The Stories of English

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Hi hadden him manred maked and athes suoren, ac hi nan treuthe ne heolden.
They had him homage done and oaths sworn, but they no loyalty not kept.

One of the most notable features of these extracts is what hardly appears in either of them: French vocabulary. The Normans had been in England for over 50 years – nearly 100, by the time of the second extract – and yet the *Peterborough Chronicle* as a whole has very few new French loanwords (about 30). *Castle* in the second extract is indeed Old French, but that is a pre-Conquest loan (p. 80). The only modernisms are *canceler*, *tresor*, and *iustise*, and there are few other examples in the rest of the *Chronicle* continuation. Nor, as we shall see in Chapter 6, is there very much French vocabulary in other early Middle English literary texts. But it is not long before the French loanwords turn from a trickle into a flood.

Chapter 6 A trilingual nation

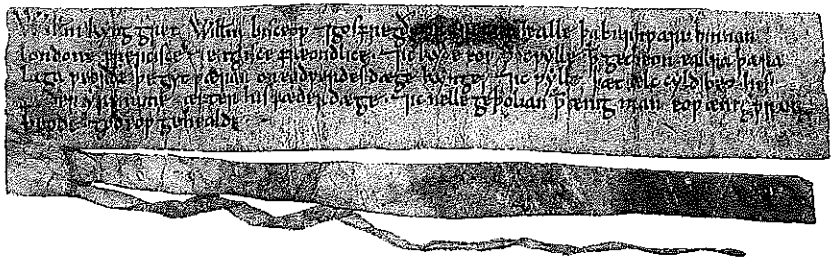
Logically, we might have expected the English language to die out, after 1066. That is what usually happens, when one nation subjugates another. The Portuguese arrived in Brazil in 1500, and what language is the norm in present-day Brazil? None of the indigenous Indian languages, but Portuguese. With few exceptions, the pattern repeats itself throughout history: the Spanish in Central and South America, the British in North America and Australia, the Anglo-Saxons in England (p. 29), and a host of lesser-known but locally just as dramatic scenarios involving Russian, Chinese, Arabic, and many other languages whose cultures are associated with periods of political expansion and dominance. Norman French in England is one of those exceptions. It failed to establish itself, and by the time of Chaucer it was learned only as a foreign language. It took less than 300 years for English to be officially reasserted – notably, being used for the first time as the language at the opening of Parliament in 1362. How could this have happened?

At the outset, there seemed no likelihood of it happening. Within ten years of the arrival of William I, 'the Conqueror', local English rebellion had been crushed with great severity; within twenty years, the manifestation of an increasingly centralized government resulted in the first national survey of land resources, Domesday Book (1086–7); and during the next seventy years Norman rule was consolidated through the reigns of William II and Henry I. There was in effect a single Anglo-Norman kingdom, with the Channel perceived as a bridge rather than as a barrier. Even when this period was over, the French connection did not cease: the 'second invasion' in 1153–4 of Henry II of Aquitaine, resolving the chaotic situation left by Stephen, the last Norman king, established the Angevin, or Plantagenet, dynasty on the English throne – a dynasty which lasted until 1399. The French language, in various northern varieties – Norman French, to begin with – thus became established in the corridors of power. French-speaking barons were given senior posts and huge tracts of land, and they arrived with their French-speaking retinues – a process which continued into the reign of Henry I. The senior Church positions were given to French-speaking abbots and bishops: Abbot Lanfranc of Caen was

made archbishop of Canterbury in 1070, replacing the Anglo-Saxon Stigand, and thereafter all English bishoprics and the headships of religious houses were given to French-speaking clerics. French merchants and craftsmen arrived in England to take advantage of the commercial opportunities provided by the new regime. French – Anglo-Norman French, to be precise – seemed secure.

Its position seemed even stronger, at the outset, because of the continuities which were maintained between England and Normandy. Aristocratic links with the Continent continued to be important, because many nobles maintained estates there. The monarchs themselves were regularly in France. William I actually spent about half his reign in Normandy, in at least five of those years not visiting England at all. William II and Henry I also spent half their reigns there, as did several later kings – Henry II for as many as twenty years. The crusading Richard I spent only six months or so in England. We do not know just how much English these monarchs knew, but it was probably very little. The chronicler Ordericus Vitalis, writing in the 1130s, reports that William I did at one point try to learn English, when he was forty-three (*c.* 1071), but, being somewhat preoccupied by the pressures involved in imposing his rule throughout the kingdom, in the face of ongoing local rebellions, he made little progress. He probably would not have been able to understand the English-language charters which he promulgated at the outset of his reign (see panel 6.1). His youngest son, as Henry I, married an English wife, Eadgyth, the daughter

6.1 William's writ



If we needed a symbol of continuity for the English language immediately *after* the Norman Conquest, we could do no better than look at the writs issued in 1067 to the citizens of London by William I, such as the one illustrated here.[1] The language is English – an uncommon usage in an era when official documents had long been, and for over a century would continue to be, in Latin. (The illustration shows all four distinctive Old English letters (p. 39), but in the transcript, for ease of reading, yogh has been transliterated as *g*, and wynn as *w*. The scribal abbreviations have also been expanded – 7 as *and* and þ as *þæt*.)

