Language and literacy

RODNEY M. THOMSON AND NIGEL MORGAN

From the Conquest to c.1200

The availability, ownership and use of books in medieval England was always conditioned by the circumstances of language, literacy and education. At the beginning of the period three languages were spoken in the country: two, Old English and Latin, had been in use for a long time, while the third, Anglo-Norman French, was a recent arrival. At the time of the Conquest the native language was Old English, represented by an impressive number of written texts which continued to be copied, along with new compositions, well into the twelfth century. The ecclesiastical culture, although Latin-based as elsewhere in Europe, had been heavily vernacularized for centuries, and was probably no less so in 1066 than it had been in the age of Bede. Old English would not be displaced as the native language, but by the second half of the twelfth century it was mutating, rapidly and violently, into what is now called Middle English. For us today, Old English is in effect another language, but speakers of Middle English, from the early thirteenth century on, seem to have been able to still read Old English, if with difficulty. Quite soon after the Conquest Latin established itself, more firmly than before, as the written language of highest status, in both books and documents. For the next two centuries most books that survive do so because they were kept in the comparative security of monastic libraries. They create an impression of a written culture almost completely dominated by Latin, and for the monasteries themselves, and for the Church as a whole, this is probably correct. As a written language, English went into a retreat from which it took a long time to recover. It continued to be the spoken language of the vast majority of people, at the lower end of the social scale, and it was also

1 In general Clanchy 1993, though focussing on documents rather than books; ch. 7 below for the early period.

2 Evidence for this is the accurate copying of Old English charter texts into cartularies as late as the fifteenth century.
spoken at the higher levels, even by foreigners. When Bishop Wulfstan II of Worcester roundly cursed Urse d’Abitot in Old English, one presumes that the Norman understood what was being said. French, the spoken language of the conquerors and their aristocratic descendants, was important for certain kinds of text, notably the romances favoured by a courtly audience. The language of upper-class entertainment, it probably differed from the other languages in being written to be read out loud to an important personage or group. Nonetheless, it was also used in other contexts, for instance as a ‘crib’ to Latin texts.

Although English lost both popularity and status as a written language after the Conquest, it was still used for another century and a half. Of the 421 surviving manuscripts in Old English catalogued by Neil Ker, about a third contain text copied or composed between the Conquest and the early thirteenth century. New literary texts continued to be written in it. Coleman, monk of Worcester, wrote his now-lost Life of St Wulfstan not long before 1113. A translation of the Homily on the Virgin by Archbishop Ralph d’Escures, written before he became bishop of Rochester in 1108, survives in a copy made c.1150, perhaps at Canterbury or Rochester. The last entry in the Peterborough Chronicle (Bodleian, ms. Laud. misc. 636), was written in 1155 (the entry itself is for 1154). William of Malmesbury, still alive late in 1142, had a good command of Old English: he translated Coleman’s Life of Wulfstan, and made substantial use in his historical works of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and other documents in the vernacular. His attitude to it was complex and contradictory: personal names in Old English were ‘barbarous’, but in translating important texts into it from Latin, Bede and Alfred were to be admired.

Other chroniclers who demonstrably knew Old English were his contemporaries John of Worcester and Symeon of Durham, as well as the somewhat younger Henry of Huntingdon. Even as late as the early thirteenth century, the St Albans chronicler Roger of Wendover made use of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. From about the same time, and in a class of his own, is the anonymous monk of Worcester known, from his pathologically induced handwriting, as the ‘Tremulous Hand’. He glossed most of the surviving local

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3 William of Malmesbury: Gesta pontificum, p. 253: ‘Hattest tu Urs, haue tu Godes kurs.’
5 The point was already made by Chambers 1932, pp. lxxxi–c.
6 Ker 1990, Blockley 1994. See also the brief but useful remarks in Gameson 1999a, p. 25.
12 Roger of Wendover: Flores historiarum, ed. Coxe, or in the slightly revised version by Matthew Paris: Chronica maior, vols. 1–11; the latest entry is for 1135.
books in Old English and wrote out the whole of Ælfric’s Grammar. About fifty thousand of his glosses survive, and he seems to have been working towards the compilation of an English–Latin dictionary. There is evidence that Worcester manuscripts with texts in the vernacular were still being read with ease throughout the twelfth century, and this in turn suggests that the ‘Tremulous Hand’ was working at the far end of a still-living tradition rather than attempting to resuscitate artificially a language wholly dead to him and his community.

