

On the Function of *That* of Complex Conjunctions in Late Middle English

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1. Introduction

Complex conjunctions such as *in that*, *now that*, *but that* used for introducing subordinate clauses, as shown in (1), are frozen and fossilized in Present-day English with the second element *that* no longer separable from the first, otherwise the first element would cease to function as conjunction. However, in earlier times this type of conjunctions was more productive and used extensively with *that* separable from the preceding particles without altering their function. Hence, in this paper we will investigate these complex conjunctions with the separable *that* in late Middle English where they were most flourishing in the history of English, and ascertain whether the allegedly pleonastic *that* is literally redundant without any linguistic property.

- (1) a. Privatization is said to be beneficial, *in that* it promotes competition.
 b. *Now that* you mention it, I do remember the incident.
 c. She would have fallen *but that* he caught her.

2. Complex Conjunctions in Late Middle English

In Middle English there are three types of complex conjunctions combined with *þat* 'that'. The first type is inherited from Old English, composed of an adverb and *þat*. This type of conjunctions was used sporadically in Midland in the twelfth century, but it gradually increased in number and from the thirteenth century it came to be used commonly in most dialects.

The second type is made anew of prepositions like *bifor* 'before', *fram* 'from', *in*, *of*, *til* 'till' and *þat* by way of the two processes: first, as represented by the changes *from þæm þe* 'since, from the time that' > *from þan þe* > *from þan þat* > *from þat*, the object of a preposition was first weakened, and then the relative *þe* was replaced by the conjunction *þat*, and finally the weakened *þan* dropped out; second, after the object of a preposition dropped out and was simplified, *þat* was added to the preposition, as in *er þan(e)* 'before' > *er* > *er þat*.

The third type of complex conjunctions consists of a conjunction and *þat* represented by *gif þat*, *when þat*, *sipen þat* 'since'. For this type of conjunctions, the addition of *þat* is greatly due to analogy, though the Scandinavian influence cannot be ignored. As for the detailed explanation to

the process of formation, the period of appearance and the dialectal difference of these three types of conjunctions, we will leave to Kivimaa (1966:147-257) and address ourselves to the function of *þat* in these conjunctions.

2.1. *The Function of That in Complex Conjunctions in Late Middle English Prose Works*

In order to clarify the function of *that* in complex conjunctions of late Middle English we will first take *Mandeville's Travels* as an instance of prose works written around 1400, for it abounds in the type of conjunctions in question. The edition used is that by Seymour (1967). First, in order to find out the clues to the function of *that* under consideration we have chosen at random the sentences in which complex conjunctions are used to introduce subordinate clauses, as shown in (2).

- (2) a. First, *yif* a man come from the west syde of the world, as Engelond, Ireland, Wales, Skotland, or Norweye, he may *yif that* he wole go thorgh Almayne and thorgh the kyngdom of Hungarye that marcheth to the lond of Polayne and to the lond of Pannoyne and so to Slesie. (I 5/8-12)
- b. And also a yonge man that wiste not of the dragoun wente out of a schipp, and wente thorgh the ile *til that* he come to the castelle and cam into the cave and wente so longe *til that* he fond a chambre. (IV 17/9-12)
- c. In Egypt there ben but fewe forcelettes or castelles *because that* the contree is so strong of himself. (VII 33/23-4)
- d. But Ierusalem is in the lond of Iudee, and it is clept of Iude *for that* Iudas Machabeus was kyng of that contree. (X 54/12-4)
- e. And *whan that* messangeres of straunge contrees comen before him, the meynee of the Soudan, *whan* the strangeres speken to hym, thei ben aboute the Souldan with swerdes drawn and gysarmes and axes, here armes lift vp in high, with tho wepenes for to smyte vpon hem *yif* they seye ony woord that is displesance to the Soudan. (VI 27/30-6)

Because of the fluctuation in the addition of *that* in (2a, e), we cannot predict with certainty when *that* appears after the conjunctions like *yif* 'if' and *whan* 'when' nor can we specify the function of *that* following the conjunctions. Next, contrary to the instances given in (2b, c, d), there occur in other parts of the text several instances of conjunctions like *til*, *because*, *for* without being

followed by *that*, which are not cited here for want of space. Besides, conjunctions like *er* ‘before’, *whil* ‘while’, *though*, too, exhibit nearly the same fluctuation as those in (2a, e).