> Willm kyng gret Willm bisceop and gosfregð portirefan and ealle þa burhwaru binnan londone frencisce and englisce freondlice· and ic kyðe eow þæt ic wylle þæt get beon eallre þæra laga weorðe þe gyt wæran on eadwerdes dæge kynges· and ic wylle þæt ælc cyld beo his fæder yrfnume æfter his fæder dæge· and ic nelle geþolian þæt ænig man eow ænig wrang beode· god eow gehealde·
>
> King William greets Bishop William and Port-reeve Geoffrey and all the burgesses within London, French and English, in a friendly way. And I make known to you that I wish you to enjoy all the rights that you formerly had in the time of King Edward. And I want every child to be the heir of his father after his father's lifetime. And I will not permit any man to do you any wrong. God preserve you.

It would be some 200 years before English monarchs and other officials would routinely use English, as opposed to Latin or French, on public occasions (p. 138).

of the Scots king Malcolm, which perhaps gave him a more intimate awareness of the language than would otherwise have been gained from official encounters. But we know nothing about his command of English really, nor that of his successor, Stephen, who spent his whole reign in England because of the civil strife of the time, nor that of King John, who lived mainly in England after 1204. We must assume that French continued to be the norm in court until at least the early thirteenth century, and that most of the nobles were largely or wholly monolingual.

The fact that William promulgated anything in English at all is interesting – a recognition of the established nature of the language in England. Unlike Celtic, 500 years before, English had a considerable written literature and a strong oral tradition. There was a public awareness of historical continuity, not least because of the events recorded in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. A vibrant strand of vernacular religious expression could be traced back for well over a century (Chapter 5). Contributions were still being made to Anglo-Saxon imaginative literature – whether original or copied is often a matter of dispute – but the fact that so many of the well-known Anglo-Saxon texts survive in eleventh-century manuscripts (not least, *Beowulf*) suggests that the heroic tradition was alive and well. It could hardly have been otherwise when several of the events it commemorated – such as the Battle of Maldon (991) – were at the boundaries of living memory when William came to the throne.

It would have taken a sociolinguistic shift of immense proportions to knock English off course, and the factors which would have created the conditions for such a shift were just not present in the decades following 1066. To begin with, there was political uncertainty. William's decision in 1087 to bequeath Normandy to one of his sons (Robert Curthose) and England to another (William Rufus) was a major source of conflict, and split the Norman

aristocracy's loyalties. Henry I resolved the matter, defeating Robert at Tinchebrai in 1106, but then complicated things by dying without a legitimate male heir. Further feuds followed, which peaked during the reign of Stephen, as recounted in the *Peterborough Chronicle* (p. 117). Meanwhile, Normandy itself was vulnerable to invasion by its neighbours in Anjou and France. Good relations between England and Normandy in fact lasted only for some 150 years. Following the accession of John in 1199, there was outright war; England lost control of Normandy, and the English nobility lost their estates in France. Within England, there was a growing spirit of nationalism. Antagonism grew between the two countries, leading ultimately to the Hundred Years War (1337–1453) between England and France. Whatever opportunity there may have been for the French language to recover was crushed for ever once Edward III declared himself 'King of England and France' in 1340. 'At Crécy field our clouds of warlike smoke / Choked up those French mouths and dissevered them', says Edward the Black Prince in Shakespeare's *King Edward III* (IV.iv.4). French was now the language of the enemy. The point was never forgotten. Much later in historical drama, it is acknowledged by the rebel Jack Cade, in his attack on Lord Say, who 'can speak French, and therefore he is a traitor' (*Henry VI Part 2*, IV.ii.157). Cade goes on:

> Nay, answer if you can; the Frenchmen are our enemies; go to, then, I ask but this: can he that speaks with the tongue of an enemy be a good counsellor, or no?

And the rabble respond, 'No, no; and therefore we'll have his head'. Which, in due course, they do.

But apart from a deteriorating political situation, it is plain that the number of Normans in England was never sufficient for their language to have made much of an impact on the general population. It has been estimated that they may have been no more than 10,000 or 15,000 soldiers – perhaps as few as 5,000 – plus an uncertain number of camp followers and opportunistic settlers: but this is a tiny number compared to the general English population, which by the time of Domesday Book totalled 1.5 million.[2] By 1300 that population had reached at least 3 million. The vast majority of the population would have had little or no contact with French at all, and would continue to speak Old English. A bilingual class would indeed have emerged – it probably already existed, given the dynastic connections with Normandy long predating the Conquest, and the evidence of early French loanwords (p. 78) – but this would have stayed small, consisting of the aristocracy, senior clergy, and merchant traders and settlers. A few English would have learned French: we can easily imagine a number of astute individuals, not wanting to miss an opportunity, who would have picked up the language in order to gain advantages from the new local aristocracy after 1066. But the pressure on the French

to learn English was much greater. Baronial staff would have had to learn English in order to mediate between their lords and local communities. French-speaking clergy would have found acquiring the language essential in order to carry out their mission to the people. Of critical importance is the fact that few French women made the voyage to England, so there was an enormous amount of intermarriage between Normans and English, and – whatever the difficulties in communication between spouses – their children would have grown up bilingually. It would only have taken one generation to establish the first peer group of young, ambitious, bilingual landed gentry. It would have been a maintained bilingualism: the need to keep up a local position would have fostered the role of English; and the need to keep in with the court would have preserved the role of French. But this would have lasted only for as long as French remained the language of prestige there.

