**ER 1.1 *Garrying grisbittyng?***

The passage below was written about three hundred years before Swift’s. It shows you how much the language changed in that period. It’s a translation from Latin of a well-known history text called the *Polychronicon* (the full title is quite a mouthful: *Ranuiphi Castrensis, cognomine Higdon, Polychronicon sive Historia Polycratica ab initio mundi usque ad mortem regis Edwardi III in septem libros dispositum*). Written by the monk Ranulf Higden, it was translated into English by one John Trevisa in 1387. The extract below comes from a section describing the languages of the British Isles. In England, the writer says, the native language is poorly spoken, often descending into what he endearingly calls *wlaffyng, cheteryng, harryng, and garrying grisbittyng* – ‘stammering, chattering, snarling and harsh gnashing of teeth’. In the passage he gives two reasons why English has become so degraded.

There’s a literal translation into modern English on the right-hand side; why not cover this up the first time you read the passage, to see how much sense you can make of it? At first, form a general impression about how Trevisa’s language differs from Swift’s, and indeed from today’s. Then, if you want to look at the language in detail, answer the questions below the passage.

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| Þis aperyrng of þe burþtonge ys  bycause of twey þinges. On ys for chyldern in scole . . . buþ compelled for to leue here oune longage, and for to construe here lessons and here þinges a Freynsch, and habbeþ suþthe þe Normans come furst into Engelond. Also gentil men children buþ ytauȝt for to speke Freynsch fram tyme þat a buþ yrokked in here cradle, and conneþ  speke and playe wiþ a child hys brouch; and oplondysch men wol lykne  hamsylf to gentil men, fondeþ  wiþ gret bysynes for to speke Freynsch, for to be more ytold of. | This impairing of the mother tongue is because of two things. One is because children in school, . . . . are compelled to abandon their own language, and to interpret their lessons and their things in French, and have since the  Normans came first into England. Also gentlemen’s children are taught to  speak French from the time that they are rocked in their cradle, and a child can speak and play with his trinket;  and rustic people will compare themselves to gentlemen, and endeavour with great industry to speak French,  to be more highly thought of. |

1. Identify the two letter in the passage that we no longer use in English today. Any ideas what letters they would be today?

2. There will be many words that you can decipher, but which are spelt different from today. Identify some of the spelling differences.

3. Look at the verb endings. What ending is associated with the third person plural (‘they’)?

4. What is the word for ‘they? And for the possessive adjective ‘their’? Is there anything to say about the form *hamsylf*?

5. Make a list of unfamiliar words in the passage. Include any that, while they are unfamiliar, you can understand because there are related words in modern English, but which may have different meanings.

Answers are given below.

**Answers [Note for editor: my *History of Early English*, users could click on the word ‘Answers’ for the answers to appear. It would be good to maintain this procedure]**

1. The two letters we no longer have are ‘þ’, called ‘thorn’ and equivalent to today’s ‘th’; and the letter known as ‘yogh’ – ‘ȝ’ – usually a ‘gh’ or a ‘y’ today.

2. Perhaps the most obvious spelling difference is the use of ‘y’ where today we might have an ‘i’ or an ‘e’. Sometimes there’s an ‘o’ where we would have an ‘a’ (*longage* for example). Our suffix *-le­* is *-il* in the passage. If you have a real interest in spelling, you may like to do some research: find out why Trevisa’s *scole* managed to collect an unpronounced ‘h’ in our spelling (*school)*.

3. Most of the verbs in the passage are in the third person plural, where the ending is -(e)þ. At that time, the same ending was found in the third person singular; you will probably be familiar with that – in the works of Shakespeare, for example, you sometimes find forms like *he goeth* and *he blesseth* (for ‘he goes’ and ‘he blesses’).

4. ‘They’ in this passage is *a*, and ‘their’ is *here*. *Hamsylf* may have puzzled you, because it looks like ‘himself’. In English today, ‘-self’ is singular, ‘-selves’ plural. But in the passage, -*sylf* is plural and the word means ‘themselves’.

5. Words which might have caused you problems include *aperyrng* and *suþthe*. Words which you could probably work out, though we do not use them today (either at all, or in a different sense) include *burþtong* (literally ‘birth tongue’), *bysynes* for ‘industry’ or ‘effort’, and *ytold of* for ‘highly thought of’.