


# CONCEPTUAL REVIEW ARTICLE

## Medieval English Multilingualisms

Rory G. Critten<sup>a</sup> and Elisabeth Dutton <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Lausanne, Switzerland and <sup>b</sup>University of Fribourg, Switzerland

**Abstract:** This article introduces the nonmedievalist reader to the multilingual landscape of England 700–1400. Building on recent work exploring in particular the relationships among English, French, and Latin in medieval England, it discusses a series of “multilingual moments” from a range of sources, including letters, poems, travel writings, and French language teaching texts. Together, these examples build a picture of the complex interrelationships of languages, both spoken and written, that existed for medieval English people at home and when traveling abroad. Then, as now, people can be seen using their linguistic resources for pragmatic and creative effect. We demonstrate that multilingualism is nothing new. From a methodological perspective, our work also underlines the importance of viewing linguistic attitudes in their particular intellectual and historical contexts.

**Keywords** medieval English; medieval multilingualism; trilingualism; medieval languages education; bilingualism; code-switching; code-mixing

### Introduction

The question that shapes this volume—“What is special about multilingualism?”—can usefully be considered diachronically: Is multilingualism something new? Our knowledge of language history, and of the written records through which we encounter the historical states of a language, tends to be shaped by the research and teaching of university departments arranged according to monolingual disciplines: a Department of English Language and Literature, for example, and its course on “The History of the English Language.” It can be easy to forget that multilingualism, far from being the product of a new globalized age, has been an important phenomenon throughout history. Nonetheless, scholars in recent decades have begun to explore

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Rory G. Critten, Section d’anglais, Faculté des lettres, Université de Lausanne, Bâtiment Anthropole, CH-1015 Lausanne, Switzerland. E-mail: [rory.critten@unil.ch](mailto:rory.critten@unil.ch)

the complexity of medieval linguistic landscapes, and their work, essential to understanding the medieval world, can also illuminate modern ideas about multilingualism and language learning. Historical studies remind us that in multilingualism, as in so many social phenomena, there is little today that is entirely new; they also remind us, on the other hand, of the importance of assessing attitudes to language and language learning (including our contemporary attitudes) in their historical and cultural contexts. In this article, we seek to highlight the continuing presence of multilingual strategies and practices across a range of contexts in medieval England.

Rather than attempt a synthetic account of medieval English multilingualism, we have opted to focus on a series of moments in which metalinguistic commentary on such topics as language choice and language accessibility is developed, or in which careful thought regarding these and other issues of linguistic importance can be inferred. We consider that this approach allows us best to reflect the fragmented experience of multilingualism in medieval England, which will have varied from location to location and depending on the gender, class, and education of individual users. We approach our case studies chronologically because this arrangement allows us most readily to organize the historical information necessary to understand the shifting linguistic landscape of our area. We do not seek to argue for gradual development either in attitudes toward multilingualism or in multilingual practices across the period that we survey: roughly 700–1400, a time span that includes the earliest written records of English at one end and, at the other, the establishment of English as a national literary language.

Medieval England owed its multilingualism to the particular history of the British Isles. The opening of the Common Era saw the establishment of Roman rule in Britain (0–400) and the gradual collapse of the Roman Empire coincided with a period of Germanic migration to the island (400–600). In the ensuing period, the Germanic in-comers amalgamated into seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms (600–1000). Viking incursions beginning in the late eighth century culminated in the establishment of a permanent Danish settlement in the northeast of the island, the “Danelaw” (878-), and Danish kings would go on to rule in England in the opening years of the 11th century (1013–1042). Conflict over the succession to the English throne led to the last major invasion of Britain. At the Battle of Hastings (1066), William of Normandy defeated the English pretender to the crown, Harold Godwinson, and England became part of the Norman dukes’ territory, a situation that continued into the 13th century.

Each of the groups that arrived in Britain from the Romans onward brought its own languages: Latin, along with early forms of German, Danish, Swedish,

Norwegian, and French. The Celtic peoples that were living in Britain before the arrival of the Romans continued to use their own languages—early forms of Cornish, Welsh, and Scots. Throughout the Middle Ages, the language economy of Britain was continually reinvigorated by close contact with the continent resulting from trade, diplomacy, and war. For example, the Hundred Years War between England and France (1337–1453) saw a temporary expansion of England’s continental possessions that led to especially close language contact between English and French: Much of northern France was settled by the English in the first half of the 15th century; Calais would remain an English port into the 16th century.

The standard histories of English chart the development and use of the language out of the provisional, multilingual situation just described toward monolingualism and standardization. In contrast, we seek to elucidate the multiple possible relationships between the languages used in England during the Middle Ages. The total picture is riven with contradictions: Translation between languages might be promoted or discouraged and their confluence could be a cause for concern or an impetus for creative endeavor. The boundaries between the languages of medieval England can often seem vague or porous. But this is also the period that sees the beginning of vernacular language education and the first attempts to codify vernacular grammar and vocabulary. In the absence of global Englishes, international travel involved medieval English men and women in attempts to capitalize on their multilingual experiences at home in order to ensure their comprehension in new linguistic situations abroad. In what follows we offer a series of snapshots that aims to capture the lived experience of these changes and tensions. Since we write with an audience of nonmedievalists in mind, we have restricted the bibliographic references listed here to the primary materials that we cite. A list of suggested secondary reading accompanies the online version of this article.

### **Attitudes Toward Translation**

In the histories of many modern languages, religion has played an important role. For example, Christian missionaries keen to spread the gospel contribute to theories of translation, or to the development of written vernaculars, and modern scholars of languages may use gospel translations as a useful dataset for comparative linguistic study. English is no exception, and standard histories of the language will often cite the King James translation of the Bible (1611), along with the works of Shakespeare (d. 1616), as a culminating monolingual achievement signaling that English has fully “arrived.” However, the Christian church’s most obvious effect in medieval Europe was often not to encourage

written vernaculars, but through the introduction and promotion of Latin as the language of learning to contribute, indirectly, to multilingualism. In this first section, we examine some of the attitudes toward translation that the institutionalization of Latin in early medieval England might promote.

The Germanic tribes that came to Britain in the migratory period were pagans; their gradual conversion followed the arrival in 597 of an evangelical mission sent from Rome. Among the most enduring effects of this mission were the Anglo-Saxons' adoption of the Roman alphabet and the cultivation of Latin among the upper echelons of their society, where Latin was expertly deployed by writers of literature, philosophy, theology, and history. The story of the conversion is narrated in the *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* [Ecclesiastical History of the English People] by the Benedictine monk of Jarrow, Bede (c. 672–735), whose work, completed in 731, marks an important contribution to the flourishing of Anglo-Latin culture. Also belonging to this moment are the writings of Aldhelm, Bishop of Sherborne (c. 639–709); Saint Boniface (c. 675–754), the Devon-born Archbishop of Mainz; and Alcuin of York, later Abbot of Tours (c. 735–804). Like Bede, whose *Historia* was known throughout premodern Europe, these men enjoyed reputations that extended beyond their island. Two of them spent significant time abroad. Boniface evangelized extensively in Frisia and Germania (parts of the modern Netherlands, Belgium, southwestern Germany, and eastern France) and Alcuin spent important stretches of his life at the imperial court in Aachen (now the western-most city in Germany), where he served as Charlemagne's personal tutor and advisor.

