A NOTE ON 'DEAR ME!'

The idiom 'Dear me!' which is still in common use in Colloquial English, is generally explained as synonymous with such interjections as 'Dear, dear!' and 'O dear!', with no further inquiry into the syntactical relation between dear and me. It is, however, no easy matter to settle the question from a linguistic point of view.

The origin of this expression has been hitherto conjectured in various ways, and yet, as far as I know, there is no clear and convincing explanation about it.

There are many people who think that me in 'Dear me!' may be also the dative, as in 'Woe's me!' (Woe is me!), or the Scotch 'Lief me!' (Lief is me!). But so long as we cannot trace it to much earlier examples, it is rather difficult for us to subscribe to such an opinion.

Next we find some advocates of the Italian influence theory, which is recorded in The Century Dictionary. They suppose that 'Dear me!' must possibly be a corruption of the Italian 'Dio mio!' (My God), an exclamation which is analogous in its usage, though quite different in its
meaning from the English one. This theory may be comparatively reliable, in that there could be no great difference of pronunciation between these two exclamations, the Italian 'Dio mio!' and the English 'Dear me!'

For, the trill of 'r' had already disappeared, except before a vowel or in the Scotch dialect, long before this idiom came into use in Modern English. But even this view still remains a mere plausible hypothesis for lack of external evidence.

Onions, one of the editors of The New English Dictionary, says thus by way of explanation about 'Oh me!', 'Ah me!' and 'Dear me!': "Note that when the subject of exclamation is of the first person singular we have 'me' not 'I,' probably in imitation of the Latin accusative of exclamation." We must thank him for this elucidation of the case of me, but we should like to hear a little more of its grammatical function.

Milton's Paradise Lost has these lines:

Me miserable! which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath and infinite despair? —Paradise Lost (1667), IV, 73-74.

In this example there is no denying that Milton, a classical scholar as well as a great poet, should have literally translated the Latin 'Me miserum!' into 'Me miserable!', and yet we cannot but hesitate to treat it in the same way as much earlier 'O me!' and 'Ah me!'

Now, as the first appearance of the expression 'Dear me!', The New English Dictionary furnishes us with the following example from Goldsmith's play:

"Dear me! dear me! I'm sure there is nothing in my behaviour to put me on a level with one of that stamp." —She Stoops to Conquer (1773), iv.

But we can find it also in the other play, written a little earlier by the same author:

"Dear me, I wish this journey were over." —The Good Natur'd Man (1768), iv.

If these are the earliest examples of 'Dear me!', and we can find no trace of it in Middle English and Old English, we are inclined to think it an idiom of rather recent formation, probably influenced by some analogy.

Long before Goldsmith wrote these plays in 1768 and 1773, the absolute adjective dear, through its vocative use, had already developed into an interjection, expressing surprise, distress, sympathy, &c. On the other hand,
A NOTE ON 'DEAR ME!'

the old-fashioned idioms, such as 'O me!', 'Ah me!' and 'Ay me!,' must have been still lingering at that time. When we take these facts into consideration, we arrive at the highly probable conclusion that the interjection dear, followed by me in analogy of 'O me!,' 'Ah me!' and 'Ay me!,' gave birth to a new expression 'Dear me!' And it would not be wide of the mark to suppose that it dates from the early part of the eighteenth century.

By the way, we have other examples of me, placed after some interjections:

"But gracious me! I quite forgot!" —Austen, Pride & Prejudice (1813), ix. 
"Alas me! flit!"
Flit like a ghost away. —Keats, The Eve of St. Agnes (1819), xii.

Such being the case, there can be no direct syntactical relation between dear and me in 'Dear me!'

But, how are we to account for the original use of me? Of this Sweet says: "Interjections occasionally imitate the constructions of the other part of speech. Thus ah! governs an objective case in ah me!" Nevertheless, he keeps silent on the syntactical relation between ah and me. Mätzner is rather suspicious of the case of me, saying, "Bei Interjektionen erscheint öfter ein Kasus, dessen Bestimmung nicht zweifellos ist." It may be misleading to treat a matter of this kind, but I fancy that me in 'O me!' and 'Ah me!' should be regarded as the vocative, though not a little weakened in its function. The interjection 'O,' not found in Old English, came into use in early Middle English (12 c.), from Latin or French, and used to stand before a substantive in the vocative relation, as in 'O Lord!', and 'O Jerusalem!'. And 'O!' often varied with 'A!'. Strange as it may seem, it is not impossible to address the first person, and we find much of the exclamatory element in such an expression. At least, we ought to think of me as the vocative in the following example:

"Poor little me! I might have been Lady Crawley."
—Thackeray, Vanity Fair, xv.

In almost all languages, the nominative is generally used in the vocative relation, and the reason why the objective me is used instead of I in the vocative, can be explained in the same way as the much discussed idiom 'It's me."