We know that the effects of intermarriage were immediate and significant because contemporary commentators referred to them. Richard Fitz Neal (or Fitz Nigel, d. 1198) was one: he was treasurer both to Henry II and Richard I, and bishop of London, and now best known as the author of *De necessariis observantiis Scaccarii dialogus*, commonly called the *Dialogus de Scaccario* (*A Dialogue on the Exchequer*) – a two-volume account, begun in 1176–7, of the procedures followed by the Exchequer in the author's time. In Book I, Chapter 10, he writes (as part of an exposition of the notion of 'murder': see panel 6.2):

> during the time that the English and Normans have now dwelt together, and mutually married, and given in marriage, the nations have become so intermingled that one can hardly tell to-day – I speak of freemen – who is of English and who of Norman race; excepting, however, the bondsmen who are called 'villani' [villeins], to whom it is not free, if their lords object, to depart from the condition of their station.[3]

6.2 The meaning of murder

What has Richard Fitz Neal's reference to English and Norman intermarriage got to do with murder? The modern word comes from Latin (*murdrum*), and is found in Old English, but not with exactly the same meaning it has today. In Anglo-Saxon times a murder was any killing that society condemned as particularly wicked or hateful. In *Beowulf*, where the word is first recorded, Cain in the Old Testament is described as committing *morðor* (l. 1,264) and a blood-feud is described as *morþor-hete* 'murderous hate' (l. 1,105).

But there is a further nuance. A *morðor* was a killing carried out in secret. In Germanic society, a killing which took place in public view was not considered a crime, but a wrong done to an individual that could be righted through a revenge

killing or some sort of compensation. Only a killing which took place in secret justified the term, for then there could be no natural justice.

This is the sense which Fitz Neal recognizes when his protégé asks him 'what is murder and why is it so called?' (Section X of Book I). His answer also gives us an insight into the relationships between Normans and Anglo-Saxons in the years after the Conquest (see further below):

> Murder (*murdrum*), indeed, is properly called the secret death of somebody whose slayer is not known. For 'murdrum' means the same as 'hidden' or 'occult'. Now, in the primitive state of the kingdom after the Conquest, those who were left of the Anglo-Saxon subjects secretly laid ambushes for the suspected and hated race of the Normans, and, here and there, when opportunity offered, killed them secretly in the woods and in remote places. As vengeance for whom – when the kings and their ministers had for some years, with exquisite kinds of tortures, raged against the Anglo-Saxons; and they, nevertheless, had not, in consequence of these measures, altogether desisted – the following plan was hit upon: that the so-called 'hundred' in which a Norman was found killed in this way – when he who had caused his death was to be found, and it did not appear from his flight who he was – should be condemned to a large sum of tested silver for the fisc [exchequer]; some, indeed, to £36, some to £44, according to the different localities and the frequency of the slaying. And they say that this is done with the following end in view: namely, that a general penalty of this kind might make it safe for the passers-by, and that each person might hasten to punish so great a crime and to give up to justice him through whom so enormous a loss fell on the whole neighbourhood.

The student, quite rightly, follows this answer up with another question: 'Ought not the occult death of an Anglo-Saxon, like of a Norman, to be reputed murders?' Fitz Neal replies: 'By the original institution it ought not to, as thou hast heard', but – he continues with the quotation on p. 125 – because we cannot tell Normans and English apart these days, 'almost always when any one is found thus slain to-day, it is punished as murder'.

Fitz Neal's account also provides confirmation of the mutual suspicion and antagonism which must have existed in the years following the Conquest. It is an atmosphere which is reported at the very beginning of the period by the monk–chronicler Ordericus Vitalis (of Norman stock, though born in Shropshire *c.* 1175), who writes in Chapter 14 of his *Ecclesiastical History* of the events on King William's Coronation Day – Christmas Day 1066:

> Meanwhile, at the instigation of the devil, the enemy of all good, an unforeseen occurrence, pregnant with mischief to both nations, and an omen of future calamities, suddenly happened. For when Aldred the archbishop was demanding of the English, and Geoffrey, bishop of Coutances, of the Normans, whether they consented to have William for their king, and the whole assembly loudly gave their willing assent, with one voice though not in one language, the men-at-arms, who formed the guard outside the abbey, upon hearing the shouts of joyful acclamation raised by the people in the church in a language they did not understand, suspected some treachery and imprudently set fire to the neighbouring houses. The flames quickly spreading, the people in the church were seized with panic in the midst of their rejoicings, and crowds of men and women, of all ranks and conditions, eagerly struggled to make their escape from the church, as if they were threatened with immediate danger. The bishops only, with some few of the clergy and monks, maintained their post before the altar, and trembling with fear completed the coronation office with some difficulty, the king himself being much alarmed. Almost all the rest hastened to the scene of conflagration, some to make vigorous efforts to extinguish the flames, and more in the prospect of committing robberies in the confusion that prevailed. The English were greatly enraged when they understood the origin of this unfortunate affair, which leading them to suspect the Normans and consider them faithless, they waited for some future opportunity of revenge.[4]

