Trusty Trout, Humble Trout, Old Trout: A Curious Kettle

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'Old trout' as a disparaging and dismissive term for an elderly woman is still with us, although used with a degree of archness, an affectation of the linguistic practices of an earlier time.[1] But the true, trusty, and humble trouts of earlier centuries, close friends and confidants, are a now extinct species. *OED* presents these as figurative uses of the ichthyonym *trout*, the common designation of *Salmo fario.* No explanation of how such extended meanings may have developed is offered.[2]

The origin of the base word, *trout*, is not in doubt. OE *truht*, which is first attested in a supplement to Ælfric's 'Vocabulary', is a reflex of Late Latin *tructus*, which had the variant forms *tructa*, *truta*, *trutta*, etc., yielding Old French *troite*, *troute*, Middle and Modern French *truite*, and the like.[3] Of the two extended or figurative uses here under consideration, 'trusty trout' is the earlier attested, first noted from ca. 1661 in a self-disparaging ballad voiced by a turncoat in the Civil War 'For I was a trusty trout In all that I went about.'[4] Needless to say, the context is not one that would immediately call references to fish and fishing to mind. The vogue for trusty, true, and humble trouts would appear to have been limited to the latter part of the seventeenth century. Rather than having a genetic link with *Salmo fario*, 'trusty trout', I would contend, is a tautological phrasing, coined when the base term seemed to have no other referent than the fish and required an explanatory gloss. *Trout* in this usage is best derived from OE *trēowan* or *trēowian* 'to trust, confide in' (with past participles *treówade* and *treówode*), reflected in early Modern English *trow* as both noun and verb. Some influence of Old Norse *trúa* 'to believe, have confidence in' (past participle *trúat*) or

of *trúr* 'true, faithful' cannot be excluded. This would have come from the Norse-inflected speech of the Danelaw, as this set of Norse words is not represented in the Norman dialect of Old French and could not thereby have reached Britain. 'Trusty trout' is then closest to the hypothetical base form; 'true trout' retains the alliteration and some of the original semantics; 'humble trout' is a further change rung on what would by this time have been seen as a piscine image.

'Old trout' could be fitted into this cluster of phrases but so doing would require some explanation of why the quality of trustworthiness has been replaced by a reference to advanced years and why it is *des dames d'un certain âge* who are so designated. The exploration of a separate origin and originally distinct development seems justified. This said, it should be noted that 'old trout' is first attested from the late nineteenth century, coincident with a heightened interest in the representation of popular speech in literature and other writing.[5] Like 'trusty trout', *OED* identifies 'old trout' as slang, but only here is there a suggestion of other factors at work in the history of the phrase. The *Dictionary*'s cross-reference 'cf. TROT n.[2]' leads in some very interesting directions, down a linguistic path very different from the angler's.

Old French had a set of words associated with ambulatory and repetitive movement, just as seen in the English verb *trot*. We find the verb *troter* in the proverb 'besoin fait vielle troter', literally, 'necessity makes the old woman trot', which could be recast as the twentieth-century American adage 'necessity sharpens industry'.[6] *Trote à pied* was a term for a valet, while *troton* and *trottin* designated one who ran errands. Negative coloration is seen in *trotier* as 'vagabond' and *troteresse* 'prostitute'. The trot is further broken down into a sequence of 'micro-movements' in the verb *troteler* 'to trot along' and the adjective *troterel* 'with an unbroken trot'.[7] As we shall see, the repetitive movement could also be viewed not simply as linear but as reciprocal, a shuttling between two poles.

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[5] See examples in *OED*, which range from 1897 to 1972.
[6] The proverb had currency in medieval Italy as well, e.g., 'bisogno fae vecchia trottare', *Conti morali d'anonimo senense,* 496, v. 22.
[7] These forms are exemplified in *Dictionnaire de l'ancienne langue française* and *Altfranzösisches Wörterbuch.*

Toward the end of Guillaume de Lorris's incomplete *Roman de la Rose*, La Vielle is introduced as a duenna to monitor Bel Acuel (the 'Fair Welcome' that the maiden/rose might accord the lover). The role is greatly expanded in Jean de Meun's continuation of the allegorical romance and, typical of this much longer, more cynical portion of the work, the duenna betrays her charge and assumes the role of manipulative go-between. It would appear significant that Jean reintroduces this character as follows: 'La Vielle iluec point ne sejorne, Le trot a Bel Acuel retorne' ('The Old Woman did not linger but trotted back to Fair Welcome').[8]

In the same century, we find the northern French poet Rutebeuf (1245-1285) in 'Le Dit de l'herbière' proclaiming his quack's allegiance to 'ma dame Trote de Salerne', an expert on matters of sex and love.[9] His dame Trote has been identified as Trotula di Ruggiero, a female physician who wrote on gynecology and female beauty. Whether she was a historical figure or simply a literary myth has been debated. For present purposes we may note that her text had a reputation among the subsequent male readership as a work of pornography.[10]

French linguistic usage also informed John Gower's work, *Le Mirour de l'ome*, which has received relatively little critical attention.[11] Among his satirical condemnations is that of the old woman who prettifies herself to attract a lusty young lover.