Hence, although a slight difference of possibility may arise among different conjunctions as to when *that* may be appended to the preceding conjunctions, it may be safe to regard, at least as far as *Mandeville’s Travels* is concerned, that the appendage of *that* to conjunctions, even though graphically marked, is literally pleonastic, without any linguistic significance.

2.2. *The Function of That in Complex Conjunctions in Late Middle English Poetry*

The fact that the instances of *that* used in complex conjunctions in late Middle English prose works are most probably pleonastic does not necessarily preclude it from carrying metrical significance in poetry of the same period. For instance, Nakao (1972:369), referring to the relationship between *that* of the complex conjunctions like *whan that* and rhythm in Chaucer’s poetry, states that if the minor category of words precedes the complex conjunctions in question *whan* will receive metrical stress, giving rise to *whán thăt*, otherwise *that* would be given metrical stress, producing *whăn thăt*. However, as apparent from many previous studies on the meter in Chaucer’s works even monosyllabic words of the minor category may be metrically strong and not all final syllables of words of the major category receive strong metrical stress (Fujiwara (1998:1-6)). Hence, we have to clarify what motivates for the use of *that* after conjunctions.

2.2.1. *The Function of That in the General Prologue of the Canterbury Tales*

First, we will take up the General Prologue of the *Canterbury Tales* and investigate into the relationship between *that* and rhythm. The edition used is that by Benson (1987) and the conjunctions to be analyzed are: *er* ‘ere, before’, *for* ‘because’, *if*, *syn* ‘since’, *tho(u)gh*, *til*, *whan*, *whil*, *wheither* ‘whether’; *how* and *why* used conjunctively are also included in the investigation.

Suppose there comes a word of the minor category before the conjunctions such as *when*. As the word in question is generally unstressed, the following conjunction *whan* naturally receives metrical stress, giving rise to *whán*. Consequently, if *that* is used after the stressed *whán*, it is naturally not given metrical stress and becomes *thăt*. On the other hand, when a word of the major category precedes the conjunction *whan*, if it is disyllabic with the trochaic

stress pattern or trisyllabic with the ‘weak-strong-weak’ one, the following *whan*, as shown in (3), will naturally receive metrical stress (hereafter numbers in parentheses refer to the respective lines in Benson’s edition, and the upperdotted “ë” indicates a silent letter without any metrical entity). Thus, contrary to Nakao’s statement, the words preceding the complex conjunctions like *whan that*, irrespective of their lexical category, are not relevant to the metrical pattern of such conjunctions.

- (3) a. Thăt hém häth hólpen *whán thăt* théy wërè séekë
 ‘who healed them when they were sick’ (18)
- b. Ānd ín hīs hárpÿng, *whán thăt* hé häddë sóngë
 ‘and in his playing on the harp, when he had sung’ (266)
- c. Āmórwě, *whán thăt* dáy bĭgán tō sprýngë
 ‘On the morrow, when day began to dawn’ (822)

Next, we will examine the relationship between the complex conjunctions and metrical stress. First, the conjunctions like *if*, *though*, *whan*, though they are generally not given linguistic stress, appear in the General Prologue in both arsis and thesis with nearly the same frequency, as shown in (4). To be more specific, *whan* occurs five times and *if* six in thesis, while in arsis *whan* is used five times and *if* eight; in all conjunctions including others used in the General Prologue, nineteen instances occur in thesis and twenty in arsis when they are used without being appended by *that*.