There were several opportunities, though none, in the long run, successful. A series of rebellions during the next five years was put down with great ruthlessness. The campaign known as the 'harrying of the north' (1069–70) was so severe, as the twelfth-century Benedictine monk–chronicler Simeon of Durham put it, 'that there was no village inhabited between York and Durham'. Over 100,000 people died of hunger, following the destruction of the land, according to Ordericus Vitalis. Throughout the country, the Anglo-Saxon nobility was systematically eliminated: by the time of Domesday Book (1086–7), some 4,000 thegns – the landholding warriors of Anglo-Saxon times – had been replaced by some 200 barons. Many English noblemen became refugees and fled into Scotland, where they were welcomed by King Malcolm Canmore and significantly increased the number of English speakers in the region (p. 203). The resentment which any nation must feel against such an army of occupation would have found a natural outlet in antagonism towards the language. Anyone speaking French would have been immediately identified with 'the suspected and hated race of the Normans' (as Fitz Neal, reporting contemporary attitudes, described them). Under these circumstances, it is inconceivable that ordinary people would have taken up the learning of French in large numbers. Only those for whom it was a matter of profit or survival would have done so.

Accordingly, with spoken French restricted to the court, the regional aristocracy, the well-educated clergy, and a handful of others, and written French an elite language of government, the new language made very few inroads into English society. Even at the official level, there were constraints on its use, because Latin had for centuries been accepted as the language of law,

administration, literature, and the Church. Domesday Book was written in Latin, not French, and most of the ensuing administrative record-keeping continued to be in Latin. Latin also continued to be the primary language of religious expression – as indeed it would remain, in the Roman Catholic tradition, up to the present-day. And there seems to have been an expectation that intelligent people would know Latin as a matter of course – this, at least, seems to be the implication from the comment of the lady in Piers Plowman's dream vision (Passus 1), who is sharply critical of his slow thinking:

> 'Thou doting duffer,' quoth she, 'dull are thy wits;
> Too little Latin thou learnest, man, in thy youth.'[5]

So although French came to be used more and more in formal domains, such as law, literature, and the arts, it never became the sole voice of officialdom. English, on the other hand, found its social role very sharply defined: in speech, it was the second-class language, the language of the defeated. It would never have been heard at court, or on formal occasions when Norman lords were present. And it would rarely have been used in writing – apart from in the domain of religion where, as we have seen, it was making respectable progress.

The linguistic situation of Anglo-Norman England is, from a socio-linguistic point of view, very familiar. It is a situation of *triglossia* – in which three languages have carved out for themselves different social functions, with one being a 'low-level' language, and the others being used for different 'high-level' purposes. A modern example is Tunisia, where French, Classical Arabic, and Colloquial Arabic evolved different social roles – French as the language of (former) colonial administration, Classical Arabic primarily for religious expression, and Colloquial Arabic for everyday purposes. Eventually England would become a *diglossic* community, as French died out, leaving a 'two-language' situation, with Latin maintained as the medium of education and the Church (p. 155) and English as the everyday language. And later still, the country would become *monoglossic* – or monolingual, as it is usually expressed. But monolingualism is an unusual state, and in the twenty-first century there are clear signs of the reappearance of diglossia in English as it spreads around the world (p. 522).

That the situation in the early Middle Ages was diglossic is supported by this extract from a verse chronicle attributed to the monk Robert of Gloucester (though in fact a compilation of at least three writers), written around the end of the thirteenth century, or soon after. He reports the arrival of the Normans, first mentioning that they were monolingual:

> And þe Normans ne couþe speke þo bote hor owe speche,
> And speke French as hii dude atom, and hor children dude also teche . . .

> And the Normans could speak nothing but their own language,
> And spoke French as they did in their own country, and also taught it to their children . . .

But then, referring to the nobility (*heiemen*) descended from the Normans, he draws specific attention to the contrast in language use between the upper and lower classes. Indeed, the modern contrast between 'high' and 'low' language is anticipated: the *heiemen* ('high men') are opposed to humble folk, *lowe men.*

> Vor bote a man conne Frenss me telþ of him lute.
> Ac lowe men holdeþ to Engliss, and to hor owe speche ȝute . . .
>
> Unless a man knows French he is thought little of
> And low-born men keep to English, and to their own speech still . . .

But he is a modern in his thinking, for this section of the chronicle concludes:

> Ac wel me wot uor to conne boþe wel it is,
> Vor þe more þat a mon can, þe more wurþe he is.
>
> And I know very well that it is good to know both
> For the more a man knows the worthier he is.

An early proponent of the value of bilingualism.

By the end of the twelfth century, references are being made to children of the nobility who have English as a mother tongue, and who have to learn French in school. The number of French-teaching handbooks increased greatly during the thirteenth century, as did bilingual dictionaries and word lists and the frequency of translations into and out of French – further signs of the changing balance of linguistic power. Two writers, at different points in the thirteenth century, provide an insight. Ranulph Higden, a monk at St Werburgh's at Chester, wrote in Latin a book he called *Polychronicon* – a chronicle of many ages (in fact, from the Creation to 1352). After his death (1364), it was translated into English by John of Trevisa (Trevessa, near St Ives, Cornwall), who became vicar of Berkeley, Gloucestershire. Completed in 1387, it became well known following its publication by Caxton in 1482. It is written in a South-Western dialect, with some Midland influence – and thus a rather different South-Western from that used by Robert of Gloucester – Robert spells *for* with a *v*, for example, reflecting that region's tendency to voice its fricatives (as it still does today in such pronunciations as 'Zummerzet' for *Somerset*), whereas John does not.

