This essay examines the Middle English (ME) word *apron*, and will take details from Beard's Trove as part of a research project contributing to Charles Relly Beard's 'Historical Dictionary of Arms, Armour, and Fashion'. In addition, the entry shall be compared to other dictionaries such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED), and the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* (DOST). Further texts, found within these dictionaries, will then be explored to allow embellishment upon Beard's work. The aim of this project essay is to provide an overview of the research that has been carried out around *apron* and what this data is able to tell us about the uses and forms of this word, to then possibly reveal new ideas and contradictions and ultimately contribute towards an active area of study: Charles Relly Beard's endeavour. To allow a contribution, elements of etymology, orthography, phonetics, and semantics will be included. In addition to these elements, reference will be made to the British National Corpus (BNC) to assess the uses of *apron* and in particular the collocates.

The manuscript of Charles Relly Beard describes ME *apron* as originating from the Old French (OF) word of *naperon*; incidentally, the OF word is the diminutive of nape and nappe, specifically meaning a table-cloth. The MED, the DOST, and the OED agree on this verdict, but there is slight variation around the orthography of the headword *apron* is found under: the MED presents the headword *nāprŏ̄n. n*, in the DOST it is found under both *aproun. n*. or *aperoun. n*., and then the OED has the headword of *apron. n.* The variations with the headwords could prove challenging, but due to dictionaries having electronic links this enables cross referencing between sources. Therefore, the sources used within this study do in fact link together, so complications have been limited. Beyond the headword, the OED does provide a more extensive understanding of the word's etymology, and as such

its orthography: since similar variants and changes can be seen to have happened in medieval Latin, so for example the uses of *matta, natte, mespilum*, and *nèfle* indicate the change of Latin /m/ to French /n/. The ME era was heavily influenced by OF, since it had significant impact on the expansion of the English lexicon (Smith, 2005, p.90), and, furthermore, French did provide English with many 'open' vocabulary words as follows: open class nouns and adjectives. Along with this, many French spellings appeared within English as these words were commonly used within written forms (Smith, 1996, p98). Beard's manuscript does identify *apron*, or at that time *naperon*, as first being used in the fourteenth century, and it was around this time that French was beginning to lose the influence it held over English: the power French seemed to have phased out due to The One Hundred Years War (1337-1453), and hence interaction with the central territory of France began to be lost; such ties began to break due to Paris becoming the central hub of French culture, and as a result contact started to reduce. Therefore, English did undergo resurgence and began to reclaim its status. Nevertheless, at a time of French influence it can be acknowledged that *apron* was introduced from OF because French was the language of culture and politics, thus influence was also seen in the contexts of art and fashion (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009, p. 156).

Naturally the ME period shows a vast range of variation, both in phonetics and orthography, as written standards did not exist. The extent of variation was based around the lexicon at the time (Smith, 1996, p.51); in this instance French was seen as prestigious and thus was implemented within language to appear higher class. ME only functioned at a local level, so it was taught in such a way, but when Old English (OE) standardisation had been lifted the full impact of Scandinavian contact was expressed —only after the Norman Conquest (Smith, 2005, p. 93). Beard's work

does not provide details into the phonetic features of *apron*, however the OED offers further insights. For example, two pronunciations are given of the headword and both indicate towards a different pronunciation: /eɪprən/ and /eɪpən/. From this it can be seen there is no distinction between vowels, and therefore pronunciation appears to have remained fairly similar, yet differences may have occurred due to dialect. Overall, only some spellings can be explained by observing historical developments. Other various spellings are a result of orthographic and phonological variation in ME.

With regards to semantics, Beard's manuscript provides extensive detail as to when the garment has been referred to, and provides explanations as to the uses of an *apron*. Beard states that the garment is used as denotation of social class and position of the wearer; accordingly, the references Beard uses explicitly relate the garment to the impression it is portraying.

Beard's first reference point goes back to 1307; nevertheless, it is specified that the previous name of the garment was *barmcloth*, and therefore it can be assumed that this OE term was replaced by the 'trendy' French form *naperon*; hence, *barmcloth* was not able to withstand the impact French contact had, yet this was the case with many forms in OE after the Norman Conquest of 1066— Anglo-Norman became the language of the rulers and those with the highest status. This is shown throughout the English language, but in particular in the ME period, as French became a status marker; demonstrating one's proximity to royal governance (Stein, 2007, p26-34) and thus was viewed as a method of asserting your standing.