The work of the ‘Tremulous Hand’ illustrates two more important points: firstly, in writing in both identifiable Old English and distinguishable Middle English, he registers the tension between a desire to preserve a venerable language on the one hand, and to make it comprehensible on the other. Secondly, his hand is not very calligraphic, and this is true of the earliest books from the second half of the twelfth century containing texts in Middle English such as Bodleian, Junius ms. 1 (Ormulum), a verse ‘translation’ of the Latin Gospel readings of the Missal with accompanying sermons (fig. 2.1), and BL, Stowe ms. 34 (Vices and Virtues). It would be a long time before books in Middle English were made with the same attention to calligraphy, format and illumination that had been once accorded to those in Old English even as late as the twelfth century, and that was always accorded the best books in Latin or French.

Anglo-Norman French, the vernacular of the governing class through the twelfth century and beyond, competed with English during the twelfth century, and from a position of strength. It was the language used in the secular courts, and was at least one of the languages of the cloister. It was above all a language in which was composed a remarkable amount of creative literature, often of high quality. For it has been claimed:

The first adventure narrative . . . in French literature; the earliest example of historiographic writing in French; the first eye-witness history of contemporary events in French; the earliest scientific texts in French; the earliest French vernacular versions of monastic Rules; the first scholastic text to be translated into French; the earliest significant examples of French prose; the first occurrence of the French octosyllabic rhyming couplet . . . ; the first explicit mention of secular courtoisie . . . in vernacular French; the first named women writers in French; the earliest named and identifiable patrons of literature in French.

15 This is substantially the opinion of Collier 2000, pp. 206–8.
16 Wright 1960, plates 2 and 3; Parkes 1983 on the script of the Ormulum.
One of the reasons for this fecundity, it has been argued, was precisely the multi-culturalism and multi-lingualism that characterized twelfth-century England. Authoritative lists of surviving manuscripts show that about sixty manuscripts containing Old French in the Anglo-Norman dialect survive from the twelfth century, as compared with about ninety containing Old English. But they also show a strong increase in copies of texts in French late in the century, compared with a dropping off of those in English. And, of course, French texts composed in the twelfth century continued to be copied in later times.

However, the proportion of books surviving in Latin as against the vernaculars over the first two centuries after the Conquest is almost certainly greater than at any other period of English history before c. 1500. This is partly due to the sort of core texts that were typically to be found in the libraries of religious foundations. It is also due to the standard, basic education in Latin which most monks and all the higher secular clergy underwent. Increasingly, the commonly used terms ‘literatus’ and ‘illiteratus’ meant, not to have or lack the ability to read, but to have a good or inferior command of Latin. By the second half of the century, it was further specialized to distinguish between those who had or had not had more than the basic grammar school education, namely those who had or had not been through the higher Schools and gained the coveted title of ‘magister’. This training meant that Latin was not only the dominant and highest-status written language, but it was a Latin very different from that which had been written in England before 1066 and particularly since the tenth century. It was marked by a conscious return to classical norms, or what were taken as such, in vocabulary and syntax.

Inevitably, however, even the members of those communities in which Latin had most currency varied as to their competence in it. We get occasional glimpses of attempts to come to terms with a trilingualism that for most people was probably only partial. Abbot Samson of Bury said that in many monasteries sermons were preached to the monks ‘in French or better still in English, for the edification of morals and not for the display of literatura’. Perhaps the most notable example in written form is the Canterbury or Eadwine Psalter of

19 Sixty-six items are dated s. xii or s. xii/xiii in Dean and Boulton 1999. See also for overviews Wilson 1943; Clanchy 1993, ch. 6, esp. pp. 215–20; Gregory, Rothwell and Trotter 2005, pp. v–xx.
21 See the famous debate about this among the monks of Bury c. 1200: Jocelin of Brakelond, Chronile, pp. 125–30.
22 Lapidge 1975; Winterbottom 2003.
23 Jocelin of Brakelond, Chronile, p. 128.
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c.1155–60, in which the Latin text is glossed in both Old English and French. A slightly different case is BL, Cotton ms. Faustina A. X, part 1, the main text of which is a copy of Ælfric’s Grammar, written in the second half of the eleventh century. Obviously made and kept in a community with a strong vernacular tradition, it was corrected c.1100, and copiously glossed c.1200 in English, Latin and French.