At one point (Chapter 59), we find Higden reviewing the language-teaching situation in England, and giving two reasons for the decline of English as a mother tongue:

On ys for chyldern in scole, a3enes þe vsage and manere of al oþer nacions, buþ compelled for to leue here oune longage and for to construe here lessons and here þinges a Freynsch, and habbeþ suþthe þe Normans come furst into Engelond. Also gentil men children buþ ytau3t for to speke Freynsch fram tyme þat a buþ yrokked in here cradel, and conneþ speke and playe wiþ a child hys brouch; and oplondysch men wol lykne hamsylf to gentil men, and fondeþ wiþ gret bysynes for to speke Freynsch, for to be more ytold of.

One is for children in school, contrary to the usage and custom of all other nations, [who] are compelled to abandon their own language and to carry on their lessons and their affairs in French, and have done so since the Normans first came to England. Also the children of gentlemen are taught to speak French from the time that they are rocked in their cradle, and learn to speak and play with a child's trinket; and rustic men will make themselves like gentlemen, and seek with great industry to speak French, to be more highly thought of.

This seems clear enough; but Trevisa is anxious to point out that times have changed, so he adds a long paragraph of his own.

Þys manere was moche y-vsed tofore þe furste moreyn, and ys seþthe somdel ychaunged. For Iohan Cornwal, a mayster of gramere, chayngede þe lore in gramerscole and construccion of Freynsch into Englysch; and Richard Pencrych lurnede that manere techyng of hym, and oþer men of Pencrych, so þat now, þe 3er of oure Lord a þousond þre hondred foure score and fyue, of þe secunde kyng Richard after þe Conquest nyne, in al þe gramerscoles of Engelond children leueþ Frensch, and construeþ and lurneþ an Englysch, and habbeþ þerby avauntage in on syde, and desavauntage yn anoþer: Here avauntage ys, þat a lurneþ here gramer yn lasse tyme þan childern wer ywoned to do. Disavauntage ys þat now childern of gramerscole conneþ no more Frensch þan can here lift heele, and þat ys harm for ham and a scholle passe þe se and trauayle in strange londes, and in meny caas also. Also gentil men habbeþ now moche yleft for to teche here childern Frensch.

This practice was much used before the first plague [the Black Death of 1349], and has since been somewhat changed. For John Cornwall, a teacher of grammar, changed the teaching in grammar school and the construing of French into English; and Richard Penkridge learned that method of teaching from him, and other men from Penkridge, so that now, 1385 AD, the ninth year of the reign of the second King Richard after the Conquest, in all the grammar schools of England, children abandon French, and compose and learn in English, and have thereby an advantage on the one hand, and a disadvantage on the other. The advantage is that they learn their grammar in less time than children used to do. The disadvantage is that nowadays children at grammar school know no more French than their left heel, and that it is a misfortune for them if they should cross the sea and travel in foreign countries, and in other such circumstances. Also, gentlemen have now largely abandoned teaching their children French.

Know no more French than their left heel? That sentence has a peculiarly modern ring about it.

Higden, writing in the 1350s, was already somewhat behind the times, if we are to believe the very clear statement about the changed situation made by William of Nassington (a village in Northamptonshire), written in 1325. An administrative official at York, he is known for his Latin translations into English, in northern dialect, including an English version of his own *Speculum vitae* (*Mirror of Life*). In 1384 there is a record of the English text being read before senior staff at Cambridge University for four days, before being pronounced free from heresy. At the beginning of this work (lines 61–78), he explains why he is using English:

In English tonge I schal 3ow telle,
3if 3e wyth me so longe wil dwelle.
No Latyn wil I speke no waste,
But English, þat men vse mast,
Þat can eche man vnderstande,
Þat is born in Ingelande;
For þat langage is most chewyd,
Os wel among lered os lewyd.
Latyn, as I trowe, can nane
But þo that haueth it in scole tane.

And somme can Frensche and no Latyn,
Þat vsed han cowrt and dwellen þerein.
And somme can of Latyn a party
Þat can of Frensche but febly.
And somme vnderstonde wel Englysch
Þat can noþer Latyn nor Frankys.
Boþe lered and lewed, olde and 3onge,

Alle vnderstonden english tonge.

In the English tongue I shall you tell,
If you with me so long will dwell.
No Latin will I speak nor waste,
But English, that men use most,
That is able each man to understand,
That is born in England;
For that language is most displayed,
As much among learnèd as unread.
Latin, as I believe, know none
Except those who have it in school done.
And some know French and no Latin,

Who have used it at court and there remain.
And some know of Latin partly
Who know of French but feebly.
And some understand well English

Who know neither Latin nor French.
Both learnèd and unread, old and young,
All understand the English tongue.

There can be no clearer statement about the linguistic character of the new era. Yet the amount being written in English was still very limited, even fifty years

later, if we accept the poet John Gower's statement in the Prologue to his long poem about courtly love, *Confessio amantis* (*Confession of Love*), written in the 1380s and revised in 1393 (l. 21):

> Som man mai lyke of that I wryte:
> And for that fewe men endite [compose]
> In oure englissh, I thenke [plan to] make
> A bok [book] for Engelondes sake,
> The yer [year] sextenthe of kyng Richard.