For reasons that continue to be debated, Latin learning in England collapsed in the first half of the ninth century. The gravity of the situation is reflected in the claim of king Alfred of Wessex (c. 848–899) that, when he came to the throne in 871, scarcely anyone in his kingdom had enough Latin to understand the liturgy or translate everyday correspondence from Latin into English. Although modern scholarship confirms the bleak picture that Alfred paints, complaints about faulty Latin are endemic throughout the Middle Ages. What is unusual about Alfred is the solution that he proposes. In his advocacy of translation as an engine for positive social change, Alfred differs from medieval writers who worry about the dangers inherent in making difficult texts more broadly accessible.

Alfred comments on the lack of Latin learning in England in his preface to an English translation of Pope Gregory the Great's *Cura pastoralis* [Pastoral Care] (c. 590). He laments England's lost preeminence in the field of scholarship, recalling that once people looked to the English to dispense wisdom where now the English must summon any teachers that they have from abroad. The

king goes on to interpret the Viking attacks that had begun in the 790s as God's punishment for the Anglo-Saxons' neglect of study and to reflect poignantly on the illegibility of the relics of English Latinity. Alfred writes that, before the Viking raids, English churches had stood filled with treasures and books but that the books were incomprehensible to their possessors because they were not written in their own language.

Translation will be the remedy for the situation that Alfred describes. Like the Greeks and Romans, who translated the Bible into their own languages, and like some of their contemporary neighbors, who had begun to do likewise, Alfred asserts that the Anglo-Saxons should make the books they need anew in their own tongue. The king proposes

ðæt we eac suma bec, ða ðe niedbeðearfosta sien eallum monnum to wiotonne, ðæt we ða on ðæt geðiode wenden ðe we ealle gecnawan mægan; ondgedon, swæ we swiðe eaðe magon mid Godes fultume, gif we ða stilnesse habbað, ðætte eall sio gioguð ðe nu is on Angelcynne friora monna, ðara ðe ða speda hæbben ðæt hie ðæm befeolan mægen, sien to leornunga oðfæste, ða hwile ðe hie to nanre oðerre note ne mægen, oð ðone first ðe hie wel cunnen Englisc gewrit arædan [that we too translate them, some of those books which all men most need to know, that we too translate them into the language that we can all perceive; and do, as we very easily can with the help of God, if we have the quiet times, that all the youth which is now in England of the free men who have the means to apply themselves to this, be set to learning while they can be used for no other purpose, until such time as they well know how to read what is written in English]. (North, Allard, & Gillies, 2011, p. 434)

Rather than advocating the renewal of Latin learning, Alfred suggests that English might just as well be promoted. The instruction of Latin is mentioned in an afterthought: "lære mon siððan furður on Lædengeðiode ða ðe mon furðor læran wille ond to hierran hade don wille" [let the Latin language be taught as an extra to those whom one wants to teach further and raise to holy orders] (North et al., 2011, p. 434). Alfred's self-confidence is manifest in his expectation that he will be able to control access to his English version of the *Pastoral Care* even after he has dispatched it. In his preface, he orders Wæferth, Bishop of Worcester, to whom he sent one copy of the book, to keep the manuscript at his church unless Wæferth specially determines to loan it out.

Alfred's project bore fruit. Translations of Orosius's *Historiae adversus paganos* [Histories against the Pagans] (c. 416–417), Gregory's *Dialogi*

[Dialogues] (c. 593), and Bede's *Historia* are assumed to have been undertaken at his instigation and, until recently, the king himself was usually thought to have translated into English further works by the late-Roman philosopher Boethius (c. 475–526) and the fourth-century Father of the Church, Saint Augustine of Hippo, as well as the first fifty psalms. If modern scholarship is skeptical of Alfred's claim to these texts' authorship, within 100 years of his death, the king had acquired a reputation as a model translator. In the preface to his first series of *Catholic Homilies* (990–995), the Benedictine monk Ælfric of Eynsham (c. 955–1010) cites Alfred as a precedent for his own translating. Immediately, however, differences of opinion regarding the utility of English texts are apparent:

Þa bearn me on mode ic truwiġe ðurh godes ġife. þæt ic ðas boc of ledenum ġeoroede to engliscre spræce awende. na þurh ġebylde micelre lare. ac for ðan ðe ic ġeseah and ġehyrde mycel ġedwyld on manegum englisum bocum. ðe unġelærede menn ðurh heora bilewitnysse to micclum wisdome tealdon. and me ofhreow þæt hi ne cuðon ne næfdon ða ġodspelllican lare on heora ġewritum. buton ðam mannum anum ðe þæt leden cuðon. and buton þam bocum ðe ælfred cyning snoterlice awende of ledene on englisc. ða synd to hæbbene. (Clemoes, 1997, p. 174) [Then it came to my mind, I trust through God's grace, that I might translate this book from the Latin language into English speech, not through confidence in great learning but because I saw and heard much folly in many English books, which unlearned people through their simplicity considered great wisdom, and I was sorry that they did not know nor possess gospel teaching in their writings, except for those people who knew Latin and except for the books that king Alfred wisely translated from Latin into English, insofar as they have survived.] (Our translation)

Where Alfred had presented translation as a means of reconnecting with the glory days of English learning and of reasserting England's cultural prominence, Ælfric worries about the tendency of English writings to propagate folly among the unlearned. He writes to correct misconceptions of this sort but he does so in the knowledge that the understanding of Old English texts by their readers might not be controlled by their authors.

Ælfric expounds upon this concern with particular clarity at the opening of his preface to an Old English translation of *Genesis*, to which he had contributed at the request of his patron, the chronicler Æthelweard (d. c. 998). The whole undertaking is risky, Ælfric writes, because an unschooled reader might be led

to think that the way of life described in the Old Testament could be followed in 10th-century England; he goes on to give the example of an ignorant priest who appears erroneously to have taken the Old Testament story of Jacob, who had two wives, as a justification of bigamy. More crucially, Ælfric worries that uninformed readers of his Old English *Genesis* will not be equipped to perform so-called typological interpretation, as pursued by medieval Bible scholars. Biblical typology, which will be mentioned again in this chapter, was important throughout the Middle Ages; it explained the Old Testament as prefiguring the New. So, for example, a medieval exegete would read the story of Abraham being ready to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as both a historical narrative and a foreshadowing of God's sacrifice of his own Son, Jesus. *Genesis* opens "In the beginning God created heaven and earth," but as well as signaling the commencement of the world, Ælfric explains, the verse points to Christ. Ælfric states that it is a grave error to assume that the significance of the bible can be found in the simple narrative to which the Old English translation gives direct access.