Language and society c.1200–c.1400

By the beginning of the thirteenth century the language which we call Middle English was firmly established, having developed out of Old English with some influence of words from the vernacular spoken and read by the higher levels of the upper classes, Anglo-Norman French. Up to the mid fourteenth century texts in these two vernaculars survive in almost equal numbers, and are often contiguous in the same book, suggesting that readers of such compilations were bi-lingual. Also, particularly in the thirteenth century, in some books the vernaculars are set beside a substantial number of Latin texts. Only in the ‘age of Chaucer’ (c.1350–1400) does English come to dominate over the number of texts in French. During the second half of the fourteenth century the use of French, both spoken and written, begins to decline, books containing texts in both languages become rare, and by 1400 very few newly composed texts were written in Anglo-Norman. Some books, particularly romances, were still entirely in French, but most of them were imported books in Continental French rather than indigenous productions in Anglo-Norman. The lists of books from 1379 and 1384–5 belonging to Richard II contain many such items, including a Roman de la Rose and a Bible in French, probably Guiart des Moulins’ Bible historiale. At the same time the library of Thomas of Woodstock, Duke of Gloucester, inventoried after his death in 1397, contained primarily French books and little in English. In certain contexts, such as the ordinances of the English army, French continues to be used into the late fourteenth century changing to English in Henry V’s reign, and in the common law courts continues

26 E.g. the compilations of religious and didactic texts, Bodleian, Digby ms. 86 and 81, Harley ms. 2253.
to be used in the fifteenth century.\textsuperscript{30} As to literary works: as late as 1354 Henry, Duke of Lancaster, writes his \textit{Livre des seyntz medicines} in Anglo-Norman\textsuperscript{31} and almost all of the text in the Holkham Bible Picture Book of c.1340 is in French, except some scrolls inscribed in English in the pictures.\textsuperscript{32} It should be emphasized that such books in the vernacular were a small minority of the total produced – the overwhelming majority was in Latin, and included the service books for the Church, the largest single category of book production.

Which vernacular language was spoken, and in the case of the literate minority also read, varied according to social level.\textsuperscript{33} The witnesses to the attested miracles drawn up in 1307 for the canonization of Thomas of Hereford were drawn from a wide social range. Priests and those of the religious orders almost exclusively gave their testimony in Latin, and among the laity about 70 per cent witnessed in English and 30 per cent in French.\textsuperscript{34} At the highest level of society were the royal family and the great nobles, the heirs of the Norman conquerors; both their spoken language and the vernacular written texts in their books were predominantly French in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, less exclusively so by the fourteenth. The spoken and written language of the knightly class was either French or English, but more than for the high nobility, the use of English alone increasingly took the place of bilingual ability.\textsuperscript{35} The author of the Middle English romance, \textit{Arthour and Merlin}, c.1300, writes: ‘Many noble ich have useiye that no Freynsche cou the seye’.\textsuperscript{36} By the mid-fourteenth century an attitude had arisen, expressed in the writings of Higden, Holcot and Wyclif, that the situation of discourse in two vernacular languages was unnatural, that French had been imposed upon the English people and was not the mother tongue of the nation. In his translation of Higden’s \textit{Polychronicon}, John of Trevisa states that the use of two vernacular languages is ‘against the usage and manere of alle othere natiouns’.\textsuperscript{37} The mercantile and professional urban classes could also have used either language according to the requirements of


\textsuperscript{31} Dean and Boulton 1999, no. 472.

\textsuperscript{32} Berndt 1969, 1972, 1976 discusses the linguistic situation from the Conquest to the fifteenth century from the sociological viewpoint of class usage. Short 1979, Legge 1980 and Kibbee 1991 exclusively discuss the use of Anglo-Norman.

\textsuperscript{33} Richter 1979, pp. 206–17, gives a list of the witnesses and the languages used, and as a summary in Richter 2000.

\textsuperscript{34} Lodge 1992 for the use of the two vernaculars in the thirteenth century.

\textsuperscript{35} Berndt 1976, p. 138.

\textsuperscript{36} Kibbee 1991, p. 60, and Berndt 1972, pp. 346–9, on growing ‘nationalism’ in the use of the English language.
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their profession or trade – the increase in international trade in the fourteenth century meant a continued demand for knowledge of French which seems to have been the language for business with Flanders and Italy, as well as with France itself.38 Even in the thirteenth century the merchant in the romance Floris and Blancheflur of c.1250 is characterized by the ‘mony langages had in his mouth’.39 Evidence for this are the late fourteenth-century model business letters in French contained in BL, Harley ms. 3988.40 Some of these professional men seem to have been fluent in both English and French, and also to have owned books in Latin. A good example would be the London fishmonger, Andrew Horn, chamberlain of the city.41

The degree to which the various social classes of the laity understood Latin is more difficult to assess, although in order to be able to read certain administrative documents this language was essential, and a certain number of people, from the nobility down to the merchant class, had to have a basic understanding of it.42 It can be concluded that the spoken and written language(s) used by these various classes changed considerably over the period from the early twelfth to the end of the fourteenth century, and these changes are reflected in the content of books owned by those of them who were literate. For certain types of text one of the two vernaculars or Latin were exclusively used, and continued to be even when French began to decline and Middle English increase.

