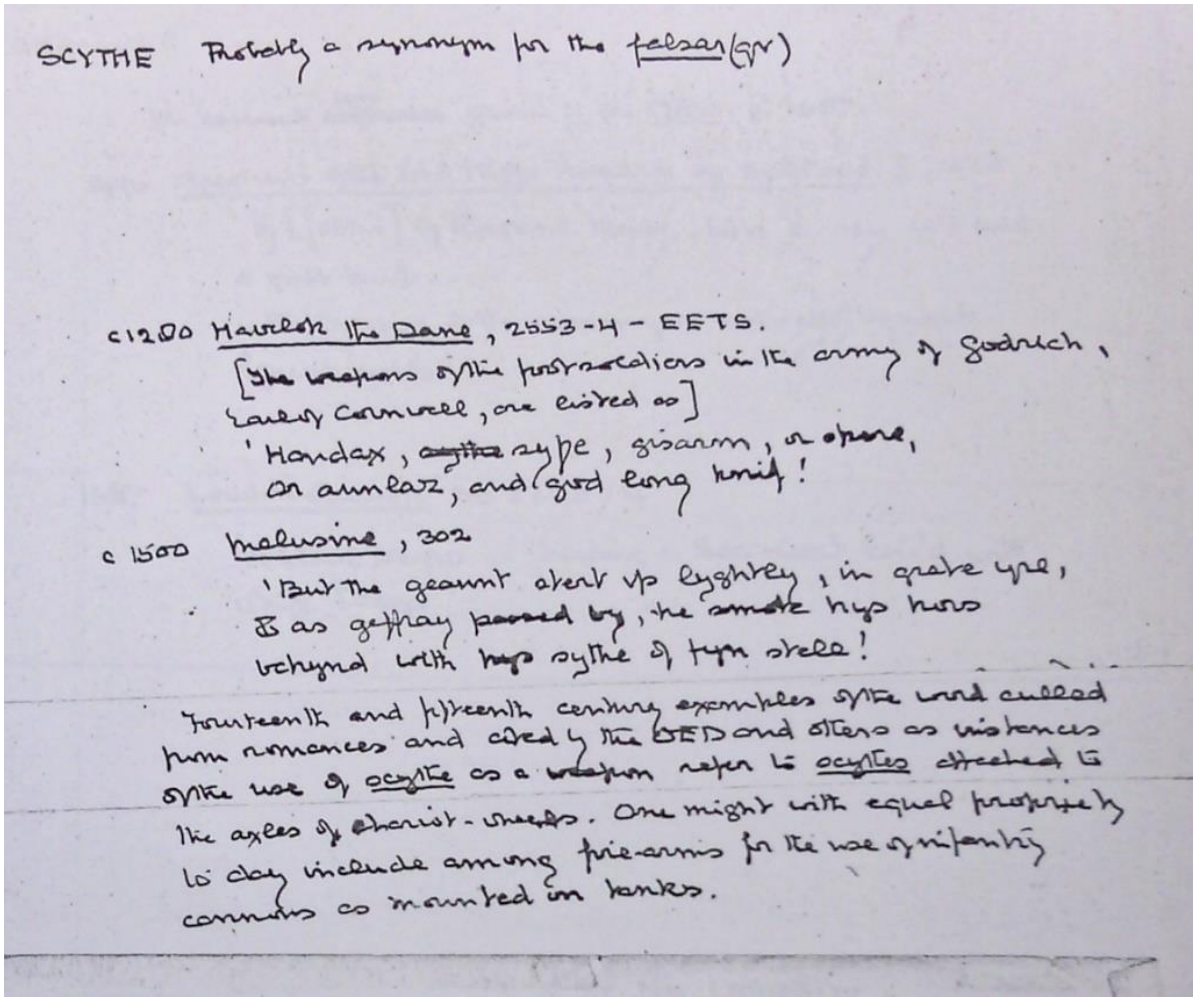

In his *Historical Dictionary of Arms, Armour & Fashion*, Beard focusses on the scythe as a form of weaponry. His entry describes the scythe in rather simple terms as a synonym for ‘falsart’ and provides some examples of usage dating back to the Middle English (ME) period, mainly in the sense of a weaponised attachment to chariot wheels. This essay seeks to explore the history of the word, and how the usage and meaning has evolved through time to give us a fuller appreciation of ‘scythe’ in the sense that Beard explores. To help achieve this task the etymology, orthography and semantics of the word will be reviewed and explored utilising the clues Beard has provided in his entry, alongside the OED, the MED, and a range of historical dictionaries from varying periods.