And his contemporary, Thomas Usk, in the Prologue to his prose essay *The Testament of Love* (1384–5), also finds it necessary to make a case for using his 'dame's tongue' (the earliest reference I have found to a 'mother tongue'):

> In Latyn and French hath many soverayne wyttes had gret delyte to endyte [compose] and have many noble thynges fulfylde; but, certes [certainly], there ben [be] some that speken their poysye [poetic] mater in Frenche of whiche speche the Frenche men have as good a fantasye as we have in heryng [hearing] of Frenche mennes Englysshe.

An English poet composing in French, he suggests, does as badly as a Frenchman trying to speak English. And Usk concludes:

> Let than clerkes endyten [compose] in Latyn, for they have the propertie of science and the knowynge in that facultie; and lette Frenchmen in their Frenche also endyten their queynt [strange] termes, for it is kyndely to their mouthes; and let us shewe our fantasyes [imaginations] in suche wordes as we lerneden [learned] of our dames tonge.

All understand this 'dames tongue', William of Nassington had suggested. But what sort of tongue was it, after 200 years of French influence?

The impact of French

Language reflects society; language change reflects social change. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to find French having such a dramatic effect on English when we consider the social implications of a 'Conquest' and the many areas where Britain found itself assimilating the culture of France. By the end of the twelfth century, people were trying to use their vernacular language to express a wide range of new functions. It must have been an uncomfortable situation, coping with the unfamiliar domains of expression introduced by the Normans.

The pressure was growing to use English, but there was no suitable English to use. Writers could not rely on the vernacular varieties available from earlier times, such as had evolved to meet the needs of chronicle history and religion, because the ancient language was no longer in use: Old English had become Middle English. And in the case of the domains most affected by the Norman invaders, such as law, architecture, estate management, music, and literature, there was a new, francophone vision to be expressed. Here, an Anglo-Saxon perspective, with all its associated vocabulary and conceptualization, was irrelevant. People had no alternative but to develop new varieties of expression, adopting Continental models, and adapting traditional genres to cope with the French way of doing things.

The development of new domains of expression involves all aspects of language. A distinctive vocabulary is the most noticeable feature – not individual words arriving one at a time, but large clusters of words introduced to express sets of related concepts. In ecclesiastical architecture, for example, French architects in England adapted Continental sources for their cathedral designs, so that in due course the buildings are better described as Romanesque or Gothic rather than as Early English. The associated specialist terminology needed to express this fundamental shift of vision was very large, covering everything from building tools to aesthetic abstractions. But the 'language of buildings' involves far more than vocabulary. New words from abroad bring new patterns of sound, so pronunciation changes. These pronunciations need to be written down, so new spellings appear. The character of phrases and sentences also changes, with the adoption of foreign compounds, idioms, formulaic expressions, and other multi-word constructions. And individual authors, schools, and genres influence general patterns of style. Several of the new domains of expression would prove to be influenced by French habits of discourse – legal English, for instance, reflecting a barrage of unfamiliar procedures and practices.

The realm of ecclesiastical architecture also illustrates how the language of a newly emerging variety could soon become widely encountered. The new cathedrals being built in the decades after the Conquest were all over the country, in such widely separated locations as Lincoln, St Albans, Hereford, Ely, Worcester, Exeter, Carlisle, and Durham. Other locations saw a great deal of rebuilding, perhaps because a church had become too small for the growing population or because it had been devastated by fire, such as happened to the foundations at Peterborough (1116) and Canterbury (1174). New monasteries and nunneries had to be built, to meet the needs of the religious orders being introduced throughout England. Early arrivals from the Continent included the Carthusians (in the eleventh century) and Cistercians (twelfth century), to be followed by the orders of friars, the Franciscans and the Dominicans. In addition

to the leading houses, smaller abbeys sprang up everywhere, often founded by local lords who placed members of their family in charge. In these circumstances, a new English – but French-inspired – architectural nomenclature would quickly spread.

The religious developments had significant linguistic effects. New religious houses meant new scriptoria, more scribes, and thus more manuscripts. The scribes were needed, because there was so much more to be written about. Within the monastic setting, there were new rules and guidelines to be circulated, not least to meet the needs of the burgeoning number of nunneries, as women came to play a more prominent role in religious life.[6] And all aspects of the Catholic Church were being affected by the canons of a flurry of General Councils. After a long period during which there were no Councils at all (Constantinople had been the last, in 869–70), there were six in less than 200 years: the four Lateran Councils (1123, 1139, 1179, 1215), two at Lyons (1245, 1274), and one at Vienne (1311–12). Each event generated new literature, and, though this was all in Latin, the need to interpret and apply the recommendations demanded English. The Middle Ages was the period when the importance of the vernacular as a religious medium was beginning to be emphasized. The work of the friars as preachers and teachers to all classes of the population, especially the poor, had been sanctioned by the Fourth Lateran Council in its Tenth Canon: 'we decree that bishops provide suitable men, powerful in work and word, to exercise with fruitful result the office of preaching; who in place of the bishops, since these cannot do it, diligently visiting the people committed to them, may instruct them by word and example'. As a result, with more preachers meeting the public, the spoken vernacular language developed fresh oratorical modes of expression which soon exceeded the range and quantity of their Old English counterparts; and much of this new output came to be written down.