An example of text traditions in particular languages is that of the prayers in Books of Hours. Throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries most of the text in these books, including the prayers added to the standard text, are in Latin. However, increasingly some prayers and rubrics are in the vernacular, almost always in Anglo-Norman.43 The number of prayers and devotional lyrics in Middle English had been steadily rising from the early years of the thirteenth century, but in the prayer books themselves they are vastly outnumbered by texts in French. The translation of the Psalter into Anglo-Norman begins in the mid-twelfth century, antedating by over a hundred years its first translation into English.44 Few of these Psalters in French survive, outnumbered a hundred fold by the texts in Latin. The Book of Hours was also translated into

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43 Dean and Boulton 1999, nos. 720–827, 840–909, 920–51, giving reference to the standard catalogues of these prayers by Sonet and Sinclair.
44 Dean and Boulton 1999, nos. 445–9.
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Anglo-Norman c.1300 and into Middle English c.1350. Only three pre-1400 manuscripts survive of the former and fewer than ten of the latter.45 Probably the rise of Lollardy, and the consequent policy of disapproval of religious texts in the vernacular pursued by the church authorities, is the reason why these translations were not popular. The linguistic situation for these devotional texts may result either from a conservatism considered appropriate for the language of prayer, or from the fact that the owners of these books, the higher nobility, constituted the last bastion of a predominantly French-speaking class.

Change in the trilingual literate culture over the century and a half from about 1250 to 1400 can be gauged by looking at the linguistic content of a particular type of book – the miscellanies of mainly religious, didactic and moral texts compiled for literate lay readership and instruction. The character of these compilations, the texts contained within them, and the readership for which they were written, have been discussed in some detail in the chapters by Alexandra Barratt and Tony Hunt.46 These authors, however, are naturally concerned primarily with the Middle English and Anglo-Norman text contents and had no brief to compare the varying proportion of Latin, French and English texts in these compilations. Four well-known examples of such books span the period from 1250 to 1350 and two are from the late fourteenth century. Although the compilers and patrons might have had particular reasons for including different numbers of texts in the three languages in these books, they do give some general indication of changes in the linguistic map of England in that period of a hundred and fifty years. In two compilations that survive from the thirteenth century the texts in Latin are substantial, with the vernaculars of French and English in varying proportions, probably resulting from differing interests of the compiler and patron for the two books. Half of the texts in Bodleian, Digby ms. 86, are in French, suggesting that it was destined for a patron for whom that was the usual spoken language. The items of text of the four manuscripts of c.1250–1350 are in the following proportions according to language: Cambridge, Trinity College ms. b.14. 39 (c.1260) – 60 per cent Latin, 29 per cent English, 11 per cent French;47 Bodleian, Digby ms. 86 (c.1275–90) – 30 per cent Latin, 20 per cent English, 50 per cent French;48 BL, Harley ms. 2253 (c.1310–30) – 11 per cent Latin, 48 per cent English, 41 per cent

45 Dean and Boulton 1999, no. 828; Prymer 1891–2; Prymer 1895–7.
48 Facsimile Digby 86, pp. xi–xxxvi, and Hunt and Watson 1999, cols. 91–7, pp. 45–9, for a list of the contents.
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French;\textsuperscript{49} CUL, ms. Gg.1.1 – 35 per cent Latin, 10 per cent English, 55 per cent French (c.1330–40).\textsuperscript{50} It is significant that in the two examples from the first half of the fourteenth century the texts in French still form a large component. Indeed, CUL Gg.1.1, like Digby 86, was probably destined for a patron whose household mainly spoke and read French. The Vernon Manuscript, Bodleian, ms. Eng. poet. a. 1 (c.1380–90), and Simeon Manuscript, BL, Add. ms. 22283 (c.1400) produced in the late fourteenth century, are similar in text content to the four compilations of the c.1250–1350 period already discussed, but are almost exclusively in English, save for a very few parallel texts of English with Latin or French.\textsuperscript{51} The predominant use of English texts indicates that by the end of the period covered by this volume this type of religious/didactic miscellany had become almost completely monolingual, as was doubtless the case for the spoken and written English of the majority of literate lay society. The persistance of an extensive use of French in these compilations of the first half of the fourteenth century is in marked contrast to this sudden predominance of English. It is clear that the French language went into a steep decline in England over the next fifty years.