Ælfric is also more preoccupied than his predecessor with the difficulties that the differences between Latin and English can cause for a translator. Where Alfred had been content to rely on the formula inherited from the creator of the Latin Vulgate, saint Jerome (c.347–420), according to which he might describe his translation as proceeding "hwilum word be worde, hwilum andgit of andgiete" [sometimes word for word, sometimes sense for sense] (North et al., 2011, p. 435), Ælfric notes that while he is reluctant to stray from the Latin text, he is forced to, because "þæt Leden and þæt Englisc nabbað na ana wisan on þære spræce fadung" [Latin and English do not have the same way of ordering language] (North et al., 2011, p. 744)—and whatever the translator does, he must not produce nonsense. Finally, Ælfric also worries about the transmission of his work by negligent copyists, who might introduce mistakes to his text.

The divergence of Alfred's and Ælfric's positions on translation reflects the different times at which they wrote and the different ranks and professions that they held. Alfred, a king, wrote at a time when English texts were rarer and this, combined with his regal self-confidence, appears to have confirmed him in the view that the circulation of his translations might be controlled. Writing a century later as a monk stationed at the marginal monastery of Cerne Abbas in Dorset, Ælfric will have felt himself on less sure footing. English texts had proliferated in the wake of Alfred's translation program and these texts had apparently not always been kept from those insufficiently trained in their interpretation. Furthermore, Ælfric's sense of what was doctrinally

appropriate will have been more stringent than Alfred's both because he was a monk and because he wrote in the atmosphere of the 10th-century religious and intellectual movement known as the Benedictine Reform, which saw a radical redefinition of orthodox learning and worship.

At this stage in the argument, two basic points should be clear. First, it is necessary to situate metalinguistic commentary in its historical and cultural contexts in order to grasp its import fully; and, second, the history of attitudes toward translation cannot be summed up as a gradual relaxing of controls and an easy facilitation of access. This is particularly true of attitudes to scriptural translation, a topic that will reappear in what follows. When we zoom into the specificities of particular historical situations, the fallacy of teleology—of tracing continuous, steady progress from multilingualism to the monolingual triumph of English—becomes clear.

### **Middle English Hybridization**

As a result of the settlement that followed the Norman victory at Hastings in 1066, England became a trilingual nation; 1066 is also typically taken to mark the moment when, under French influence, “Old” starts to become “Middle” English. Broadly speaking, in England after the Conquest, French will be the language of the law and the royal court; Latin the language of the church; and English a largely spoken language used by the native lower classes. Numerous examples complicate this paradigm, however. Language choice does not always follow a rigid pattern; oral and written language interacts; speakers and writers may move between languages within a conversation or a text; furthermore, the boundaries between Latin, French, and English are not always clearly distinguishable. There is plenty of evidence for medieval deployment of what linguists would now call “code-mixing” or “code-switching.” This code-mixing and switching resulted in the hybridization of English, a process whose effects can be traced in the English-language texts surviving from the period. One of these, the *Ancrene Wisse* [Guide for Anchoresses], provides our next example.

*Ancrene Wisse* is a beginner's guide written c. 1225–1240 for anchoresses, women whose spiritual vocation prompted them to live apart from society, often in specially built cells attached to a parish church. The text combines practical advice about such matters as diet and clothing with scriptural citation and devotional material to inspire the anchoresses' love of God. Originally composed by a male religious in order to offer instruction to three enclosed sisters of a noble family, the guide somewhat improbably became a “bestseller” that was widely copied, translated, and adapted across three centuries. *Ancrene Wisse* reflects 13th-century England's trilingualism: It survives in 17 versions



of which nine are English, four French, and four Latin. The oldest English version appears to have been composed somewhere between Worcester and the Welsh border; its language has been extensively studied by scholars including J. R. R. Tolkien, whose celebrated novels were informed by his work as Professor of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Oxford. Tolkien characterized the language of *Ancrene Wisse*, and of the associated “Katherine Group” and “Wooing Group” manuscripts, as a highly standardized written form of a West Midlands dialect, with French and Norse loan words, colloquial expressions, conservative spelling, and syntactic resemblances to Old English.

One of the effects of the Norman Conquest was the dramatic drop in the status enjoyed by English, which, as Alfred’s translation project demonstrates, had been used at the highest levels of the court. It is striking that a work of serious religious instruction should be composed in English, and not French or Latin, in the early 13th century. Possibly the women for whom it was written did not know Latin, since when the writer cites Latin he also glosses it, offering translation and/or interpretation. But the women did read French: They are told to study the psalter “redunge of Englisc other of Frensch” [reading in English or in French] (Hasenfratz, 2000, part 1, line 340). Possibly, the choice of English owes something to regional particularity. In Worcester, which had housed one of the most important Anglo-Saxon scriptoria, the Old English homilies of Ælfric and Wulfstan continued to be copied, annotated, and studied into the 13th century. It is therefore possible that a local tradition accorded status to works in English and stimulated further English writings in the region of Worcester and the Welsh border. According to this line of argument, the *Ancrene Wisse* continues the work of Old English writers like Ælfric. Certainly the *Ancrene Wisse*, “Wooing Group” and “Katherine Group” texts exhibit the influence of Ælfric’s Old English “rhythmical prose,” which is built from units of two-stress phrases, with a varying number and distribution of unstressed syllables, and heavy alliteration.

Considering the *Ancrene Wisse* as a link in the chain of a continuous English prose tradition does not entirely misrepresent the text, but it should not blind us to the multilingual milieu that shaped it. Its content and form were strongly influenced by the Latin texts of monastic Rules such as that by the Cistercian monk Aelred of Rievaulx, *De Institutione inclusarum* [On the instruction of anchoresses] (1160), and Latin rhetorical devices abound. The tropes of French romance are assumed to be familiar to the reader, and are apparently used to appeal to a noble lady’s sensibilities. A short passage will give a flavor:

Apostolus: Christus dilexit ecclesiam et dedit semet ipsum pro ea. “Crist,” seith Seinte Pawel, “luvede swa his leofmon thet he yef for hire the pris of him-seolven.” Neometh nu gode yeme, mine leove sustren, for-hwi me ah him to luvien. Earst as a mon the woheth, as a king thet luvede a gentil povre leafdi of feorrene londe, he sende his sonden bivoren - thet weren the patriarches ant te proph[et]es of the alde testament - with leattres i-sealet. On ende he com him-seolven ant brohte the Godspel as leattres i-openet ant wrat with his ahne blod saluz to his leofmon, luve-gretunge, for-te wohin hire with ant hire luve wealden. (Hasenfratz, 2000, part 7, lines 50–58) [The apostle: Christ loved the Church and gave himself for her. “Christ,” says saint Paul, “so loved his lover that he gave himself as the price for her.” Now pay good attention, my dear sisters, why one ought to love Him. At first, like a man who woos, like a king who loved a noble, poor lady from a faraway land, he sent his messengers before—they were patriarchs and the prophets of the Old Testament—with sealed letters. Finally, He came Himself and brought the Gospel like letters patent and wrote a salutation with His own blood to His lover, a greeting of love to woo her and to possess her love.] (Our translation)

