Trading Tongues

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Contact Zones, Modern and Medieval

Multilingual welcome signs and other navigational markers in London’s Heathrow and Gatwick airports—including texts in Chinese, Hindi, and Punjabi, not to mention English and a number of European languages—offer the overseas visitor some indication of the many languages one can encounter on the streets of London today. Anyone who has lived in or traveled to London might find it unsurprising to learn that the city has been characterized (in popular media and academic scholarship alike) as “the most linguistically diverse city on earth.” Indeed, one London newspaper has colorfully hailed it as “one of the very few cities in the world where you can order breakfast in Farsi, book a taxi in Urdu, ask for afternoon coffee in Arabic and spend the evening chatting with your friends in Cantonese.”

Although the singularity of London’s multilingual character

can be disputed (other cities around the globe can very well vie for the title of most linguistically diverse, depending on how one defines a “language” and “diversity”), this newspaper article’s effusive praise for the city suggests the very idea of London’s linguistic diversity exerts a strong imaginative appeal. In order to provide a compelling “hook” to what is essentially a summary of a numerical survey of languages used in London, the journalists invite readers to adopt the perspective of a single person (“you”) going about business in the city. In this description of everyday life, the city’s plethora of tongues implicitly serves as an index for London’s global stature and multiethnic character. At the same time, each scenario in this urban trajectory is underlaid by the combined forces of global migration and commerce. An ongoing exchange of money for goods and services drives the hypothetical Londoner’s interactions with people of different professional and (presumably) ethnic backgrounds over the course of a single day.

London’s multilingual character and status as a major commercial center would appear to mark it as a quintessentially modern global city, but the conjunction of everyday business and cross-linguistic encounter is in itself nothing new. An anonymous early fifteenth-century poem known as London Lickpenny presents a vivid portrayal of medieval city life, narrating a remarkably similar trajectory punctuated by cross-linguistic exchanges. Inhabiting an urban environment through pedestrian experience, this medieval poem offers its own fictive itinerary of a single person in transit throughout a busy, polyglot London.

In this poem, a visitor from outside the city, identified only as “one of Kent” (20), travels to London to seek justice for wrongs, but he is unsuccessful in his pursuits. As it describes the narrator’s movements throughout the day, the poem posits that money (or the desire for it) drives all interactions in the city, and the narrative offers a seemingly incidental survey of the linguistic demographics of different neighborhoods. For instance, the speaker’s interactions with legal professionals in Westminster feature


3. The poem survives in two manuscripts: London, British Library, Harley MS 367 and Harley MS 542. All citations and line numbers follow Medieval English Political Writings, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1996), which is based upon Harley MS 542.
highly specialized forms of language, including a healthy dose of French-derived legal terminology employed in pleading and other court procedures. The penniless first-person narrator submits a “complaynt” (4) and ponders how to “procede” [litigate] (6) before making a final appeal to the court of “Chauncerie” (34). At the Court of Common Pleas, the speaker states, “I tolde [. . . ] my case, as well as I coude” (28) to “one with a sylken hoode” (26)—a legal professional seated on high at the bench—but this hooded man says nothing in response, since the narrator has no money to offer. When the speaker then moves into the Chancery court, he discerns many cries of “qui tollis,” the Latin phrase used by clerks to summon claimants to the bar, “[b]ut I herd no man speke of me” (36). In this Westminster episode, legal professionals employ an obscure mix of Francophone and Latinate jargon that the narrator, an outsider, struggles in vain to navigate.

Once the speaker exits Westminster, the linguistic landscape of the poem alters. Instead of encountering professionals employing specialized forms of French and Latin, the speaker interacts with merchants who use less prestigious vernaculars. Outside the doors of Westminster Hall, “Flemings grete woon” (great crowds of Flemish merchants) approach the narrator, crying: “Mastar, what will ye copen or by—/Fine felt hatts, spectacles for to rede?” (51–54). The odd phrase “copen or by” is a rare, if not unique, occurrence in a Middle English text. This mixed-language utterance—featuring Middle Dutch and Middle English equivalents of the verb “buy”—effects a subtly stylized representation of the speech of Flemish immigrants who try to get the narrator to purchase some of their wares. In the rest of the poem, the speaker encounters other varieties of Middle English. In “Estchepe,” a victualing district, the poet hears vendors clanging pots, crying, and singing songs (89–96), but he cannot purchase anything they offer; and in the waterfront district of Billingsgate, a bargeman rudely rebuffs the speaker when he states he cannot afford the fare for a trip back across the Thames and out of the city (115–19).