Since Beard states, and as aforementioned, the French form *naperon* was still in use during the fourteenth and first half of the fifteenth century, but it was around 1460 onwards that *apron* appears to become the standard. Beard's work provides a

timeline of how the word has been altered throughout the English periods. The earliest date of evidence in Beard's manuscript is 1307, which is linked to the 19th century book found in the online archive: *The Deanery of Craven.* Within this text, the use of the French form *naperons* appears; this text discusses the idea of this word replacing *barmcloths*, and states this change as the beginning of the etymology of *apron*. Furthermore, it is proposed that *apron* has simply lost a letter in the process of forming the Present Day English (PDE) form. This document suggests it likely happened by mistake, and as a result *'a naperoun'* or *'an apron'* was formed; this explains why there is such variety in relation to spelling, for it was dependent upon what the *Deanery of Craven* has termed a prefix split—nowadays this would be the process of the indefinite article being reanalysed. *The Deanery of Craven* also appears within a further document: *The Drapers Dictionary*. This second document references *The Deanery of Craven*, but it provides further details into the appearance of the garment. This text tells: "they are varied in size and length, especially when used by the upper classes rather for show than utility, and have frequently been of very rich materials". From this it can be understood as an item of high quality, and consequently one of high value; moreover, it can be viewed as indicating the owner's social position, and, so does not seem to make a link to its physical use—protection. Therefore, it shows the centuries of invasions and contact with French has formed deep impressions upon English culture (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009, p160). Interestingly, both Beard's manuscript and *The Drapers Dictionary* make reference to the work by Stephen Gosson: *Pleasant Quippes for Upstart New Fangled Gentlewomen*; incidentally, within Gosson's work he inveighs against the garment, in terms of its functional concept, and questions why it must cost so much for the role it fulfils. This is shown in: "were they in works to save their

cotes, they need not cost so many grotes". This details the general theme: the higher levels of society are the ones that have use of this garment. As mentioned previously, 1460 was around the time apron became standard, however in 1590 Edmund Spenser's poem *The Faerie Queene,* which Beard makes reference to, uses an archaic form, therefore showing a harkening back to an older time. This deliberate use can be seen in the line "put before his lap a *napron* white", and whilst this shows an element of creativity it also shows reflection back to an era of French dominance. At the same time, a sense of social standings is brought back, for French was generally used as a method of conveying higher status. Indications of the aristocratic stamp can be seen on medieval French words. Things generally connected to ordinary people will retain their English names, whereas upper-class objects often have French names (Barber, Beal, Shaw, 2009, p175).

Below are tables summarising the instances of *apron* Beard has compiled.

1307: *The Deanery of Craven*	**1590: Edmund Spenser's poem *Faerie Queene***	**1591: Lyly in *Midas***	**1594: Stephen Gosson's *Pleasant Quippes for Upstart New Fangled Gentlewomen***
'Pro linen tela ad naperonns'.	'put before his lap a napron white, instead of curiets and bases fit for fight'.	Applied to barbers the term 'checkered-apron men'.	'These aprons white of finest thread'.

1640: Bishop Hall	**1659: Massinger in *City Madem***	**1690: Evelyn: *Mundus Muliebris***	**1726 Amherst: *Terrae Filius***

‘A separatist, a blue-aproned man, that never knew any better school than his shop-board’.	Makes one of his characters exclaim in horror- ‘my young ladies in buffin gowns and green aprons’.	‘The working apron too from France with all its trim appurtenance’.	‘If any saucy blue apron dares to affront any venerable person… all scholars are immediately… to have any dealings or commerce with him’.

Overall, the OED distinguishes between two semantic areas of *apron*, the first refers to the garment as an article of dress, and talks about covering yourself; the second denotes a technical use, and is commonly found within specific contexts. The first way *apron* is characterised is in relation to it being an “article of dress originally of linen, but now also of stuff, leather, or other material, worn in front of the body, to protect the clothes from dirt or injury, or simply as a covering” (apron, n., I.); similarly, the first usage is recorded as 1307 and uses the same reference as Beard to *The Drapers Dictionary.* Within the first sense of the OED there is a large range of variation in terms of the noun, and consequently it is only from the early seventeenth century onwards there appears to be regularisation in terms of the orthography—this constant variation indicates the level of uncertainty in ME. The OED references *apron* in William Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar (1616) in “where is thy Leather Apron, and thy Rule?” (apron, n., I.). From this a sturdy garment is suggested, and within the context of this text it indicates towards the apron acting as symbol of the trade the worker is from. Additionally, the capitalisation of the noun gives the impression of its importance to the owner and society—a method of identification. Next, the OED presents a sense that talks about the dress of a bishop, dean, and Freemason. This sense provides fewer references, still, there seems to be a strong correlation

between the garment and identity. The example from 1859 indicates this assumption of societal position—“never be a bishop, nor even wear the lesser apron of a dean” (apron, n., I.2.) . This quotation expresses the concept that your status is portrayed through the clothing you wear, as well as the role you have within society; thus, it highlights the importance of being able to express your image. In particular, at the time of the Middle Ages, there seemed to be a surge of new professions, and being able to identify where you fitted in within society was important; moreover, being able to identify the profession you came from meant it was easier to earn status within the working world, and as a result meant earning money was easier.