‘Scythe’ itself has a long history, with its etymology having roots in Old English (OE) as an agricultural tool. The first recorded usage is that in the form of ‘síðe’ as documented by the OED (2019), occurring as early as c725. We also see instances that preserve the medial -g- as in the form ‘sigði’ (c825), found also in cognates such as Low German ‘seged’, which collectively derive from the root Germanic form ‘seg-’ meaning ‘to cut’.

As time elapses and OE begins to fade, Middle English (ME) gains traction and takes precedence in the 11th century, we begin to see signature orthographical changes associated with ME. In *Essentials of Early English* (Smith, 2005, p.92) we learn that the use of the 'edh' (ð) disappears early in the ME period and is replaced by the 'thorn' (þ). This is evidenced in the OEDs timeline of the orthographical changes of 'scythe', as we see the form 'syþe' being utilised in the 16th century. Beyond this, predominantly from the 17th century onwards, we see several different representations of the word which no longer utilise the 'thorn', which Smith (2005, p.93) describes as a result of the invention of the printing press and the shift to Early Modern English (EME). This wide orthographical variation in the period is also attributable to the lack of standardisation and the reflection of regional varieties being present in orthographical forms throughout the country, as explained by Smith (2005, p.90-91).

This variation continues until the 18th century, with forms documented in the OED such as 'sythe' and 'sithe'. We then see Johnson publish his dictionary, in 1755, and we begin to see more standardisation as we move into Modern English (MoE). Samuel Johnson (Johnson, 1755, p.311) cites 'sithe' as, "the instrument of mowing." However, unusually and unlike many lexemes which became standardised following his publication, it was not his spelling which prevailed. Instead it was the currently accepted form, 'scythe' which is dated by the OED as appearing from the 16th century onwards, on an inconsistent basis.

It is interesting that even as late as the 18th century we saw orthographical variation. Johnson preferred 'sithe', yet the OED offers an alternative in 'sythe', while other sources state 'scythe'. This variation in part traces back to the influence of Latin on ME. The OED explains the shift from spelling 'sithe' to 'scythe' was due to incorrectly taking influence from the Latin word 'scindere', meaning 'to cut'. A semantic link was created between 'scindere' and 'scythe' and so the current orthography was introduced, and despite its inaccuracies, has been retained to the present day.

This inaccurate link is also reminiscent of the etymology, in that the root from 'seg-', meaning 'to cut', was the source of the early OE 'sigði'. Perhaps this incorrect connection to 'sc-', the Latinate root from the word for 'cut', has been attributed here to mirror the original Germanic root 'seg-' whilst simultaneously, even if erroneously, incorporating the Latin influence.

Indeed, this rationale for inaccurate links such as these is described in *The Handbook of Simplified Spelling* (Paine, 1920, p.5-6) which provides some explanation as to why the Latinate form could have become the dominant form. The reasoning for this could lie in the voracious trend during the 16th century (and beyond) to incorporate Latin influence in the

respelling of words wherever possible. This classical influence occurred as a means to emphasise prestige and indicate “the real or supposed derivations of English words from the Latin and the Greek” (Paine, 1920, p.6). We see other examples such as ‘b’ being inserted into ‘det’ to give us ‘debt’ to relate directly to the Latin ‘debitum’ rather than the French ‘dette’ which was also the EME spelling. Paine also attributes the insertion of the ‘c’ into ‘scissors’ to this phenomenon and describes the insertion as “a supposed derivation of the word from the Latin ‘scindere’, whereas its true basis is ‘caedere’, to cut.” (Paine, 1920, p.6).

Despite the documentations of the weapon scythe in the ME period, other historical dictionaries from the 18th century, like Johnson’s, seem to have no mention of the weapon, and in listings of ‘scythe’ we see references to the agricultural tool only. We can see this in two examples of dictionaries in the 18th century which precede and follow Johnson’s publication, first by Manlove (1741) and later by Entick (1791). Both include scythe and it is simply defined as an instrument for mowing grass, in line with Johnson’s definition which reinforces the OED’s casting of the sense of weaponry as obsolete by this time.

As time progressed, it appears that the term ‘scythe’ as a weapon, described in Beard’s Trove, became less common, possibly due to innovations in technology as well as the language evolving. This type of semantic shift is described by Stockwell and Mindozo (2001, p.149) as one being driven by technology, an observation alluded to by Beard in his entry, while referring to the scythed wheels of chariots: “One might with equal propriety today include among firearms for the use of infantry cannon as mounted on tanks.” It is also possible however, that it became obsolete due to convergence with lexemes for other weapons which hold many similarities, a possibility which this essay will later seek to explore.