A similar story can be told for other major domains, such as political administration. Domesday Book (1086–7) was the first national survey carried out by a government whose character was becoming increasingly centralized, and it proved to be the stimulus for an unprecedented amount of legal formulation and record-keeping. About 2,000 writs and charters survive from the Anglo-Saxon period; in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the surviving legal manuscripts number hundreds of thousands. Everyone was affected by documentation, from landowner to serf. The amount of work passing through the new civil service offices – the Chancery and the Exchequer – grew immensely. From 1199 Chancery clerks began to keep parchment copies of letters sent out under the great seal. Even though many manuscripts have been lost, it is still possible to get a sense of the growth in administrative load from such details as the amount of sealing wax used by Chancery clerks. In the late 1220s the office was using 3.63 lb a week; by the late 1260s the weekly outlay had risen to 31.9 lb.[7]

A remarkable amount of administrative ephemera built up during the late eleventh century and throughout the twelfth: records of apprenticeship, guild membership, and military conscription (muster rolls), records of assize courts and quarter sessions, enclosure awards, and parish registers. Manorial records, for example, listed such matters as land transfers within a manor, and the names and deaths of tenants. Occasional taxes, or subsidies, were collected by local assessors, who kept detailed accounts on behalf of the Exchequer. The Pipe Rolls of the Exchequer are the earliest surviving series of public records, running almost without a break from 1155 until 1834, with one roll from 1129–30 also surviving. They contained accounts of the royal income, arranged by county, for each financial year. (The name comes from the pipe-like appearance of the parchments which resulted when the individual pages were sewn together and rolled up.) It might be thought that the vast increase in documentation in early Middle English is of little importance for the history of the language, because they were almost entirely written in Latin – often (as in the case of the Pipe Rolls) in a highly abbreviated style. But this is to forget the importance of names – both of people and of places – as the next Interlude illustrates (p. 140). A great deal of information can be deduced about social and regional background from the choice and spelling of proper names. And it would in any case not be long before this documentation began to be written in English.

Record-keeping affects everybody. Today, we are so used to maintaining records and having them available for information retrieval that it is difficult to imagine a world without them – a world where everything depended on verbal memory.[8] That was very largely the case in the Anglo-Saxon world, and it remained so until the twelfth century, when it proved no longer possible to ignore the daily demands imposed by a society which depended on literacy in order to function. Writing became increasingly visible to all, its significance not lost on the illiterate majority, whose lives were governed by it. Some time later, Shakespeare would put into the mouth of Jack Cade a comment about the almost magical power of the written language. Agreeing to his rebel associate's call to 'kill all the lawyers', Cade reflects on the way writing can condemn a man to death: 'Is this not a lamentable thing, that of the skin of an innocent lamb should be made parchment? That parchment, being scribbled o'er, should undo a man?' (*Henry VI Part 2*, IV.ii.73). Literacy became a priority during the twelfth century. The number of schools rapidly increased. And, at a higher level, advanced literacy began to manifest itself in the establishment of the first universities (Oxford in 1249, Cambridge in 1284), as well as through that series of intellectual and cultural developments in Continental Europe known as the 'twelfth-century Renaissance'.

This Renaissance affected all areas of knowledge, and new language emerged to express fresh thinking in such domains as theology, philosophy, logic, law, cosmology, medicine, and mathematics. A renewal of interest in the Classics and the nature of ancient learning increased the prestige of Latin, but other languages – notably, Arabic and Greek – also received fresh attention. Vernacular literature also benefited. Not only did the rebirth of learning lead to a great increase in the number of translations into English from other languages, foreign influence also manifested itself in the world of English secular music and literature. The two domains had been inseparable in the performances of the virtuoso poet–musicians who emerged in the eleventh century, travelling around the courts and taverns of Europe, romanticizing the high ideals of courtly love, recounting long-past epics, and capturing events of the moment in satirical and bawdy ballads. These professional entertainers performed a variety of roles, used a range of dialects and styles, and were known by various names (depending on the time and place), such as *trouvères*, *troubadours*, *minnesinger*, *jongleurs*, *goliards*, and *gleemen*. We find a reference to their role in an early Middle English text, the thirteenth-century *Lay of Havelok the Dane* (ll. 2,327–40), in which the celebrations taking place at Havelok's coronation include both the reading and singing of romances (*gestes* is derived from the name of the French epic poems, the *chansons de geste*):

Leyk of mine, of hasard ok,	Sports of dice, of gambling, too,
Romanz-reding on þe bok;	Reading romances from the book;
þer mouthe men here þe gestes singe,	There might you hear the epics sung
þe glevmen on þe tabour dinge.	The gleemen beating on the drum.

The development of a more sophisticated musical genre was also to be found in France, in the works of such composers as Pérotin Magister (*c.* 1160–1240), Philippe de Vitry (1291–1361), and Guillaume de Machaut (*c.* 1300–1377), the last decisively influencing the emergence of polyphonic singing. And in due course, all these developments crossed the English Channel, bringing their language with them (see panel 6.3).