Education and language c.1200–c.1400

Irrespective of which vernacular was spoken, by whom and in what contexts, at the most elementary level of education learning to read was always linked to the learning of Latin. The vernacular used for teaching Latin was predominantly French up to c.1350, but from that date on was English, and from about that time manuals for the learning of French increase in number. In his translation of Higden’s \textit{Polychronicon}, made c.1385, John of Trevisa identifies this change of the language of instruction in his own time: ‘... in al the gramer-scoles of Engelond children leveth Frensch and construeth and lurneth on Englysch’.\textsuperscript{52} Already, in the second half of the thirteenth century, Walter of Bibbesworth’s manual for teaching husbandry and estate management written for Dyonise de Mountechensi, to educate her children, was evidently written for a family whose children had been brought up to speak

\textsuperscript{49} Fassimile Harley 2253, pp. ix–xvi, for a list of the contents. Corrie 2000 compares the texts with those of Bodleian ms. Digby 86.

\textsuperscript{50} Meyer 1886, pp. 281–340, catalogues the French text content in detail, but there is only brief reference to those in other languages in \textit{Catalogue of the manuscripts preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge} 1856–67, iii, pp. 1–8.

\textsuperscript{51} Serjeantson 1937; Guddat-Figge 1976, pp. 145–51, 269–79, and \textit{Vernon Manuscript}, unpaginated section following the facsimile for lists of the text contents.

\textsuperscript{52} Stevenson 1901 on the rise of English for school instruction.
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English as their mother tongue. Even so, its text of instruction is almost exclusively in French.

It is assumed that only a small proportion of the populace received some form of schooling, but how small is impossible to say. During the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries many grammar schools were established in the towns, and schools were also attached to cathedrals, collegiate churches and some university colleges. The rise of institutional schools can be documented, but the extent of less formal education by, for example, the parish clerk, parish priest, or family chaplain in the case of the nobility, is very difficult to assess. The 1262–5 statutes of Bishop John Gervais of Winchester order the parish priest to teach boys the Lord’s Prayer, the Creed, the Ave Maria, and ‘after they know how to read the Psalter, to learn singing’. Some boys of humble origin, who might not otherwise have received formal education, thus had to be educated for tasks like singing in a church choir, as was famously the case with Chaucer’s ‘little clergeon’ of the Prioress’s tale who heard sung the Marian antiphon, Alma redemptoris mater ‘as children lerned hir antiphoner’. The musical service books, the Gradual and Antiphoner, were stipulated in diocesan statutes as essential for all parish churches, and these liturgical texts provided further instruction in reading after the elementary stage of the alphabet, followed by the Psalter and Primer (the Book of Hours). Choir boys at York Cathedral in 1375–1400 were learning from the choir Psalters when they were rebuked for dirtying them in the process. Social status and chosen trade for a career demanded a degree of literacy to carry out essential tasks such as account keeping – Walter of Bibbesworth’s thirteenth-century treatise was primarily concerned with husbandry and estate management. Some of the manuals for learning French produced in the second half of the fourteenth century are directed towards the needs of business. The proliferation of administrative bureaucracy and the processes of the law in the thirteenth and fourteenth century required large numbers of clerks and scribes fluent in Latin for the reading and writing of documents in that language, as well as in French. All those entering

53 Walter of Bibbesworth: Le Traité and Le Tretiz for editions of the text; Baugh 1956 on the controversy over its dating; Kibbee 1991, pp. 41–5 for the purpose of the text. See also Dean and Boulton 1999, no. 285.
55 Orme 1994 discusses elementary education of boys in such contexts.
56 Brown 1905–6, p. 8, but Councils and Synods ii, p. 713, art. 59, with the correction that John Gervais was the first bishop who promulgated the statute. Brown’s article discusses the probable education of Chaucer’s ‘little clergeon’.
57 Brown 1905–6, pp. 9–21, discusses the learning of prayers and antiphons in primary education.
58 Fabric rolls York, p. 243.
59 These are the Orthographia gallica and Manières de langue.
60 Clanchy 1979, pp. 186–91, 197–201.
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the Church, even if only in minor orders, of course had to have some degree of literacy in Latin and this was emphasised by Pope Boniface VIII’s 1298 Constitution, Cum ex eo, which was concerned to improve the education of the clergy. There is some evidence that the novices of religious orders received their earliest instruction in the vernacular. In 1395 one of the books in the cupboard for the novices at Durham was a Gospel Book, which also contained homilies in French (in gallico). Copies of the rule of certain orders, such as the Benedictines and Augustinian canons, exist in both Anglo-Norman and Middle English. These could have been used for teaching the novices and particularly by nuns, since women, save those of the high nobility, were much less literate in Latin than men – the grammar schools, cathedral and collegiate church schools only educated boys. Many Anglo-Norman texts were written by members of the religious orders in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and this probably implies that that language was spoken within the cloister. As early as the late twelfth century, Abbot Samson of Bury expresses a preference for sermons in French or English over elaborate rhetorical Latin: ‘colores rhetoricos et phaleras verborum et exquisitas sentencias in sermone dampnabat’. Indeed, in 1343, the provincial synod of the English Benedictines, while acknowledging that the monks spoke to each other in English, ordered them to speak in Latin or French. In estimating the proportion of the population literate in Latin it should be remembered that priests and those in minor orders and religious orders never exceeded 2 per cent of the total population.