The influence of French romance tropes is evident when the love of Christ for His church is said to be like a king’s love for a distant noblewoman. The *Ancrene Wisse* author’s understanding of this audience’s particular situation as recluses also shapes his argument. His rhetorical finesse is illustrated in his handling of the passage’s opening citation. He purports to cite “the apostle” in Latin and then goes on to gloss the line in English and identify the author as “Saint Paul.” The passage referenced appears to be Ephesians 5: 25, in the Vulgate “viri diligite uxores sicut et Christus dilexit ecclesiam et se ipsum tradidit pro ea” [Husbands, love your wives, as Christ also loved the church and delivered himself up for it]. But the quotation given in *Ancrene Wisse* is inexact and partial. The scriptural original uses Christ’s self-sacrifice for the church to exemplify how husbands should behave toward their wives, but the quotation omits this frame of reference, while the English gloss appears to reinsert it, or rather to mingle metaphor and interpretation by talking neither of a husband and wife nor of Christ and the church, but of Christ’s beloved. The gloss guides the reader, a female anchoress who is of course not a wife, to apply the text to herself, a bride of Christ, seeing herself as the object of Christ’s desire in the way a king might woo a noble lady.

In the metaphor, God is the king who woos the lady royally, first sending messengers with sealed letters (i.e., the prophets), and then by visiting in person

(i.e., as Christ) with what would now be called letters patent, written orders issued by monarch or head of state (i.e., the gospels). The terminology is that of royal administration, in which *leattres isealet* [sealed letters] were sent by the king under his seal to individual subjects, and *leattres iopenet* [open letters] were sent to the king's subjects in general. These terms establish a metaphor of the Old Testament as a precursor of the New Testament. Where the Old Testament deals specifically with the people of Israel, the New Testament is God's covenant with all people, all his subjects, delivered in person by Christ, the incarnate God. The underlying scriptural exegesis accords with Ælfric's method of typological reading, described above.

The image of royal wooing and royal administration is appropriate to the noble audience of *Ancrene Wisse*. From our current perspective, it is also worth pointing out that the form of the *Ancrene Wisse* author's epistolary terms reflects a fusion of linguistic features that everywhere characterizes the language of *Ancrene Wisse* and "Katherine Group" and "Wooing Group" texts. *Leattres isealet* are etymologically French, from *lettre* (<Latin *littera*) and *seel* (<Latin *sigillum*). *Leattres iopenet* adds in a Germanic lexeme: *Open* is of Germanic origin (<Old Saxon *opan*; cf. Old High German *offan*). The terms reflect Germanic morphological patterns. The adjectival past participles in both phrases are made on the Germanic model: Middle English *i-* in past participles like *isealet* [sealed] descends from Germanic *ge-* (French has no parallel construction). But the syntax is French. Both past participles are positioned after the noun, which is a much more common ordering in Old French than in Old English (and is seen also in the unusual syntax of modern English "letters patent"). This arrangement doubtless reflects the influence of French legal terminology on the Middle English of the *Ancrene Wisse* author. Indeed, it appears that this writer is deliberately deploying the regal and legalistic connotations of French in this passage in order to enhance his wooing metaphor.

If the *Ancrene Wisse* author knew his Ælfric, it is interesting that he does not employ the Ælfrician coinings *heahfæder* [patriarch] or *gecyðnis* [testament], which are loan translations, or calques, giving the etymological meaning of Latin terms in Old English, rather than simply anglicizing the Latin terms. *Patriarch* seems to have passed into English via French, but *testament* seems to have come directly from Latin, and the appearance of these terms in the English *Ancrene Wisse* must challenge an over-simple view of the text as continuing an Ælfrician tradition. However, the writer does employ the Old English *Godspel* [gospel] rather than the Latin cognate *evangelium* that was loaned into the French of 13th-century England as *evangeile*.

Thus, even in a very few lines, *Ancrene Wisse* reflects the complex relationships among Latin, French, and English in post-Conquest England insofar as they play out in its author's glossing practices, lexis, morphology, and syntax. Other languages are also integrated in the text. Among the non-French vernacular loans, the most significant numerically are Scandinavian and relate to everyday life: words like *cnif* [knife], *deien* [to die], and *gris* [young pigs]. The nature of these words and their occurrence in a geographical area that had never been ruled by the Vikings as part of the "Danelaw" indicates that they had already passed into the mainstream of English and were presumably no longer recognized as foreign. Two Welsh words appear: *cader* [cradle] and *baban* [baby]. Although Gaelic loans of any kind are unusual in English, the fact that the text was composed near the border with Wales makes this lexis less surprising. *Ancrene Wisse* also contains a dozen or more words of Dutch origin, including *bunkin* [beaten], *slubbri* [slippery], and *wigleð* [staggers], whose appearance might be explained historically. In 1107–1110 Henry I settled a large number of Flemings in Pembrokeshire, probably troops protecting against a Welsh invasion of England, and Dutch was spoken in this part of Wales at least until the end of the 12th century. The very particular multilingualism of Wales would be worthy of a chapter of its own; a glimpse into its rich complexity is offered by the career of the writer Gerald of Wales (1146–1223). Though a native speaker of French, Gerald wrote in Latin and understood both English and Welsh; he also wrote about a local Flemish-speaking knight, Ernaldus Rheting, and Gerald's brother is known to have understood Dutch.

### **Creative Multilingualism**

Modern enthusiasm for multilingualism makes claims about its cognitive benefits for the individual, including that it boosts creativity. This has not been fully explored or proven, though it is clear that multilinguals may deploy all their languages to meet complex communicative needs. This, too, is nothing new: Medieval writers who have multiple languages at their disposal certainly put these resources to creative use, presumably with the assumption that they would have multilingual readers able to appreciate their decisions. In the previous section, we saw how the *Ancrene Wisse* author mobilized the royal and legal connotations of French and Latin in order to enhance a wooing metaphor. For further evidence of the creative opportunities afforded by England's diverse language economy, and particularly of the ways in which the connections of English to Latin and French might be intelligently exploited, we now turn to a text preserved in a manuscript that was written in the 1330s at Ludlow, near Hereford and Worcester, apparently for a gentry audience including adults and children:

London, British Library MS Harley 2253. This book contains texts written in Latin, French, and English, a confluence of materials that reflects the impressive linguistic capacities of its intended audience. The manuscript's geographical proximity to the *Ancrene Wisse* author's Worcester suggests the continuing importance of this location in the propagation of multilingual English; at the same time, the breadth of the book's texts—which include a romance, fabliaux (short and often obscene parodies of romance), and lyrics, as well as saints' lives—demonstrates an extension of the generic scope of vernacular writing in the intervening century.