- (4) a. i. *Whān* Zéphīrus ěek wĭth hīs swéetë bréeth
 ‘when Zephyrus also with its sweet breath’ (5)
- ii. Ānd shórtlÿ, *whán* thē sónnë wás tō réstë
 ‘And shortly, when the sun had gone to rest’ (30)
- b. i. Kāught ín ā tráppë, *ĭf* ĭt wërè déed ör bléddë
 ‘caught in a trap, if it died or bled’ (145)
- ii. Őr *ĭf* mēn smóot ĭt wĭth ā yérdë smértë
 ‘or if a man struck it hard with a rod’ (149)

Comparing the subordinate conjunctions like *whan*, *if*, *er* with other function words such as *but*, *or*, *a*, *the*, we will soon notice the great difference of metrical constraints between the two groups of words. First, take *but* for instance. It is used in the General Prologue forty-five times in thesis, as shown in (5ai), while only three in arsis, as given in (5aii). Second, in case of *or*, too, there is a marked difference of positions the conjunction takes in verse lines: *or* appears twenty-three times in thesis, as in (5bi), in contrast to only five in arsis, as given in (5bii). Third, the articles *a* and *the* show a far more marked

difference of distribution: *a* occurs as often as two hundred and fifty-four times in thesis, as shown in (5ci), while only eight in arsis, as given in (5cii); in contrast to one hundred and twenty-eight instances of *the* as in (5di) in thesis there are only three in arsis, as shown in (5dii). Thus, it is apparent that the poet tries to avoid these unstressed words in arsis, while he does not care for subordinate conjunctions like *whan*, *if*, *though* appearing in metrically strong positions, as suggested in 2.2.1. and 2.2.2.

- (5) a. i. *Būt náthěléés, whīl Í hǎvē týmè ānd spáce*
 ‘But nevertheless, while I have time and opportunity’ (35)
- ii. *Hīs hórš wěřè góodě, bút hě wás nǎt gáy*
 ‘his horses were good, but he was not finely dressed’ (74)
- b. i. *Ŏr wīth ā bréthěrhéd tō bėén wīthhóldě*
 ‘or to be supported by a guild’ (511)
- ii. *Thě réulé ōf Séint Mǎurě ór ōf Séint Běnéit*
 ‘The Rule of Saint Maur or of Saint Benedict’ (173)
- c. i. *Ānd cértáinly hě háddě ā múrýě nótě*
 ‘And assuredly he had a merry note’ (235)
- ii. *Hě wás nōt pǎlě ās á fōrpýněd góost*
 ‘he was not pale as a tortured spirit’ (205)
- d. i. *Hīs nékkě whít wás ás thě flóur-dě-lýs*
 ‘His neck was white as a lily’ (238)
- ii. *Tō téllě yów āl thé cōndícíoun*
 ‘to tell you all the condition’ (38)

Then, what happens when the conjunctions are followed by *that*? First, in case of *whan that*, as shown in (6a), there occur five instances of *whán thǎt* and four of *whǎn thát*. Second, with *tho(u)gh that*, too, *that* is used in both arsis and thesis, though only once for each, as given in (6b). Including other conjunctions we have the total of twenty-six instances: in seven of them *that* appears in thesis, like (5ai) and (6bi), while in the remaining nineteen in arsis, as given in (6aii) and (bii), which means the stressed *thát* appears about two and a half times as often as the unstressed *thǎt* after subordinate conjunctions. This is equal to say that the stressed *thát* is likely to be appended after the unstressed conjunctions. However, as the number of instances is not large enough, we cannot draw any definite conclusion from these examples.

- (6) a. i. *Thǎt hém hǎth hólpen whán thǎt théy wěřè séekě*
 ‘who healed them when they were sick’ (18)
- ii. *Whǎn thát wě háddě mǎad óurě rékěnyngěš*

- ‘When we had made our accounts’ (760)
- b. i. *Ānd thóugh thát hé wěre wóρθý, hé wás wýs*
 ‘And though he was distinguished, he wise’ (68)
- ii. *Thǒgh thát Ī pléynlǔ spéké ĩn thís mǎtéere*
 ‘though I speak plainly in this matter’ (727)

2.2.2. *The Function of That in the Knight's Tale of the Canterbury Tales*

Hence, we will next take up another tale of the *Canterbury Tales*, i. e. the Knight's Tale to extract a more detailed data concerning the relationship between *that* and metrical stress. The tale is placed in the text immediately after the General Prologue, composed of 2250 lines which is nearly 2.6 times as big as the General Prologue of the total 858 lines, sufficient for us to obtain specific data on the present subject. If the Knight's Tale shows nearly the same tendency as that of the General Prologue with respect to the relationship between *that* and metrical stress, it will be justified for us to make a generalization about the relationship in question without piling up additional data.