The elementary stages of learning the alphabet and reading in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were taught in French, but in the fourteenth century mainly in English. The language used for instruction was determined largely by the social status of the child, although the texts they used to learn to read were in Latin which presumably at the first stage of education could be read out but not understood. Thus, the pronunciation of Latin was learned before the language itself. The next stage was the proper learning of that language and its grammar. This learning of Latin is discussed in the chapter by Jan Ziolkowski on Latin Literature; here we comment on the language used to teach it. As English rises in linguistic status in the fourteenth century it becomes the language of instruction in schools. This change accompanies the rise of English, discussed

62 Orme 2006, pp. 266–7, on the education of novices.
63 Catalogi Dunelm, p. 81.
64 Hunt 1995b, Dean and Boulton 1999, nos. 710–14, for Anglo-Norman, and Winteney-Version and Three Middle English Rules for Middle English.
69 See below, ch. 10, pp. 230–41. 70 Stevenson 1901.
in the chapter by Boffey and Edwards, and the eventual demise of French as a spoken and written language which occurs in the early fifteenth century. By that time the view of English as the ‘natural’ language of the nation puts an end to three centuries in which the *lingua materna* of almost all the population had had to take second place to the French language introduced after the Norman Conquest. Coincidentally, the establishment of English as the language used by the ruling family happens at exactly the period following the death of the last of the French Plantagenet dynasty, Richard II. Although not exclusively, the view of French as a literary language, and even to some degree a spoken one, superior to English, was still current at that high social level in Richard’s reign. It should be remembered that John Gower wrote one of his early works, *Le Mirour de l’omme* (1376) (fig. 6.11), in French, and that the inventories of the king’s books and those of Thomas of Woodstock list many romances in that language.

After learning to read and pronounce Latin the understanding of the language was taught using books of grammar and vocabularies. These vocabularies have both French or English interlinear glosses to the Latin words, but before 1300 French predominates. The main ones are Alexander Nequam’s *De nominibus utensilium*, John of Garland’s *Dictionarius* and Hugutio of Pisa’s *Derivationes*. A commentator in the early thirteenth century writes: ‘after (he) has learned the alphabet and has been imbued with childish rudiments, he learns Donatus’. Grammar was taught from an elementary grammar, the *Ars minor* of Donatus, and literature from the *Distichs* of Cato and other short texts such as Theodulus’ Eclogues. The explanatory texts for these works in extant manuscripts of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries are in French or English or both (fig. 15.1). An example of a school book of the second half of the thirteenth century is Lincoln, Cathedral Library ms. 132 (fig. 10.3), in which several Latin reading texts such as Theodulus’ *Eclogue*, Cato’s *Distichs* and Avianus’ fables, are glossed in French. The Middle English adaptation of Donatus is the *Accedence*, written probably in its original form in the mid-fourteenth century, but of which the earliest surviving manuscript is c.1400. It is significant that one of the few French texts in that late fourteenth-century

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71 See below, ch. 15, pp. 381–9.  
72 See n. 28 for references.  
73 These are studied in detail with transcriptions of texts (vol. ii) and indices (vol. iii) in Hunt 1991.  
74 Orme 2006, p. 88.  
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compilation of Middle English texts, the Vernon manuscript, is the Distichs of Cato (Le Livre de Catun). The more advanced texts of grammar, Alexander of Villedieu’s Doctrinale and Evrard of Béthune’s Grecismus, do not always have these French or English glosses, suggesting that their users were able to read Latin quite fluently. A good example of a schoolbook containing many of these texts (Cambridge, Trinity Coll., ms. O.5.4) was written by a single scribe for the college of Battlefield (Salop.) shortly after its foundation by Henry IV in 1409/10. This includes a Middle English version of the Accedence, other grammar and orthographic texts, a short tract on table manners (Stans puer ad mensam), a Latin dictionary, texts on arithmetic and geometry, the Distichs of Cato, Theodulus’ Eclogue and various works of Alexander of Villedieu and John of Garland. The version of Accedence is written for instruction in Latin grammar, but as the examples of the figures of speech are first given in English, it also serves for instruction in English grammar. Such schoolbooks contain texts for practice in reading Latin and lists of Latin verbs according to their conjugations.