The poem “Dum ludis floribus” deploys Latin, French, and English, but not in equal proportions. Its speaker addresses a male acquaintance who, he thinks, is having more luck in his amorous adventures than he is. The first stanza gives a sense of the poet's inventiveness:

Dum ludis floribus velud iacivia,  
 Le Dieu d'Amour moi tient en tiel angustia,  
 Merour me tient de duel e de miseria,  
 Si je ne la ay quam amo super omnia.

[While you play in flowers as if in wantonness, / The God of Love binds me in such anguish, / Holding for me a mirror of sorrow and misery, / Since I don't have her whom I love above all.] (Fein, 2014–2015, lines 1–4)

The first line of the stanza is in Latin and the rhyme words are in Latin throughout; in lines 2–4 of the stanza, French dominates to varying degrees. The impression created here and in subsequent stanzas is one of virtuosic improvisation. Over the next 12 lines, the speaker develops a bilingual complaint in Latin and French. He says that he burns so fervently for his lady's love that he must give up this world if he cannot prove worthy of her; he lays out the lady's superb beauty and her refinement; and, finally, he admits the sexual component of his desire, adding a lewd prayer that is apparently designed to appeal to the poem's inscribed male addressee:

Dieu la moi doint sua misericordia,  
 Beyser e fere que secuntur alia.

[May God grant her to me by his mercy, / To kiss and do the other things that follow.] (Fein, 2014–2015, lines 15–16)

English is kept back for the poem's final lines, which strike a more earnest note:

Scripsi hec carmina in tabulis.  
 Mon ostel est enmi la vile de Paris.  
 May Y sugge namore, so wel me is;  
 Yef Hi deye for love of hire, duel hit ys!  
 [I've written these songs on a tablet. / My lodging's amid the city of Paris.  
 / I may say no more, as seems best; / Should I die for love of her, sad it  
 is!] (Fein, 2014–2015, lines 17–20)

Here readers' attention is drawn to its writer's situation in Paris: The poem reminds us that English ability in French and Latin might facilitate the passage of both texts and people beyond the English Channel. The learning exhibited in the poem suggests that its author was a cleric and it was not unusual for such men to spend significant time abroad on official business or in order to study. The switch to English in the last two lines seems engineered to produce a pathetic effect. It is as if the speaker, worn out by his artistic efforts, lets his mask slide, and, in this moment of surrender, utters a final, unvarnished account of his experience of unrequited love. After the exuberance of the poem's opening eighteen lines, the flatness of the English is striking. The flagrantly unambitious rhyme on "is / ys" as well as the breakdown of syntax in the poem's last line neatly portray the writer's exhaustion. Grammatically, the final clause requires either a future or a conditional form conjugated with *will* or *would*: "If I die for love of her it will or would be sad." The only way to parse the poem's conclusion as we have it is as a sigh: "If I die for love of her . . . Oh! This is a sorry business!"

The author of this poem draws on the connotative potential of the languages that he uses: Latin demonstrates the speaker's clerical excellence; French shows his attachments to the art of love and to Paris, where he resides; and unpretentious English allows him to access new psychological depths. But these connotations are not the automatic properties of Latin, French, and English. In other texts in Harley 2253, Latin strikes a humbler note, French expresses Christian piety, and English is deliberately ornate and tricky. It is the disposition of Latin, French, and English in "Dum ludis floribus" that produces the impression of appropriate language choice. The poet's achievement lies in his artful arrangement of the languages in which he works. If we encountered the poem's English couplet elsewhere, scribbled at the back of Harley 2253, for example, we would undoubtedly find it less affecting, or perhaps even trite. The multilingual connections of English were such in the 14th century that each new writer might participate in the ongoing process via which Latin, French, and English were connotatively constructed in relation to each other.

## The Beginning of Vernacular Languages Education

The proceeding sections have highlighted the difficulties that attend modern attempts to tease apart Latin, French, and English in our period. The connotative potentials of the languages are relational and it is not always clear where one language ends and the next begins. But the English Middle Ages also sees the beginning of vernacular languages education and the codification of vernacular languages—in this case, French—that such education implies. “*Dum ludis floribus*” suggests the kudos that attached to facility in languages besides English, and the interest in French that this poem manifests is reflected throughout the book. Thus in “*Urban the Courteous*,” another text compiled in Harley 2253, we learn that reading French should be a priority for those aspiring to nobility: The language continues to be associated with the aristocracy throughout this period, although, as we shall see, its appeal also begins to widen.

The speaker of “*Urban the Courteous*” purports to instruct younger men in the ways of the world:

Je vueil, tot al premour,  
 Que sages seiez e plein de douçour,  
 Seiez debonere e corteis,  
 E qeu vous sachez parler fraunceis,  
 Quar molt est langage alosee  
 De gentil honme, e molt amee  
 [I want, first of all, / For you to be wise and full of kindness, / Gracious  
 and courteous, / And that you know how to speak French, / For highly is  
 this language praised / By noblemen, and much loved.] (Fein, 2014–2015,  
 lines 15–20)

In light of this comment, the French texts in Harley 2253 might be seen to perform the double purpose of deepening as well as confirming their readers’ French learning. The pedagogic aim of the manuscript is particularly apparent in “*The Goliard’s Feast*,” the monologue of a comically revolting jester (in the 12th and 13th centuries the goliards were disaffected young clerics who wrote Latin satires: But by the 14th century the term could refer simply to a minstrel). The speaker of this poem waxes lyrical about the joys of winter, which for him appear to comprise scratching oneself by the fire and overeating. The speaker’s description of his overindulgence is illustrated by long lists of the things he likes to eat:

Oues e madlarz,  
 Plongons e blaryes,  
 Chapouns chanevaus,  
 Gelynes rosties,  
 Cygnes, pouns,  
 Grues, heyrouns,  
 Cerceles, jauntes,  
 E morillons.  
 E purcel enfarcie,  
 La loygne entrelardé —  
 De cele ay molt amee!  
 Venesoun ne haz mie,  
 Ne char de cerf venee,  
 Ne deym, ne porcke, velee  
 Une pome flestrye;  
 Jamboun  
 De fresche salesoun  
 Mi ad rendu la vie!