Beard’s work and the OED coincide when detailing the design of the *apron*. From this study, there has been a recurring theme of colour and its association with the garment; incidentally, both Beard’s research and the OED predominantly use white when speaking of the *apron*. To allow this to be studied further, online resources such as the BNC provide information as to the most frequent uses of words, and this corpus can be utilised to uncover the collocates of *apron*. Studying this brought back the top five collocates as follows: her, white, an, leather, and his. Interestingly, from compiling the collocates, it can be seen that white is the second highest. Beard’s work only mentions white aprons up until 1659, at this point green aprons are introduced, and the OED shows a similar story where colours are not detailed until 1750. It appears the colour reflects the class the wearer is from. Interestingly, Beard’s work denotes green aprons as being “refined to women of the merchant class”, and hence implies the white apron is worn by the upper class—their use of an apron “indicates their office rather than they have any knowledge of domestic economy” (Beard’s Trove, *apron*).

Apron is also used within more technical contexts, according to the OED. Sense four details the technical uses *apron* has been used within. In this context descriptions denote a less metaphorical sense, but instead a more physical item that is less whimsical. The latter of the two ways the OED presents *apron* is likely less obvious as it appears to derive from more specialised contexts, and is also not in Beard's work. The OED presents the first technical use, 1633, as coming from the context of mechanics and provides a definition as to where and when this industry would use this: "the piece that holds the cutting tool in a planing machine" (apron, n., I.4, f.). This source comes from Thomas James' book where he discusses his voyage, as a result it would be expected to be for a more informed audience that would understand the journey and experiences he has faced. Similarly, William Sutherland's work (1711) is quoted where he talks about being part of the 'Shipbuilders Assistant' (or essays contributing to the completion of marine architecture). In contrast, the OED also has references to what appears a more elegant, but specific, context. Within the Elizabethan era, the apron referred to the setting of the theatre, but more specifically the stage: "the technical name for the stage-area in front of the curtain […] this 'apron' slowly shrank until at last in our day it has altogether disappeared" (apron, n., I.4, j).

To summarise, the OED's work surrounding *apron* appears to be split between the physical garment and technical contexts—when this is the case it is apparent the references are from more specialised contexts and therefore are aimed at someone with specific knowledge. Due to their differing focus, the OED suggests a semantic element that Beard does not; a closer examination of both sources is necessary to fully appreciate their contribution to the understanding of the word.–

The MED presents *apron* with only one sense, and as previously mentioned is under the headword *nāprŏ̄n.* This dictionary identifies apron as first being used in the fourteenth century which uses the definition: “an apron; also, a bishop's apron; ~ tabbe, an apron string or strap”. The associated quotations appear to use the French form *naperon*, and it remains untidy in terms of orthography; this uncertainty continues towards the end of the fifteenth century. The DOST, similarly to the MED, highlights many variations in terms of orthography; especially, this seems to be the case with the consonant [y]. In 1508 it is spelt as apronis, but then in 1565 the appearance of ayperon has developed. The latter appears to have adopted a phonetic spelling, for the English phonological system began to be applied (Barber, Beal, & Shaw, 2009, p159), but this was only possible as French was losing its power. In the era of Chaucer’s work, particularly throughout *The Canterbury Tales*, French is beginning to lose connotations of social status due to English becoming more powerful, which would have been unheard of in ME as French was the authoritative language (Smith, 2005, p104). Furthermore, regulations begin to be seen as English moves into the Early Modern English (EME) period. Within this era William Caxton’s printing press, 1476, and Samuel Johnson’s dictionary, 1755, formed the catalyst of standardisation.

In conclusion, this essay has looked at the etymology of the ME word *apron*, which originated from OF and has also replaced *barmcloth*. With regards to phonology, it appears to have been subject to few changes, and as such there has been little analysis to provide. The word’s orthographic features were looked at throughout the essay and it has provided insight into the variety of spellings which is exemplarily of ME. Finally, *apron* has offered a range of semantic data. In Beard’s work, who provided the most detail, *apron* is a status symbol, whereas the MED and

the DOST present it is as the physical garment. The OED offers two different views on the semantics of *apron*, and as a result strengthens Beard's research. Overall, the three dictionaries agree on *apron* being from the ME period, and hence support and embellish Beard's research.

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