Another, slightly earlier, example of the types of texts used in schools is in the list of the 1358 bequest of books of William Ravenstone, almoner and schoolmaster, to St Paul’s almonry school, London. Some of the books of philosophy and texts of the authors of antiquity must have been for advanced education of the older boys, but the list includes basic texts such as the vocabularies of Alexander Nequam, John of Garland and Hugutio of Pisa, Alexander of Villedieu’s Doctrinale, Donatus’ grammar, Evrard’s Grecismus, Cato’s Distichs, Theodulus’ Eclogues, Avianus’ fables, a Gradual, Hymnal and two Psalters.

The learning of French in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries must have been necessary for some people brought up in exclusively English-speaking families, but who needed the second language for their education and for their professional careers. From the early fourteenth century onwards a number of books were written to assist in the learning of this language by certain sectors of society for whom it certainly was not their lingua materna but necessary for a variety of social uses.

78 Serjeantson 1937, p. 258, item no. 350.
79 Hunt 1991, ii, pp. 15–34, gives examples of French and English glosses to these texts.
80 Thomson 1979, pp. 57–8, 158–68, for a description of the contents and history of the manuscript. See also Br Bonaventure 1961, pp. 5, 7–14, 16, for some of its texts, Meech 1935 (an edition of its Accedence text) and Bursill-Hall 1976 for its John of Garland grammar texts.
81 Br Bonaventure 1961 and Miner 1990, pp. 136–50, discuss the text contents of many examples of such schoolbooks.
volume the higher ranks of the aristocracy, and a reasonable proportion of its
to the English-speaking populace. In the four-
teenth century, a new genre of books of instruction in the French
language was necessary, presumably because an increasing number of English
men and women, although literate, were not fluent in Anglo-Norman. These
books raise the question of why an understanding of French was still thought
necessary. Some of them are clearly for business men or those involved in
estate management. Walter of Bibbesworth’s treatise of the third quarter of the
thirteenth century was even intended to teach husbandry and management to
children.84 This treatise also teaches a lot of French vocabulary about country
life not specifically concerned with these professional activities. Although their
mother, Dyonise de Mountechensi, could evidently read French fluently, her
mother tongue was English. So, for her children, Bibbesworth’s treatise pro-
vides education in that language as much as in the practical managerial skills
with which its text is primarily concerned.85 The vocabularies of Alexander
Nequam and John of Garland contained in schoolbooks were in Latin with
French and English glosses, but some others are just in French and English.
Such a text is the fourteenth-century *Nominale sive verbae in gallicis cum exposi-
tione eisdem in anglicis.*86

A second case is about a century later than Bibbesworth’s treatise, involving
what has been called ‘Business training in medieval Oxford’, that is instruc-
tion in letter writing, conveyancing and accounting.87 This involves Thomas
Sampson, a teacher of grammar to pre-university students and those need-
ing training in estate management in Oxford in the second half of the four-
thteenth century, considered by some as the writer of a treatise on French
vocabulary and word usage, the *Orthographia gallica.*88 Sampson may not be
the original writer of the text, but may have edited and expanded it for
his teaching in Oxford. Although he seems to have studied at the univer-
sity he apparently never proceeded to the degree of bachelor of arts. The
texts written by him make it clear that he taught in French and Latin. The
*Orthographia gallica*, written in those languages, is for pupils who already had

84 The arguments by Baugh 1956 for this early dating are not accepted by all: e.g. Kibbee 1991, pp. 26,
41–6.
86 Skeat 1903–6 for an edition of the text; Rothwell 1968, pp. 39–41 and Dean and Boulton 1999, no.
308.
87 Richardson 1941 with pp. 276–9 listing the manuscripts of all the texts written by or associated
with Thomas Sampson.
88 Arnold 1937, Kibbee 1991, pp. 47–8, and Dean and Boulton 1999, no. 287, and *Orthographia gallica*
for an edition of the text.
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basic knowledge of Anglo-Norman French and Latin grammar. It teaches the spelling, pronunciation, syntax and grammar of Continental French as a corrective to those of Anglo-Norman. In the 1350s Thomas Sampson wrote a treatise on letter writing in French, apparently a very necessary skill to be acquired by his pupils.

Finally, there are a number of treatises on French vocabulary, phrases and grammar, written in 1396, 1398 and 1415, the *Manières de langage*. These are primarily directed toward the acquisition of colloquial French in the manner of a modern travel phrase book, characterized by Rothwell as ‘for the tourist and the business man’.