[Geese and mallards, / Coots and moorhens, / Capons on canvas,  
 / Roasted hens, / Swans, peacocks, / Cranes, herons, / Teals, wild geese, /  
 And tufted ducks. / And stuffed pig, / The interlarded loin — / I've much  
 loved that! / I don't hate venison at all, / Nor flesh from hunted deer, / Nor  
 buck, nor boar, veal / With dried apple; / Ham / Freshly salted / Has  
 restored me to life!] (Fein, 2014–2015, lines 66–84)

This is effectively a rhymed vocabulary list giving the kinds of winter foods that a well-to-do English person might aspire to eat (although presumably not all at the same time!). As well as entertaining its reader, “The Goliard’s Feast” thus also affords its readers an opportunity to practice and extend their command of topical French.

The similarity of “The Goliard’s Feast” to another French text whose pedagogic aims are made more explicit still—Walter de Bibbesworth’s *Tretiz* [Treatise]—has not passed unnoticed. Usually dated to 1240–1250, the *Tretiz* is a versified vocabulary that teaches the French of rural life: At this time, French was used by English landowners alongside Latin in order to manage their estates. The *Tretiz* was a success. It survives in 16 manuscripts dating from the early 14th to the 15th centuries, six of which transmit a dedicatory preface outlining the goals of the work. Here is the beginning of the preface as it appears in a manuscript from the first half of the 14th century that is roughly



contemporaneous with Harley 2253, Cambridge, University Library MS Gg. 1. 1:

Le tretiz ki munseignur Gauter de Bithesweth fistt a madame Dyonise de Mountchensi pur apriise de langage. E ço est a saver de primere tens ke home neistra ou tut le langage par sa nature en sa juvente, puis tutle fraunceis cum il encurt en age e en estate de husbondrie e manaungerie, com pur arer, rebingner, waretter, semer, searcler, syer, fauger, carier, muer, batre, ventre e mouwere, pestre, brescer, bracer, haute feste araer. (Rothwell, 2009, p. 1) [The handbook that my lord Gauter de Bibbesweth made for madame Dionisie de Montchensi for language learning. It covers the language needed from the first time when a man is born, having all the language of his birth and childhood, then all the French of his coming of age and beginning husbandry and estates management, which is to say the language of ploughing, re-ploughing, ploughing fallow land, sowing, weeding, reaping, mowing, carting, stacking, threshing and winnowing, grinding, kneading, malting, brewing, and holding a high feast.] (Our translation)

The topics that Walter lists are covered in the ensuing poem along with further aspects of rural life, including baking bread, fishing, and building a fire. Lists of the vocabulary of childrearing and the names of the parts of the body are also included. It would be a mistake to assume that the poet's interests are entirely utilitarian, however. Walter expresses an interest in homonymy that looks beyond the purely transactional uses of French. The following lines, which are extracted from Walter's long list of body parts, elaborate a pun upon the words "la rubie" [ruby] and "le rupie" [snot] that seems designed to appeal to the work's implied child audience:

Vostre regarde est graciose  
 Mes vostre eel est chaciouse.  
 Des eus oustés la chacie  
 E de nes le rupie.  
 Meuz vaut la rubie par .b.  
 Ki ne fet le rupie par .p.,  
 Car ci bource eut tant des rubies  
 Cum le nes ad des rupies,  
 Mult serreit riches de pirie  
 Qui taunt eut de la rubie. (Rothwell, 2009, p. 3)

[Your gaze is gracious / but your eye is full of sleep / You remove sleep from your eyes / and snot from the nose / rubies [*la rubie*] with a “b” are worth more / than is snot [*le rupie*] with a “p” / For he who had a purse as full with rubies [*des rubies*] / as the nose is with snot [*des rupies*] / would be most rich in precious stones / having so many rubies [*la rubie*].]

Walter’s *Tretiz* remained popular into the opening decades of the 15th century, which saw a flourishing in the production and copying of materials designed to teach French to the English. Many of these works responded to pragmatic concerns. Written French was commonly used in legal, mercantile, monastic, and governmental contexts well into the 1400s and spoken French was required too, both by those traveling abroad and those remaining in England who wished to communicate with foreign visitors. The 15th-century French teaching and reference materials are remarkable both for the high level of French proficiency that they anticipate among their users and for the breadth of situations in which they imagine their users deploying the language. The texts of Harley 2253 and Walter’s *Tretiz* that directed French to a gentry audience are henceforth complimented by a range of materials aimed at a clientele including urban and bourgeois learners.

Of principal interest in this connection are the *manières de langage*, a collection of interrelated conversation manuals that were written to teach spoken French to the English. The surviving dialogues differ widely in terms of the complexity of the French that they demonstrate and the situations that they present. Lists of greeting such as the following are common:

- Sire, Dieu vous doint bon jour.
- Dieu vous doint bon jour et bon estraine. Ou: . . . bon santé. Ou: . . . bon joie.
- Dame, Dieu vous doint bonnez vespres.
- Sire, vous soiez le bien venu.
- Dieu vous avant, bon amy.
- Dieu vous garde de mal, m”amy.
- Quelle heure est il de jour?
- Prime. Ou: Tres. Ou: Middy. Ou: Noune.
- Quantez heures est il?
- Entre six et sept.
- Combien decy a Paris?
- Douse liaues ou auques. (Kristol, 1995, p. 53)
- [—Sir, God give you good day.

- God give you good day and good fortune. Or: . . . good health. Or: . . . good pleasure. —Madam, God give you good evening.
- Sir, may you be welcome.
- God help you, good friend.
- God keep you from harm, my friend.
- What time of day is it?
- Prime [early morning]. Or: . . . Terce [mid-morning]. Or: . . . Midday.  
Or: . . . None  
[mid-afternoon].
- What time is it in hours?
- Between six and seven.
- How far from here to Paris?
- Twelve leagues or thereabouts.]

Other dialogues in a similar vein show the French needed to secure lodgings at an inn, order food and other provisions, and interact with French-speaking servants.

Alongside these conversations, there exists a series of more complex interactions that testify to a desire to use French in more specialized and potentially delicate situations. The *manières* teach the French required to comfort a crying child or a sick friend; they present masters and apprentices negotiating employment terms; and they show French being used to transmit international news. The following dialogue shows one man telling another about the French defeat at the battle of Agincourt in 1415:

- Sire, dez queux partiez veignez vous?
- Sire, je veigne dez partiez de Fraunce.
- Sire, quelez novelx de par dela?
- Sire, le roy est en bon point—loiez soit Dieu—[ . . . ] Lez seignours de Fraunce ovesque la nombre de .l. ou .lx. mille persones armez ount encontrez le roy par le chymyn, et le roy ovesque la nombre de .x. mille persones ad combatuz ovesque eaux a un lieu apellé Agincourt, a quele bataille i sount pris et tuez .xi. mille personis dez Fraunceys et sount tuez forsque .xvi. persones dez Englés, dount le duc d’Everwyk estoit un et le counte de Suffolk un autre. Et le roy avoit le champ et le victorie—loiez soit Dieu—et mist toutz les autrez Fraunceys au fewer. (Kristol, 1995, p. 70)
- [—What parts do you come from, sir?
- I come from French parts, sir.