First, there are fourteen lexical items used as conjunctions in the tale: *although, er, for, how, if, sith* ‘since’, *syn, though, til, whan, wherby* ‘by which, why’, *where, whil, why*. As a result of investigating these conjunctions, it is found that these conjunctions are used without being accompanied by *that*, both in stressed and unstressed positions in nearly the same frequency: sixty-three instances in thesis and sixty-five in arsis, as shown in (7). As this result is almost the same as that of the General Prologue, it is apparent that the poet uses these conjunctions freely in either weak or strong positions of the line.

- (7) a. i. *Ānd ón thě mórwe, ǔr ít wěre dáyēs líght*
 ‘and the next morning, before the day was light’ (1629)
- ii. *Fǒr ǔr thě sónné ũntó thě réstě wéntě*
 ‘For, before the sun went to rest’ (2637)
- b. i. *Hǒw wónnēn wás thě régnē ǒf Féměnyě*
 ‘How the realm of the Amazons was won’ (877)
- ii. *Ānd hów ässégēd wás Ypólítá*
 ‘and how Hippolyta was besieged’ (881)
- c. i. *Ānd téllēth mé ĩf ít mǎy béen äméndēd*
 ‘And tell me if it may be put right’ (910)
- ii. *Ānd cértēs, ĩf ít néré tǒ lóng tǒ héerē*
 ‘And certainly, if it were not too long to hear’ (875)
- d. i. *Nǒw hélp ũs, lórd, sĭth ít ĩs ĩn thý mýght*

- ‘Now help us, Lord, since it is in your power’ (930)
- ii. *Thăt, síth hīs fǎcě wás sō dísfīgúřěd*
‘that, since his face was so changed’ (1403)
- e. i. *Whīl Ěmělyě wās thús ĩn hír přěyěřě*
‘while Emily was thus in her prayer’ (2332)
- ii. *Fōř Í mōot wěpě ānd wáyľě, whīl Ě lývě*
‘For, I must weep and wail, while I live’ (1295)

Then, about the same frequency of *that* is expected both in the strong and weak positions of the line, when *that* is appended to the conjunctions. However, contrary to our expectation there occur only eighteen instances of *that* in unstressed positions, as shown in (8ai-di), in contrast to forty four in stressed positions, as in (8aii-dii). Hence, it follows in the Knight’s Tale that the stressed *thát* occurs nearly two and a half times as often as the unstressed one. This result is noteworthy, for the ratio of the stressed *thát* to that of the unstressed *thăt* is nearly the same as that of the General Prologue, as stated in 2.2.1.

- (8) a. i. *Thăt nó mǎn wóndřěd hów thăt hé ĩt háddě*
‘so that no man wondered how he had got it’ (1445)
- ii. *Hým thóughtě hów thát thě wýngěd gód Měrcúřě*
‘it seemed to him how the wýnged god Mercury’ (1385)
- b. i. *Thăt, ĩf thăt Pálámón wās wóunděd sórě*
‘that, if Palamon was badly wounded’ (1115)
- ii. *Ěf thát Ě háddě léysěř fōř tō sěyě*
‘if I had leisure to say’ (1188)
- c. i. *Ānd thóugh thăt Í nō wěpěné hǎvě ĩn thīs plǎcě*
‘And though I have no weapon in this place’ (1591)
- ii. *Thóugh thát Ě névěřě hĭř grǎcě máy děsěrvě*
‘though I may not deserve her grace’ (1232)
- d. i. *Sō stóod thě hévěně whán thăt wé wěřě bōrn*
‘the heaven stood this way when we were born’ (1090)
- ii. *Whǎn thát thīs wóřthý dúc, thīs Thěsěús*
‘When this noble ruler, this Theseus’ (1001)

Hence, we will have to explain the higher frequency of the stressed *thát* than that of the unstressed one when *that* is combined with subordinate conjunctions. As a clue to find an answer to the question, remember that the frequency of conjunctions like *whan, if, er* is about the same in arsis and thesis, as shown in terms of the instances of (4) and (7), when used without being

accompanied by *that*. Hence, our assumption is that the poet was fond of using the stressed *thát* as a metrical filler after unstressed monosyllabic conjunctions so that the required iambic metrical pattern might be formed.