It was accordingly during this period – chiefly in the thirteenth century – that we find French coming to be viewed as the first international language of culture and fashion. But it was a new kind of French, learned in a new kind of way. The Anglo-Norman variety, which had been the mother tongue of the power-wielding class after the Conquest, had by this time virtually died out, to be replaced by a more prestigious variety, the language of the French court, taught as a foreign tongue in homes and schools. This was the key to social advancement: one could not be thought civilized if one did not speak the 'French of Paris', with its fashionable pronunciation, vocabulary, and style. The point

6.3 Eleanor of Aquitaine

The changing character of a language is usually the result of anonymous social trends; but every now and then we can identify an individual whose influence has been exceptional. In the twelfth century, such a person was Eleanor of Aquitaine. Thanks to her lifelong patronage, no one had more influence on the spread throughout France of troubadour music and song. And we must note that 'lifelong', in this instance, is no cliché: her eighty-two years (1122–1204) was remarkable, almost twice the average life expectancy in the early Middle Ages.

Eleanor was heiress of the duchy of Aquitaine in south-west France – a huge patrimony covering almost a third of the country, and much influenced by the musical and artistic traditions of nearby Spain and Moorish Africa. A first marriage to Louis VII of France was annulled, and in 1152 she married Henry of Anjou, who became Henry II of England. Two of her eight children became English kings – Richard I and John. In 1173 she supported a rebellion against Henry, which resulted in her being imprisoned for fifteen years; but after his death she was effectively ruler of England for four years (1190–94), when Richard I was away on the Third Crusade.

Eleanor was already famous for her patronage in her home region, and her arrival in the English court heralded a new musical era, during which she received many Continental musicians. The troubadour movement took time to establish itself, partly because its dialect (the *langue d'oc* of the southern region of France) was different from the Anglo-Norman dialect which had grown up in England (derived from the *langue d'oil* of the French north). But in its various genres, French music eventually became fashionable and influential. Richard I was himself a composer and singer – an accomplishment which has achieved legendary status. (Richard was imprisoned in Austria on the way home from the Crusades. His friend Blondel de Nesle (1155–*c.* 1200) went in search of him, singing a song they had jointly composed, in the hope that Richard would recognize it and sing a response. The strategy worked, when the song was answered from a cell in the castle of Dürrenstein, and Blondel was able to inform the English where Richard was being held.)

Legend aside, there is no doubt that French musical expression was a significant influence on the subject-matter, vocabulary, and style of the language of English secular music during the thirteenth century.

was still relevant a century later, when Chaucer pokes some fun at the presumably nonstandard linguistic ability of the Prioress, who had learned her French at the Benedictine nunnery in Stratford (now part of Greater London):

And Frenssh she spak ful faire and fetisly	And French she spoke very well and gracefully

After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
For Frenssh of Parys was to hire
unknow.

After the school of Stratford at Bow,
For French of Paris was to her
unknown.

But French was not only in vogue for the sake of fashion. Even more than previously it was an important career language, for by the middle of the thirteenth century it was regularly being used as an alternative to Latin in administrative settings. Although the Church continued to use Latin for ecclesiastical purposes, in court circles it was steadily being replaced by French. Officials would still use Latin for letters abroad or to senior clergy, but otherwise French was the norm for royal letters. French also gradually supplanted Latin in parliamentary debate, retaining its position until itself later supplanted by English. And in the business world, scribes carried on their recording and accounting in French until well into the fifteenth century.

The relationships between the three languages were immensely complex during the later part of the period. We must not forget that not only was English changing during this time, but so was French, especially in the law courts, where it remained for some time, becoming more specialized and different from that of Paris, with large numbers of arcane legal expressions and a syntax increasingly influenced by English word order. The notion of 'English supplanting French' does not refer to a swift change. A statute of 1362 indeed recognized the role of English for the first time in Parliament, but that did not suddenly stop the use of French. On the contrary, French had a routine presence in parliamentary records until well into the fifteenth century, and is actually still encountered there as late as the seventeenth century.[9] The context of the 1362 statute was a concern over the way plaintiffs were unable to understand spoken proceedings in the courts: ordinary people could not follow the French of their lawyers and judges. The 1362 statute applied basically to the spoken language, not to the written records of the courts and Parliament, which continued to operate with a mixture of French, Latin, and English for a very long time. As late as 1549, in the reign of Henry VIII, Archbishop Cranmer is recorded as saying that plaintiffs complained because their lawyers pleaded their causes 'in the French tongue which they understood not'.[10] And when, in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, Cardinal Wolsey visits Queen Katherine to persuade her to cooperate with Henry's plans, he begins in Latin – only to be abruptly checked by the Queen (III.i.41):

O, good my lord, no Latin!
I am not such a truant since my coming
As not to know the language I have lived in.
A strange tongue makes my cause more strange, suspicious;
Pray speak in English.

By the sixteenth century, trilingualism would have been restricted to a specialized, chiefly legal elite. But during the Middle Ages in Britain, educated English people would have been trilingual as a matter of course. English would have been their mother tongue, as we have seen (p. 131).[11] They would have learned Latin as the required language of the Church, the Roman Classics, most scholarship, and some politico-legal matters. And they would have found French essential both for routine administrative communication within Britain and in order to be considered fashionable throughout Western European society. The situation would not last. As the Middle Ages progressed, we find English gradually making inroads into domains of discourse which had previously been the prerogative of Latin or French. Legal English, medical English, philosophical English, literary English, parliamentary English, and other varieties started to appear, and quite quickly evolved the distinctive and sophisticated styles of expression still used today. But in every domain, the new vernacular displays the influence of its linguistic antecedents. And by the end of the Middle English period, the Germanic element in the English vocabulary had been firmly put in the shade by a Romance and Italic lexical invasion of unprecedented proportions.