—What news from there, sir?

—The king is in good health, sir—praise be to God!—the lords of France with the number of fifty or sixty thousand armed men met the king [Henry V] in the road, and the king with the number of ten thousand men fought with them at a place called Agincourt, at which battle eleven thousand men were taken and killed on the French side and only sixteen men were killed among the English, of whom the duke of York was one and the count of Suffolk another. And the king had the field and the victory—praise be to God!—and put all the other Frenchmen to flight.]

The dialogue models how specialized French—here the language of military campaigning—might be mobilized to tell an arresting story. What is perhaps most interesting about the conversation, however, is that it is imagined taking place in French at all. The second speaker comes from France and delivers his English perspective on the battle there in French. Who is the second man talking to? An Englishman? A visitor from France? Or elsewhere? Where are they? The dialogue demonstrates the complexities inherent in attempts to match languages to the national identities of their speakers in early 15th-century England. At the same time, the dialogue presents an image of a late-medieval England that is awash with francophones. Even at this relatively late stage in the development of French and English the identities of the two languages and the people that spoke them might still be inextricably linked.

### **Pragmatic Multilingualism**

English was not studied outside England until the 16th century, so the English abroad had to make themselves understood via means that did not rely on their native tongue. This is perhaps particularly true of English women: If the *manières* model the French young Englishmen might have needed for the purposes of travel, trade, and administration, women's access to French education will have been more restricted. Intriguing accounts of an Englishwoman dealing with the multilingual challenges of international travel are provided in *The Book of Margery Kempe*, arguably the first autobiography in English. Margery Kempe (b. 1373–d. after 1438) was the daughter of the mayor in the flourishing port of King's Lynn, in East Anglia. Although she could probably read, Kempe presents herself as unable to write; she is said to have composed her work through scribes, to whom she dictated her work. Kempe frequently asserts her monolingualism, but in telling of her pilgrimages to Rome, Jerusalem, and Santiago de Compostela, she provides accounts of multiple multilingual interactions.

Kempe is a rather explicitly patriotic Englishwoman, and one who is apparently suspicious of foreigners, although she encounters many of them both at home in King's Lynn and abroad, during pilgrimages to Rome, Santiago de Compostela, and Jerusalem, and on a journey with her daughter-in-law to Danzig. She seems particularly interested in Germans, who appear repeatedly in her *Book*. When she visits Canterbury, she cannot remember the name of the street in which her inn was to be found, but she identifies it as "a Dewchmannys hows" [a German's house] (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 29). In Jerusalem, "tweyn pilgrimys of Duchemen" [two German pilgrims] are said to help her when she falls off her horse (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 67). In Rome, she depends upon a translator for communication with the Bridgettines, but when she hears "a Dewche preste" [a German priest] preaching about Saint Bridget in the room in which the saint died, she is apparently able to understand at least the general content of his words (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 95). Later, however, she tells us that when she heard "Duchemen" preach she was sometimes heavy with sorrow "for lak of undirstonding" [because she could not understand] (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 41). And, when Margery encounters a German priest at the church of St John Lateran in Rome, she is unable to speak to him as she wishes because he "undirstod non Englisch" and she "cowde non other language than Englisch" [did not know any language except English] (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 82). This priest is granted, after prayer, miraculous understanding of Margery's spoken English—and hers alone, for, confronted with a group of English pilgrims he still "undirstod not what thei seyden in Englisch les than thei spokyn Latin" [did not understand what they said in English unless they spoke in Latin] (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 97). The priest proves his comprehension of Margery's speech, however, by translating her holy conversation into Latin, which convinces the English pilgrims of the miracle.

Whatever we might make of this miraculous xenoglossia—the supernatural gift of knowledge of languages previously unknown—it is noteworthy that, while the pilgrims speak no Latin, they must have some pragmatic understanding of the priest's Latin words. Kempe, too, has some acquaintance with Latin. In York, she tells us, she is asked by a great clerk to explain the words "Crescite & multiplicamini" [increase and multiply] and she replies that they relate not only to begetting children but also to bearing spiritual fruit (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 121). Kempe does not appear to consider it necessary to translate the Latin, but rather moves directly to its exposition. In Aachen, when she is attacked for the bouts of weeping that characterize her devotions, she defends herself by citing scripture, apparently in Latin: "versis of the Sawter [psalter], 'Qui seminant in lacrimis' [they that sow in tears] & cetera 'euntes

ibant and flebant' [going they went and wept] & cetera, & swech other [such others]" (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 236). Strangely, the only part of this passage that is translated is the "& cetera," as "& swech other." As the language of the international Catholic Church, Latin has an important communicative role not only at home but also abroad. Pilgrims not fully proficient in Latin could nonetheless identify liturgical and scriptural passages, and perhaps deploy brief Latin phrases to establish shared religious experience or even orthodoxy.

Margery's conscious engagement with German is indicated in two further moments that reflect the challenges that face her as an Englishwoman abroad. On her way to Aachen, local men insult her with "lewyd wordys" [ignorant, here probably obscene, words], which she is apparently able to understand: She reports that they call her an "Englisch sterte," a derogatory and apparently salacious term of Germanic origin for an Englishwoman (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 236). And when, in 1433, at a time of tension between England and the Hanseatic League, Kempe wishes to travel home from Danzig, she is at first refused permission on account of her nationality by the "heerys of Pruce" [knights of Prussia] ruling Danzig (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 232). The term was used of the Teutonic Knights, and the Germanic "heerys" occurs only once in the *Book*. It is unsurprising, of course, that foreign loans should occur in accounts of foreign travel: Kempe has learned very specific terms and put them to appropriate use.

Furthermore, although she does not explicitly signal it, Margery's language is heavily influenced by French. Indeed, it is possibly because French is so pervasive that Margery pays it no attention. French vocabulary and syntax are naturalized so that she is no longer aware of them as foreign. Unsurprisingly, legal terms in the *Book* are French—and there are a number of them, because Margery sometimes prays in a way that suggests she is negotiating a contract with God. But French is at the same time an important language of foreign trade for East Anglian merchants, as is clear from contemporary records of business transactions and from regulations aimed particularly at foreign merchants, which are written in the language. For the burgesses of Lynn, French is both a foreign and a native language.