The invention of scythed weapons, documented from 1200 by Beard, could have been named because of the similarities in the physical form of the weapon to that of the agricultural tool. This also could link the adjectival form ‘scythed’ – OED (2019), as the weapon scythed its victims, as a farmer would scythe his crops. This is depicted in sense 2 of ‘scythed’ in the OED.

Having reviewed scythe’s etymological and orthographical history, we must now return to Beard’s entry. Beard explicitly links ‘scythe’ to ‘falsart’ as a direct synonym, and as he provides little information beyond this link, or clues as to what the definition of ‘falsart’ may be, it is imperative to investigate and review the information available on ‘falsart’ to provide further insight into his research. We can see that in both the MED (2019) and the OED, ‘falsart’ is defined simply as a ‘billhook’ and offers the etymology as deriving from Latin ‘falx’ and its variations, through the Old French to ‘falsart’. A billhook is defined in the OED, quite simply as; “a heavy thick knife or chopper with a hooked end.”

It is interesting that despite the influx of Latinate words which entered ME, the term scythe in its various forms was not replaced by the Latin derived forms tracing from falx despite instances of both 'scythe' and 'falsart' being evidenced as early as the 13th century, in the MED, and the 14th, in the OED. Instead the OE rooted form prevailed, irrespective of the links to Latin. We can also see in the OED, under the head word 'falx', we are directed to 'scythe'. The retaining of the OE rooted 'scythe' could however be due to the fact that it was a word which would have been used by average people, who were likely not to possess any schooling in literacy. Pyles, et. al (2013, p.153) advise us that during the Renaissance, an influx of words entered ME through what is referred to as; "inkhorn terms, so named from the fact that they were seldom spoken but were mainly written (with a pen dipped into an ink container made of horn)." Due to the nature of the origins of the lexeme, in agriculture, and by extension, the likelihood of the people using it in the most part being illiterate, it is unlikely that an 'inkhorn' term, such as 'falx' or its derivatives, would replace the spoken English word.

Much like its English counterpart, 'scythe', there is a long history of 'falx' being utilised and is present, even in the classics. In *A Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities* (Smith, 1875, p.518) we are further presented with the dual distinction of the scythe as both an agricultural tool and a weapon. We are first given further synonyms by means of definitions listing similar items we have already seen in dictionary sources, such as a 'bill', and a 'scythe', however other weaponry is also introduced in this source, comparing a 'falx' to a 'halberd': "If we imagine the weapon which has now been described to be attached to the end of a pole, it would assume the form and be applicable to all purposes of the modern Halbert [sic]." Under his entry for 'halberd', Knight (1875, p.1049) describes: "a common weapon among the Romans (falx, falcula)."

It must be noted that when the comprehensive entry in the OED for 'halberd' is reviewed, the link to 'scythe' is not entirely explicit despite the historical links in other dictionaries. The description of 'halberd' differs, in that it is described as: "A weapon consisting of a spear and battle-axe combined… Having a spearhead or spike above an axe blade with a hooked back, on a pole typically around 1.8 metres long." The only clues in the description are that it is on a pole and there is a curved element. In the MED however, we see more links. For example, under the reference for 'batel-ax', we see the reference to 'bill' alongside 'halberd', linked back to the definition of a 'falsart' being a 'billhook'. We also see this circular reference in the entry for 'bil', we find; "A cutting, hacking, or grubbing implement: (a) a falchion, halberd…; (b) a pruning hook or blade." Once again, returning to the definition of 'falsart' as a synonym for 'scythe' being a 'billhook', and linking back to the Latinate 'falx' through 'falchion'.

This leads to the question of whether Beard explored these links in his entries for ‘halberd’ or ‘falsart’, which unfortunately at present are not yet–published on Beard’s Trove. Once published on the website, these entries could be an interesting source for further enquiry and investigation. If the OED were to review their entries in the future, this could also provide further insight into the links between the different weapons and their relationship to one another.

In Smith’s (1875, p.518) dictionary, we see examples of the usage of ‘falx’ in the writings from classical authors, such as Homer and Virgil, in an agricultural sense. However, we are also given an overview of the item as a military weapon, describing it in comparison to its agricultural counterparts; “its employment in battle was almost equally varied, though not so frequent.” Examples of Ovid, for instance, describe mythological figures wielding the item, indicating the ancient usage of the weapon, and its wielding is described as being employed by “the Assyrians, the Persians, the Medes, and the Syrians in Asia… and the Gauls and Britons in Europe, made themselves formidable on the field of battle by the use of chariots with scythes.” The latter definition of usage is in line with Beard’s entry, though as we have seen there is much more to be discovered about the weapon than the brief entry Beard provides.