In order to verify our assumption of the stressed *thát* as a metrical filler we will investigate the distribution of subordinate conjunctions like *whan* especially in the initial positions of the line. In the General Prologue there are only four in the total occurrence of thirty-eight single conjunctions without *that* which occupy the initial positions of the line, as shown in (9a, b). However, when the stressed *thát* follows the conjunctions in question, the ratio of occurrence of such conjunctions greatly increases in line-initial positions: we find as many as ten in the total of twenty-six conjunctions, as shown in (8c, d), in contrast to five for the second foot, five for the third, and six for the fourth (zero for the last because of the rhyme requirement). On the other hand, in later positions of the line the ratio of the stressed *thát* and the unstressed one is nearly the same: nine for *thát*, as in (9e), and seven for *thăt*, as in (9f). On the other hand, in later positions of the line the ratio of the stressed *that* and the unstressed one is nearly the same: nine for *thát*, as in (9e), and seven for *thăt*, as in (9f). Hence, it is evident that the poet is fond of using the stressed *thát* especially in the initial positions of the line, for it is probably easier than in other later positions for him to form the required iambic rhythm for a given foot. Now, we may ascribe the higher frequency of the stressed *thát* of complex conjunctions to the poet's preference of it in the initial foot of the line over the other later feet.

- (9) a. *Whăn Zéphirus* ěk wíth hīs swéetě bréeth
 ‘when Zephyrus also with its sweet breath’ (5)
- b. *Īf évěn-sóng* ānd *mórwě-sóng* āccórdě
 ‘If even-song and morning-song agree’ (830)
- c. *Ěr thát* Ī férthěr ín thīs tálě pácě
 ‘Before I will further proceed (to tell) you this story’ (36)
- d. *Whỹ thát* āssémlěd wás thīs cómpāignýě
 ‘Why this company was assembled’ (717)
- e. *Shě wóldě wépé*, Īf thát shě sáugh ā móus
 ‘She would weep, if she saw a mouse’ (144)
- f. *Ānd* ín hīs hárpýng, whán thăt hé hăddě sóngě
 ‘And in his playing on the harp, when he had sung’ (266)

2.2.3. *The Metrical Relationship between that and the Following Words*

We will next investigate the instances of *that* which is assigned metrical

stress when followed by subordinate conjunctions like *whan, if, er, how*. As for the frequency of these conjunctions to receive metrical stress, when used without being followed by *that*, it is about fifty percent, as stated above. Hence, we naturally expect that if *that* is added to such conjunctions, about half occurrence of *that* will not receive metrical stress to maintain the iambic or trochaic rhythm in the line. Actually, however, *that* is used in arsis more than twice as often as in thesis, as already shown. We ascribed the marked tendency for *that* to receive metrical stress after the conjunctions to the result of the poet's inclination towards metrical adjustment at the initial metrical foot of the line. As the metrical pattern of complex conjunctions is not dependent on the words appearing immediately before the conjunctions, the only remaining question is whether the words immediately following the complex conjunctions are involved in the addition of *that* after the conjunctions.

First, we take all words in the General Prologue all words which appear immediately after the stressed *thát* of the complex conjunctions like *whǎn thát, whīl thát, sȳn thát*. In consequence of investigating these words we can draw a very interesting fact that sixteen out of the total occurrence of seventeen words are function words (i.e. *he* (4), *we* (4), *I* (3), *his* (2), *she* (1), *the* (1), *a* (1)) and one full word *assembled* with unstressed initial syllable, as shown in (10). Hence, it is most likely that the poet added the stressed *thát* after conjunctions so that function words and initial unstressed syllables of full words might not be given metrical stress when they immediately follow subordinate conjunctions.