Margery's descriptions of her European travels are punctuated by moments of more or less successful multilingual encounter, in which she deploys the linguistic resources we have seen at her disposal. On the road between Venice and Rome, Margery is accompanied by two grey friars and a woman who provide her with material support though "non of hem cowde undirstand her langage" [though none of them could understand her language] (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 77). But when she tells the woman who runs the inn in which

they are staying that she has lost her “bone marid ring” [good wedding ring] the woman, “undirstonding what sche ment [meant],” aids in the search (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 78), and then asks, in a similarly mixed-language phrase: “Bone Christian, prey pur me” (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 79). Also near Rome, Margery reencounters a wealthy woman, “Dame Margarete Florentin,” whom she had first met in Assisi. The two women can only communicate by “singnys er tokenys” [signs or tokens] and with a “fewe comown wordys” [few common, or shared, words] (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 93). Dame Margarete asks her, “Margerya in pouerte?” [Margery is in poverty?] and she replies “Ya, grawnt pouerte, Madam,” whereupon Dame Margarete invites her to eat with her on Sundays (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 93). Margery and her Continental namesake communicate through a “comown” word, “pouerte,” that is intelligible in Middle English and in Romance languages; Margery’s “grawnt” seems to reflect her approximation of French “grand.” “Ya” may well reflect German influence, so that this brief exchange shows a dense and pragmatic multilingualism.

There is a curious nationalism in God’s promise to Margery that “noon Englishman schal dyn in the schip that thow art in” [no Englishman shall die in the ship that you are in] (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 32) and a strange dismissiveness in Margery’s apparent lack of interest in many of the places through which she travels: “If the names of the placys be not ryth wretyn [correctly written], late no man marueyln [let none be surprised], for sche stodyid mor a-bowte contemplycyon than the namys of the placys” [was more engaged in contemplation than in the names of the places] (Meech & Allen, 1940, p. 233). Nonetheless, the *Book* gives an image of international exchange at home and abroad, and signals interest in the otherness of foreigners. When Margery records conversations with foreigners, she creates scenes of dialogue in which limited multilingual competence in a necessarily multilingual milieu is revealed. This is an aspect of her text’s reality claim; fictional texts by contrast often forget the challenges presented to travelers by linguistic diversity. The author intends her *Book* primarily as a devotional work and, as such, it presents communicative difficulties as opportunities for divine intervention or as occasions of persecution by which Margery’s faithful resolve as a pilgrim is tested. Nonetheless, through Kempe’s *Book*, a picture emerges of the late-medieval multilingual pilgrim milieu, and of the pragmatic multilingual practices by which an Englishwoman could communicate while traveling abroad, at a time when it could not even have been imagined that English would become a global language of communication.

## The Diversity of English

*The Book of Margery Kempe* offers 21-century readers a salutary reminder that English did not always enjoy the global currency it now possesses. Outside England, well into the early modern period, English could only be understood insofar as it was bent into the resemblance of another idiom. The flexibility of the language at home assisted in this process: Before the boundaries of English, French, and Latin were fixed, and before the establishment of a national standard, individual users of English more readily found their own multilingual solutions.

Not all users of English rejoiced at the malleability of the language all of the time. Among the dissenters was Geoffrey Chaucer (d. 1400), the Middle English poet whose reputation endures most vibrantly today and who continues to play a central role in traditional histories of the English language. At the close of his partial retelling of the Troy story, *Troilus and Criseyde* (1382–1386), Chaucer addresses his book directly. He dispatches it to kiss the footsteps of his great predecessors, Ovid, Virgil, Homer, Lucan, and Statius, and he utters a prayer for its safe reception:

And for ther is so gret diversite  
 In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,  
 So prey I God that non myswrite the,  
 Ne the mys metre for defaute of tonge;  
 And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,  
 That thow be understonde, God I biseche!  
 (Benson, 1987, book 5, lines 1793–1798)

[And because here is such great diversity / in English, and in the way in which our language is written down, / I pray to God that no one miswrites you / nor ruins your meter because of a lack of language; / and that wherever you are read or sung / I beg God that you might be understood.]  
 (Our translation)

At the same time as he imagines his work approaching the great writers of Greece and Rome, the poet worries about the “gret diversite” of English and its effects on the transmission of his text. Scribes whose dialect of Middle English do not match Chaucer’s own might mangle his verses and the very long-term comprehensibility of the text seems in doubt.

Throughout *Troilus and Criseyde* and elsewhere in his writing, Chaucer shows himself to be entirely capable of making creative capital out of diverse English and its multilingual connections. His first poetry looks likely to have



been in French; he continued the native tradition of Boethius translation, producing his own *Boece* (1380–1387); and, thanks to his travels abroad, where he acquainted himself with the works of Boccaccio, Petrarch, and Dante, he became the first ambassador to the English of the great 14th-century Italian writers. What the prayer at the end of *Troilus and Criseyde* shows is Chaucer's awareness that his achievement in that poem was novel: High-art, long poems in English were unusual when he wrote it. While Chaucer would quickly be taken up as the “father of English literature” in the 15th century, when writings in English of all sorts finally began to predominate, the poet inhabited a world in which English was still thoroughly entwined with French, Latin, and the other languages with which its users came into contact. *Troilus and Criseyde*—the poet's English masterwork—was released into the world with excitement and trepidation. It is an irony of cultural history that a poet so profoundly embedded in the multilingual environment that we have described might become the bedrock of modern accounts of English monolingualism.<sup>1</sup>

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## Note

- 1 Since we write with an audience of nonmedievalists in mind, we have restricted the bibliographic references listed here to the primary materials that we cite. A list of suggested secondary reading accompanies the online version of this article.

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## Supporting Information

Additional Supporting Information may be found in the online version of this article at the publisher's website:

**Appendix S1.** Supplementary Bibliography.

**Appendix: Accessible Summary (also publicly available at <https://oasis-database.org>)**

## Medieval English Multilingualisms

### *What This Research Was About and Why It Is Important*

This article introduces the nonmedievalist reader to the multilingual landscape of England 700–1400. Building on recent work exploring in particular the relationships among English, French, and Latin in medieval England, it discusses a series of “multilingual moments” from a range of sources, including letters, poems, travel writings, and French language teaching texts. Together, these examples build a picture of the complex interrelationships of languages, both spoken and written, that existed for medieval English people at home and when traveling abroad. Then as now, people can be seen using their linguistic resources for pragmatic and creative effect. We demonstrate that multilingualism is nothing new. From a methodological perspective, our work also underlines the importance of viewing linguistic attitudes in their particular intellectual and historical contexts.

### *What the Researchers Did*

- Provided very brief summary of relevant historical changes in the period 700–1400
- Drew from across the period on a range of sources exemplifying multilingual practices
- Analyzed evidence about relationships between Latin and European vernaculars; about translation practices, both written and oral; and about multilingual strategies both creative and pragmatic
- Briefly suggested possible connections with modern multilingualism studies

*What the Researchers Found*

- Multilingualism in medieval England is manifest in a wide range of times, places, and contexts.
- There is no simple, linear development from “multilingual” to “monolingual” England.
- There is no simple, linear historical development in attitudes to translation.
- Illuminating connections might be found between medieval and contemporary multilingual practices.
- Medieval English materials designed to teach French demonstrate an impressive aptitude among their users for that language.
- Both medieval and contemporary discussions of multilingualism must be understood in their historical and intellectual contexts.

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