The OED cites ‘scythe’ in the sense Beard lists as obsolete, with exception of historical reference to the aforementioned scythed chariots. In both the MED and OED, we see examples of this usage in the wars of Alexander, stating; “Þe chiftayne had chariotis..And þai ware sett aþire side full of sythe-bladis.” The OED continues to link to the adjective ‘scythed’ in relation to this usage, describing in sense 1 as: “Furnished with a scythe; esp. Historical (…Latin falcatus) of war-chariots provided with scythes fastened to a revolving shaft projecting from the axle-trees.” Whereas sense 2 is very simply; “cut down with a scythe.” ‘Falcatus’, is defined by Morwood (2012) as an adjective in Latin meaning; “armed with scythes; sickle-shaped, curved.” Thus, we are provided with deeper links between the Latin ‘falx’ and the English ‘scythe’, reinforcing Beard’s description of ‘scythe’ being a synonym of ‘falsart’ and as a weaponised addition to chariots, alongside the further links to other words which retain similar meanings, but are vastly different in a lexical sense.

Moving further towards the present day, we begin to see usage transfer from a literal weapon, to that as a figurative device as the weapon of the personification of Death, and as symbol of death in itself. This figurative definition is outlined in the OED, sense 2. For example, from the Early Modern English period (EME) and beyond we begin to see that around the time literal

uses as a weapon begin to disappear in the varying dictionary entries, and the examples of weaponry end around the 16th and 17th century, we see examples of this figurative representation of Death's tool simultaneously appear. It is no longer being utilised as lexeme to describe military weapons, perhaps because usage in this sense converged with the likes of 'falsart', or even 'halberd', thus becoming obsolete.

However, we begin to see references in the early 16th century in the figurative sense, which then becomes more popular, taking traction in the early 17th century onwards. This figurative sense was utilised by some of the most famous literary figures in history of English, such as Shakespeare and Byron, potentially assisting in the widespread and popular usage due to their own popularity. For example, we see this figurative use in Shakespeare's Sonnet 12, the final couplet reads: "And nothing 'gainst Time's scythe can make defence; Save breed, to brave him when he takes thee hence." The dictionaries reviewed do not relay this figurative usage but is one that becomes widespread in literature.

It is also interesting to note that this shift from the literal to figurative began pre-industrial revolution, which occurred from the 18th century onwards. Pre-industrial revolution society was mostly agricultural and so the average person's connection to the cycle of life was more obvious and present, from the shoots of spring which could signify birth, the growth of summer which could signify life and maturity, through to the autumn and the scything of crops in the harvest, leading to the cold, harshness of winter, signifying death. This figurative use of the scythe as being representative of death could be symbolised in its purpose as the tool for cutting and reaping of the harvest prior to the winter. Tarlow (2013, p.621) reinforces this idea that agricultural metaphors of death "involve a strong cyclical understanding of life and death, in which death is part of a circle of fertility." This symbolism between agriculture and death can also be evidenced as far back as the Old Testament of the Bible. For example, Job 5:26 states: "Thou shalt come to thy grave in a full age, like as a shock of corn cometh in his season." Therefore, this figurative usage takes us back to the tool in its original sense, of that as a simple agricultural tool, used to farm and reap the harvest. Like the cycle of life, which the scythe metaphorically embodies, its meaning returns us to its first.

As Stockwell and Minkova (2001, p.148) advises us, "It is not always easy to decide at which point two meanings of one polysemic word merit separate entries in the dictionary." However, in scythe we can see the clear overlap of when the polysemic senses begin to diverge and separate, with the usages giving us a very clear indication of the timeline of the evolution of each sense, even if not as individual lexemes.

The evolution of the word scythe and its uses throughout history is almost poetic, and representative of humanity itself. As an agricultural tool it is used to breed and nourish life, to harvest crops and provide food. Thus, leading to usage as a weapon as it serves to cut and destroy, and as a result it has become figurative of death, becoming a metaphorical tool used to provide meaning to the unknown of physical death, thus in itself representing the cycle of life. The figurative use is therefore embodying this, as well as the journey of the word itself throughout history. Although Beard's listing focusses purely on its usage as a military weapon, there is much more behind this.

Further investigation into orthography and etymology would be advantageous to fully understand the true journey of this lexeme, alongside analysing further entries in Beard's dictionary, which are not yet published, to allow us to create a fuller, more accurate, picture of the lexeme scythe, its history, usage and links to other lexemes.

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