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[8] Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun (1974), vv. 12541-42; *The Romance of the Rose* (1994), 193. For present purposes, we might prefer the rendering 'returned to Bel Acuel at a trot'.

[9] Rutebeuf, 392, 398.

[10] The putative historicity of Trotula was relatively early the object of close study; see Rowland (1979), effectively responding to Hurd-Mead (1930) and Stuard (1975). Rowland observes that a broad range of nominally medical treatises in the English vernacular were linked with Trotula, whose name is variously found there as *Trot, Troto, Trotta, Trocula, Trutella*. There has been little subsequent scholarship from the perspective of women's and gender studies, in the latter respect as concerns the male reader's gaze on the passive, textualized woman's body.

[11] Gower's relation to continental material has not been studied since Dwyer's 'Gower's *Mirour* and its French Sources' (1951).

> Mais sur trestoutes je desfie
> La viele trote q'est jolie
> Qant seches ad les mammellettes[12]
> But above all I distrust the old hag who is prettified when her breasts are dried up.[13]

Gower also seems to have known *Le lai du trot*, a moralizing piece in which a knight, Lorois, meets two parties of mounted women and men. The first advances comfortably on ambling palfreys; the second is shaken to their teeth and bowels by the jolting advance of the trotting nags. These rewards and punishments are due to the first group having given themselves to and honored Love, while the second abstained from Love. This, at least, is the modern reading of the moral.[14] But other associations of *trot* suggest that there may at least be a subtext available, that the second party of women has offended Love by giving themselves too freely, promiscuity replacing fidelity. In addition to horseback-riding, another frequent facet of this cluster of motifs associated with love and sex, is 'the old daunce', again linking stylized and repetitive movement with both the give and take of courting and flirting, and the sexual act itself.

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[12] *Mirour de l'omme*, in *The Complete Works of John Gower*, Vol. 1, *The French Works*, vv. 17900-03; cf. the fuller exposition on the 'viele trote', vv. 8713-24. Under *trot*, n.[2], *OED* cites the Gower passages and states that 'the word [*trot*] has not been found in Continental French either as *trote* or *tratte*, so that the derivation is uncertain' and goes on to disallow a connection with OFr *baudetrot* (see below). As concerns the former claim, this is, strictly speaking, true, but it seems more likely, given the evidence reviewed here, that the nominal derivative *trote* emerged in the context of Anglo-French from the verb *troter* and such words and phrases as *trote à pied* `valet', *troton*, *trottin* 'runner of errands', *trotier* 'vagabond', and *troteresse* 'prostitute'.

[13] John Gower, *Mirour de l'omme,* 246. A freer rendering, which allows, in the absence of punctuation in the manuscript, for greater sarcasm on Gower's part, would be: ' ... the old hag–how pretty she is with her dried up little dugs'.

[14] *Le Lai du trot*, in *Three Old French Narrative Lays: Trot, Lecheor, Nabaret*. Gower's recasting, which revolves around a pun on *bridle* and *bride ale*, is explored in Bratcher. Bratcher's note, and earlier studies listed there, do not link the trotting mounts of the deficient lovers with the other *trot* associations here reviewed.

La Vielle, who gives a long account of her former life as a beautiful but ruthless and extortionate courtesan, has been seen as a major source for Chaucer's portrait of the Wife of Bath. Yet, unlike La Vielle, the Wife has lived an ethical life within matrimony and sought not a self-indulgent 'freedom' but woman's sovereignty as her goal. Yet the cluster of relationships here under review has affected the portrait of the Wife in at least two respects. Included in her fifth husband Jankyn's *Book of Wicked Wives* are purported excerpts from a work by Trotula, which, the context makes clear, cannot have been about women's medicine but more likely about women's erotic wiles.[15] And, on the conclusion of the Wife's preface to her tale, there is an exchange between the Summoner and the Friar. The former replies to the latter's objection to the length of the Wife's introduction with the sally 'What! amble or trotte, or pees, or go sit doun' (cf. the gaits of *Le Lai du trot*).[16] Thus, the Wife's iterative marital career seems to have prompted at least two echoes of 'trotting' as characteristic of an erotic agent or intermediary. We must regret that Chaucer's fragmentary adaptation of *The Romance of the Rose* did not include the full portrait of La Vielle as found in Jean de Meun, since the English author does not otherwise use *trot* as either noun or verb in quite the sense here under consideration.