Language and literacy c.1200–c.1400

The proportion of the population who were literate, and who consequently were owners and readers of books, has been estimated to be very small in the previous chapter. This is surely correct, although almost impossible to assess numerically even in the most general way. As Michael Clanchy has shown, literacy had to be acquired for certain professional activities, particularly in regard to the languages used for administrative documents. The term ‘literatus’ in the Middle Ages implied good knowledge of Latin, and would not be used for a person who only had reading knowledge of the vernacular languages. It is likely that most of the patrons of authors and readers of early vernacular romances in Anglo-Norman and Middle English would not be considered ‘literatus’. Ownership of books in Latin, particularly prayer books such as Psalters and Books of Hours, certainly does not imply anything but superficial understanding of that language. In the case of many owners of these books who memorized and recited the Latin prayers and the psalms, an ability to understand every word was neither necessary nor expected, as indeed has been the case for centuries, including our own time. Reading aloud, as opposed to silent reading, was more usual, and could be with a group rather than alone. The Lollards, established by the 1380s, stressed the importance of reading the Bible text in English, and encouraged literacy among their adherents.

91 Rothwell 1968, p. 45.
95 Saenger 1985.
Knighton, in his chronicle, states that Wyclif’s translation of the Gospels into English made it available to men and ‘women who know how to read’, whereas previously the Bible could only be read by educated clerks.98

Of the book collections of the period from 1300–1450 catalogued by Cavanaugh, 95 per cent belonged to members of the religious orders, priests, university men, lawyers and administrative clerks on the one hand, and the high aristocracy and knightly classes on the other. The remaining 5 per cent represents the book ownership of merchants and tradesmen and their wives. Books of clerics, university men, lawyers, administrators and the aristocracy have been discussed in many sections of this volume, but little said about those of the burgher class. Examples of the latter are, in the case of women, Nichola Mocking, wife of a London fishmonger, who in 1348 owned a Missal and a Breviary, and Beatrix Barton, wife of a London vintner, who owned a Breviary in 1379.99 If we limit the selection to the period up to 1375, several London tradesmen owned books which are listed in their wills: Andrew Horn, fishmonger and lawyer (1328), Robert Felstede, vintner (1349), Roger Madour, draper (1349), William Thorney, preacher (1349), John de Bonyngdon, apothecary (1361), William Holbech, alderman and draper (1365), William de Burton, goldsmith (1368), John Worstede, mercer (1368) and Roger Longe, vintner (1375), to cite just a few.100 After that date numbers of book owners of this social group greatly increase. That is almost certainly not because people of this class became significantly more literate in the late fourteenth century, but because of the enormous increase in the number of surviving wills. Although this source has been the main evidence for judgments on book ownership, it does not tell the whole story – Petrarch’s will mentions only one book, although he is known to have had a library of at least 300!101 The idea that literacy, and consequently book ownership, markedly increases in England in the fifteenth century, is open to disputation – the numerical increase which is clearly evident is likely to have been the direct result of the much better survival of documentation from that period. Possession of books cannot determine the exact degree of literacy of their owners. Particularly since the majority of the books individual lay people owned were Psalters and Books of Hours, naturally in Latin, the ability to read that language certainly did not imply the full understanding of all that was

98 Aston 1977, p. 360. Aston 1984 discusses ‘devotional literacy’ in regard to other Middle English religious texts, not only those of the Lollards.
99 Cavanaugh 1980, pp. 73, 558.
100 Cavanaugh 1980, pp. 114, 157, 336, 431, 440–2, 541, 550, 857, 948. It should be noted that after 1375 there is an exponential increase in evidence of book ownership, above all from wills. What is known about the earlier is inevitably conditioned by lack of surviving documentation.
101 Parkes 1973, pp. 568–9, for cautionary words on relying on evidence from wills.
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read. In the previous chapter Christopher de Hamel asserts that the increase in the numbers of books containing vernacular English literature leads to an increase in lay book ownership. However, service books and texts for devotion and religious instruction were by far the largest category of books owned by the laity, and their ownership of vernacular books is in most cases on a much smaller scale. That hardly changes in the fifteenth century. Psalters and Books of Hours were the priority books for the literate and for the semi-literate, and the demand for these continues to dominate. We are not as sceptical as the author of the previous chapter in regard to the degree of booklessness and illiteracy of the British population at large, in contrast with the supposed superior literacy and bibliophilia of the French. The social classes of book owners listed by Cavanaugh certainly represented a small proportion of the total number of the inhabitants of the nation. We have no idea of the degree of literacy of the majority, whose ownership of books was assuredly negligible, and doubtless very few could read anything more than the names of the religious figures inscribed on some of the images in their parish church. This illiteracy would remain so until the establishment of extensive public education, many centuries after the end of the Middle Ages.

103 For fifteenth- and sixteenth-century readership of Books of Hours, see Duffy 2006.
104 There is no equivalent publication for France to the wide-ranging listing of book ownership provided by Cavanaugh, so no direct statistical comparison can be made.