- (10) a. Bǔt with thīsē rélikés, *whǎn thát hē fōnd*
 'But with these relics, when he found' (701; 399, 570, 697)
- b. Nōw dráwēth cút, *ēr thát wē férrēr twýnnē*
 'Now draw the lot before we depart farther'
 (835; 721, 760, 801)
- c. Fōr bý mȳ tróuthē, *īf thát Ī shál nāt lýe*
 'for, by my pledged word, if I am not going to tell lies'
 (763; 36, 727)
- d. *Sȳn thát hīs lórd wās twénty yéer ōf áge*
 'since his lord was twenty years of age' (601; 506)
- e. Shē wóldē wépe, *īf thát shē sáugh ā mósus*
 'she would weep, if she saw a mouse' (144)
- f. Frō Búrdēux-wárd, *whīl thát thē chápman sléep*
 'from Bordeaux, while the merchant was sleeping' (397)
- g. Ānd éek yē knówēn wél *hōw thát ā jáy*

‘and also you know well how a jay’ (642)

h. *Whỹ thát ěssémlěd wás thĭs cǒmpāignýě*
 ‘why this company was assembled’ (717)

Next, we will turn to the investigation of words which appear immediately after complex conjunctions with the unstressed *thát*. Among the six instances in the General Prologue falling under the case, two of them, i.e. *Aprill* and *day*, are full words with stressed initial syllables, as shown in (11a, b). Hence, in these examples the unstressed *thát* seems to be inserted for avoiding the stress crash and maintaining the required iambic rhythm. The remaining four words are all function words: three instances of *he* in (11c) and one of *they* in (11d). In these instances if the unstressed *thát* were not appended after the stressed conjunctions, the pronouns would occupy the weak positions and form the iambic rhythmic pattern. Actually, however, the poet added the pleonastic *thát* after the conjunctions so that the metrical stress might be given to the pronouns in questions. The addition of the unstressed *thát* may be caused by the numerical necessity of syllables required for a given line.

(11) a. (´) *Whán thát Áprĭl* wĭth hĭs shóurěs sóotě
 ‘When April with its sweet showers’ (1)

b. *Āmórwě, whán thát dáy* bĭgán tǒ sprýngě
 ‘On the morrow, when day began to dawn’ (822)

c. *Ānd ín hĭs hárpĭng, whán thát hé* hăddě sóngě
 ‘and in his playing on the harp, when he had sung’
 (266; 68, 637)

d. *Thát hém hăth hólpĕn whán thát théy* wěrě séekě
 ‘who healed them when they were sick’ (18)

The restrictions imposed on words after the unstressed *thát* in question is more obvious in the Knight’s Tale than in the General Prologue. Specifically, forty-three out of fifty instances of words immediately following the stressed *thát* are function words, as shown in (12ai), and the remaining seven are full words with unstressed first syllables, as shown in (12a ii). On the other hand, fourteen out of twenty-nine instances of words immediately following the unstressed *thát* are restricted to personal pronouns or possessive pronouns like (12bi), while others are full words beginning with stressed first syllables, as shown in (12bii).

(12) a. i. the (9), I (6), they (5), hir ‘her’ (4), thou (3), hym (2), his (2),
 ther ‘there’ (1), this (1), myn (1), men ‘anyone’ (1), she (1)
 ii. *Ārcĭtě* (5), *Förtúně* (1), *Dĭáně* ‘Diana’ (1)

- b. i. I (4), he (4), we (2), thou (1), ye (1), me (1), my (1)
 ii. wás (2), híghte ‘was called’ (1), óon ‘one’ (1), wépe ‘weep’ (1), évere ‘ever’ (1), Pálamon (1), Árgus (1), dáy (1), lád ‘led’ (1), lýche-wake ‘watch over a corpse’ (1), báar ‘behaved’ (1)

Hence, it follows from the preceding analyses that when the poet added *that* immediately after subordinate conjunctions, whether stressed or not, *that* directly contributes to the formation of the required rhythm in a given line, at least as far as Chaucer’s works are concerned.

3. Conclusion

The allegedly pleonastic *that* which may be used after subordinate conjunctions in late Middle English may be literally redundant in prose works, while it substantially contributes to the formation of required rhythm in poetical works like those of Chaucer. It is apparent that *that* was especially effective as a means to avoid unstressed function words to be placed in metrically strong positions. The fact that the instances of the stressed *thát* in the first metrical foot of the line far outnumber those in later feet is duly ascribed to the poet’s inclination towards metrical adjustment at the initial positions of the line.

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