Yet Chaucer uses what appears an analogous term in *The Canterbury Tales*, when in *The Friar's Tale* the summoner accuses the old woman of lechery and calls her 'thou olde virytrate.'[17] No sure etymology has been identified for *virytrate* and Rowland, seeing Latin *vir* 'man' in the term, thought it might be a debased Latin compound. The first element is more plausibly Old French *virer* ' to turn around, revolve' and would reference either the iterative movement of a courtesan or promiscuous woman among a sequence of men or the shuttling movement of the procuress between the as yet to be united couple (cf. OFr *viree* 'comings and goings'). Since popular tradition had it that beautiful prostitutes often

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[15] *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, v. 838.

[16] *The Merchant's Tale*, v. 1538. Note, in this respect, Mieszkowski, which is useful for its summary of intermediaries who act in the interests of lust, but, according to Valenzuela's review, succeeds less well in its treatment of go-betweens promoting true and honest love.

[17] *The Friar's Tale*, v. 1582.

ended up as ugly procuresses and go-betweens, this and other related term would appear to reference simultaneously both stages in the lives of these women. The second element of Chaucer's *virytrate* could have originated in French *trot* 'a trotting advance', on the model of other popular compounds of verbal plus nominal elements (cf. *couvre-chef* > Eng. *kerchief*), but shows the influence of the noun *trote* as seen in Gower. The putative vowel shift from *-o-* to *-a-* in this element is addressed below.

Another term for a go-between in amorous matters that occurs in Middle English is *bawdstrot*, defined by *OED* as 'a bawd, male or female; a pander, a procuress'. Here again, we see references to both the prostitute, and the pimp or procuress. The term is first found in Langland when a confessor addresses Meede þe Mayden: 'I schal asoyle þe my-self And eke be þi bawdstrot and bere wel þin ernde Among Clerkes and knihtes'.[18] This is a direct reflection of Old French *baudetrot*, *baudestrot*, *baldestrot*, in which the first element is Frankish *bald*, 'bold' when used positively, 'brazen' when negatively. The forward manner of prostitutes led to their association with the word in its pejorative context.[19]

The French and other Romance reflexes of the 'trot' words (e.g., *Trotaconventos* as the name of a panderer in Juan Ruiz's *El Libro de Buen Amor*) are traced to Germanic, in the French case to Frankish *trottôn* 'to run'.[20] There is no native English derivative from common Germanic. English *trot* is then best seen as a loan from Anglo-Norman French into Middle English, just as its literary use has clear French models. At the same time, Middle English and Scots knew a cluster of words displaying a variant vocalism. As a first example, ME *trateler* 'gossip, idle chatterer, talebearer' appears in the versified paternal instructions 'Myne Awen Dere Sone', from the first half of the fifteenth century and situated by the editor in a northern dialectal environment: 'For no trateler þat rennys the tyll Loke þou trowe on þame [servants] noon yll Till þou gare bathe prouse and constrewe Whether þe tale be false or trewe ... Þou sall neuere have reste in lande Whils þou haldes

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[18] *The Vision of William Concerning Piers the Plowman*, Version A, III.42.

[19] *Französisches etymologisches Wörterbuch, Germanische Elemente*, Vol. 15, 29-33, s.v. bald.

[20] *FEW, Germanische Elemente*, Vol. 17, 371-74, *s.v. trottôn.*

swyllke tratelers in hande'.[21] Here the to-and-fro movement seen earlier is reflected in both the physical displacement of the talebearer and the give and take of information.

Medieval Latin had a term *trattus* that, like *anus*, referred both to the rectum and, by extension, to an old woman (possibly a reformation of *tractus,* which had such specialized meanings as a move in chess or the traces in a horse's harness). In English we find the variants *trat*, *trate*, *trattes*, and *trattas* with the meanings 'old woman', more pejoratively 'old hag'.[22] The earliest attestation is in *William of Palerne*.

> Whan þise [tidinges] were told to lasse and to more,
> þat þo tvo trattes þat William wold have traysted,
> þo ladyes þat had him to loke and leren in 3ouþe,
> þei wisten witterly þanne ... þat þei schuld be do to dethe ... for þere wicked dedes.[23]

If we may add the sense 'conduit' to the signification 'old woman', we may see ME *tratte* as a gossip, the purveyor of information (cf. German *Tratsch* 'silly, idle talk' but Danish *tragt* 'funnel', likely from Middle Low German). *OED* traces ME *trateler* and the related forms *trattler, trattle, trattling*, all attested in the fifteenth century, to Scots forms such as *tratillar*, *tratlar*, *tratlour*, *tratler* 'chatterer, gossip',[24] although, as noted, we may be dealing with northern, i.e., not exclusively Scots, reflexes of a confluence of French *trote* and English *tratte*, with some possible influence of words such *prattle* and *tattle*.

