he poore, Be he hye, or be he lowe, Be he borne in barne or hall, Tis maners makes the man and all'.<sup>15</sup> Though his mother is said to have been of gentle blood, his father was a free yeoman and so, because nobility was held to follow the paternal line, Wykeham was not noble. The fact that the motto is in the vernacular in a period when Latin and French were the languages of high status and almost *de rigueur* in mottoes<sup>16</sup> also suggests a bearer of less than noble origins. Yet he rose to become Bishop of Winchester (1367-1404), Keeper of the Privy Seal (1363-7) and Chancellor (1367-71 and 1389-91), as well as becoming, along the way, enormously wealthy. In this story of rags to riches, then, we may discern a strong personal motive for the choice of motto.<sup>17</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to take *manners makyth man* as merely an honest disclaimer of high rank, still more so as a bold piece of self-advertising. Nobility is much discussed in literature of the later Middle Ages. Highly influential was *Tractate IV* of Dante's *Convivio* in which the author sets out to 'speak of worth, by which a man is truly gentle...refuting the false and mean judgement of those who deem that

<sup>10</sup> On the role of proverbs in the teaching of *mores* in the fourteenth and fifteenth century classroom, see M.C. Woods and R. Copeland, 'Classroom and Confession', in *Medieval English Literature*, ed. D. Wallace (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 376-406, especially pp. 382-5.

<sup>11</sup> See T. Woodcock and J. M. Martin, *The Oxford Guide to Heraldry* (Oxford, 1990), pp. 112-15.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115: 'Private English war-cries, to the extent that they existed, were as unacceptable to the Tudors as private armies, and when mottoes began to reappear on late Tudor patents they are harmless expressions of honour, wisdom, and virtue, clothed in Latin'.

<sup>13</sup> This text is found in NC MS 288, fol. 5 ff. Chaundler's translation also disposes of the ingenious, but erroneous, idea that the motto may show 'Object-Verb-Subject' order. A bishop of Wykeham's time would not, in any case, have subscribed to the notion that man created virtue. On the story behind the reversible syntax of the punning graffito *Hoc fecit Wykeham*, see Moberly, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>14</sup> So personal to the Black Prince was his motto that he uses it as if it were his signature in a writ of privy seal of 1370.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted from *The Oxford Dictionary of English Proverbs*, ed. F.P. Wilson (Oxford, 1970), p. 508.

<sup>16</sup> An exception is *Ich dene* ('I serve'), apparently in the Low Franconian dialect of Low German.

<sup>17</sup> For the possibility that his arms are canting arms 'adopted by Wykeham with a view to intimating the means through which he had risen; for a chevron is said to be a rude imitation of a carpenter's square', see Moberly, *op. cit.*, p. 306.

nobility hath riches for its source'.<sup>18</sup> And such virtue was typically thought of as a gift of divine grace: 'Bountee [i.e. virtue] comth al of God, nat of the streen Of which they ben engendred and ybore'.<sup>19</sup> Such ideas of the nature and origin of virtue almost certainly informed Wykeham's choice of motto, and, accordingly, 'morals make a man' would be a better modern rendering than 'manners make a man'. We may think this a somewhat contradictory message to add to a coat of arms, given that heraldic imagery encoded and celebrated lineage, but this mixed message is both appropriate to the life of the founder and perhaps representative too of an important ideological tension of the later medieval period. It is a dichotomy relevant also to the history of New College, for if, on the one hand, the motto gestured towards meritocracy, on the other, the special access granted to Founder's Kin subsequently mired this in nepotism.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> *Dante's Convivio*, trans. W. W. Jackson (Oxford, 1909), p. 190. Compare Chaucer, 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', l. 1170 'he is gentil that dooth gentil dedis' (and the proverb 'Gentle is as gentle does'). The notion of *virtus non sanguis*, of course, has classical roots, especially in Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book III, pr. 6 and m. 6, and in Seneca *Epistle XLIV*. For modern critical discussion see M. Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven, 1984), esp. chapters 8 and 9, and D. Burnley, *Courtliness and Literature in Medieval England* (London, 1998). A useful list of more than fifty quotations from texts of the twelfth to fifteenth centuries expressing this sentiment is given by G. M. Vogt, 'Gleanings for the History of a Sentiment: *Generositas Virtus, non Sanguis*', *JEGP* 24 (1925), pp. 102-24.

<sup>19</sup> Chaucer, 'The Clerk's Tale', lines 157-8. See also 'The Wife of Bath's Tale', l. 1162, 'gentilesse cometh fro God allone'.

<sup>20</sup> This Note is a revised and enlarged version of a piece which first appeared without footnotes in *New College News* 15.