To return to Chaucer and *The Friar's Tale*, if the *trate* words are admitted as northernisms, *virytrate* might be seen as yet another, and offer some further support to Manly's claim that Holderness in Yorkshire was the Friar's *contree* and that the diction of the tale exhibits a northern

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[21] 'Myne Awen Dere Sone,' vv. 427-36; for the comment on northern provenance, see p. 149.
[22] *OED* does not have *trat(te)* as a head word and it figures only in the discussion of Gower's *trote* (note 12 above). *Middle English Dictionary, s.v. trot,* gives *trat* as a variant of *trot* and calls the (assumed common?) origin "uncertain".
[23] *William of Palerne*, vv. 4768-74.
[24] See *Dictionary of the Scots Language, s.v. v. trate, tratillar.*

flavor.[25] In later authors, the southern or French form reasserts itself, as evidenced in Shakespeare's 'an old Trot, with n'er a tooth in her head although she may have as many diseases as two and fifty horses,' where the equine touch is, curiously, still evident.[26]

To summarize, English *trot/tratte* would have originated in French *trote*, with subsequent reshaping, both semantic and phonological, under the influence of Latin *trattus* and its English derivative, and would have been used as an agent noun for a intermediary, whether in the provision of services (as procuress) or of information (as amorous counsel, gossip). In the reformation as 'old trout', a euphemistic melioration, the word is only lightly dismissive but not condemnatory in moral terms, as the exchange of personal information on other members of the community is prejudicially seen as the quintessential activity of older women. English *gossip*, originating in *godsibb* 'baptismal sponsor', exhibits a comparable semantic movement, albeit in the opposite direction, a positive term gradually turning negative.

Before concluding, we may briefly note three words that have some resemblance, in phonology and perhaps register, to those reviewed here but are unlikely to have any deeper affinity. These are OE *trúð* 'trumpeter', Old Norse *trúðr* 'juggler', and Middle Irish *drúth* 'fool, entertainer'. All the words display respectable historical depth, although only the Irish form is well attested. Most of the imaginable derivations (OIr > OE, ON > OIr, etc.) have had their defenders, but none of these seems to have considered such socio-linguistic factors as which population groups might have sought employment in popular

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[25] Manly, 102-22, summarized in 'Explanatory Notes' to *The Friar's Tale,* 875, where Malone's rejection of this claim is also noted.

[26] Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew,* I.ii.78-80, cited in Rowland, who also calls attention to instances in *Gammer Gurton's Needle*, 75, where the "old trout" is characterized as "ill-favored", and in Urquhart's translation of Rabelais, I.40. It is of interest to note that Wright's *English Dialect Dictionary* offers two definitions for *trot*: 'a contemptuous term for an old woman', and 'foolish talk'; VI.246, while *trotter* is defined as 'a woman of the town', 246. Since the completion of the present study, Anatoly Liberman has published *An Analytic Dictionary of English Etymology*, which includes an entry for *trot* (208-10).

entertainment when cultures came into prolonged contact.[27] From this perspective it seems at least plausible that ON *trúðr* is a loan from Irish *drúth*, the Norse invaders of Ireland quickly setting up kingships, lordships and courts of their own in a rapid merging of Germanic and Celtic culture, while a hypothetical British **drud* (cf. Welsh *drud* 'bold, brave' but also 'reckless, foolish') would have replicated this situation among the Anglo-Saxon invaders and settlers, and the (subaltern?) British population seeking accommodation with the new rulers. Or Norse *trúðr* may have made its way from Ireland and the Islands to York and the Danelaw, and thence into Old English.

The *OED*, we recall, had entries for 'trusty trout' and 'old trout' under the headword *trout* as the designation of *Salmo fario*. Yet the cross-reference to *trot* (however cryptic) in the case of the latter clearly shows that editors had some notion that another explanation might be the correct one. This continues to be the lexicographer's dilemma: to group by etymology or by evolved phonology and semantics–in these cases, analogues of *trusty/trustee* and *trot* recast as *trout* under the effects of folk etymology.

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[27] *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* would derive all three words from an IE root meaning 'tree' and subsequently used of heroic men; I.214-17, *s.v. deru-*. Yet, from this perspective, the words would all have suffered a considerable slide in register, perhaps a feature of loaning among later European languages; cf. Frankish *bald*, above.

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