The vivid pedestrian perspective in London Lickpenny provides a survey of the demographic and linguistic diversity of the medieval city’s neighborhoods. It depicts French- and Latin-speaking legal professionals in Westminster; Flemings outside Westminster gates negotiating two related Germanic vernaculars; and retailers elsewhere throughout town crying,

singing, and scolding in Middle English. Although the imagined Londoner in the modern newspaper article is happily conversant across tongues and the fictive first-person speaker in this poem is not so fortunate, medieval London—like its present-day counterpart—nonetheless emerges as a profoundly polyglot city: a space that absorbs and sustains people of diverse ethnic, social, and professional backgrounds. In *London Lickpenny*, commerce is not just an incidental feature of everyday life; rather, it provides the vehicle for the urban subject’s motion through diverse sociolinguistic environments. A cross-temporal comparison allows us to conceive of the city, medieval or modern, as a dynamic contact zone: a place that draws together peoples of disparate origins, professions, and social classes, often under the aegis of trade.

This book, *Trading Tongues*, examines how multilingualism and commerce shape texts written in medieval contact zones, from London during the time of Chaucer and his contemporaries through the early Tudor era. When referring to a contact zone throughout this book, I simply mean to indicate any venue (such as a city) that facilitates ongoing interactions between people and exchange among languages. This term “contact zone” has a critical pedigree that can be traced back to Mary Louise Pratt’s examination of colonialism in the Americas. In her groundbreaking work, Pratt employs the self-described “coinage” of the term “contact zone” to refer to “the space of colonial encounters . . . in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.”

As a critical term, “contact” claims its disciplinary origin in linguistics, where it applies to the study of how languages change through mutual interaction over time. Pratt’s coinage of the “contact zone” imbues the phenomenon of language contact with an important spatializing force, drawing attention to how languages mix and commingle within particular geographical and social environments. Insofar as it implicitly conjoins notions of language and space, this formulation has provided a productive conceptual framework for subsequent investigations of social exchange and interaction in past and contemporary settings alike.

In *Trading Tongues*, I adjust the scope of Pratt’s formulation.

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7. Pratt’s characterization of contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” has been mobilized not only in literary criticism but also in scholarship on multiculturalism,
I grant the contact zone the capacity to encompass the meeting (or clashing) of peoples and tongues through cross-cultural encounters or politically charged scenes of social conflict, but I primarily focus on more mundane interactions of the sort facilitated by trade or travel. Throughout this book, I am interested not so much in uncovering systems of radical inequality or sociopolitical power imbalance but rather in tracing instances of sociolinguistic fluidity, exchange, and interpersonal negotiation. My readings illustrate a pervasive intercourse among tongues in everyday life, and I attend to the manifold forms of social leveling engendered by urban commerce.

In framing medieval trading environments as contact zones, I am not simply transporting postcolonial or modern sociolinguistic discourses back to the Middle Ages; instead, I seek to help us better understand how writing within multilingual contact zones is historically situated and constituted. This book’s title, Trading Tongues, signals two major interventions in our thinking about medieval literature and culture. First, it illustrates how profoundly commerce in medieval contact zones, particularly in cities and coastal environments, shapes how language is used in literary texts. Mercantile and legal languages that were employed to conduct daily affairs in urban centers like medieval London—including specialized forms of French and Latin—were not neatly circumscribed within professional domains; these intertwined languages of business readily informed both the style and the form of imaginative literary texts from lyric poetry and romance to travel writing.

This book’s second and related objective is to investigate how medieval writers engaged in linguistic exchange, “trading tongues” by moving across languages—and combining them—in the texts they created. Urban professionals like merchants, lawyers, and scribes were quite capable of shifting between different languages (or identifiable registers of any given language) in their writings, often due to practical considerations such as adopting a more specialized realm of discourse or addressing (or excluding) a particular audience. In modern sociolinguistics, this type of movement across languages or registers is known as code-switching.8 Trading Tongues...

maintains that polyglot poets and other medieval writers code-switch not only for pragmatic purposes but also for deliberately artistic ends: using different languages to develop distinct expressive registers, to stylize certain types of speech, or to evoke a vivid sense of place.

Throughout this book, I argue that we broaden our appreciation for the complex literate practices of medieval code-switchers by conceiving them as translingual writers. In his recent anthology of essays by contemporary authors around the globe, Steven Kellman expansively defines translingual writers as those “who write in more than one language or in a language other than their primary one.”9 Ruth Spack and Lydia H. Liu have offered more sharply delineated understandings of translingualism, using this term to designate literary writers who cross over into another language in order to reappropriate, subvert, or reinvent it.10 If I had to adopt a modern point of comparison, I would say my own approach to medieval “writing across tongues” resonates most strongly with the heterogeneous work of a writer like Gloria Anzaldúa, whose reflections on life and travel throughout la frontera (the borderlands) spanning Mexico and the United States asserts the strategic power of using more than one language simultaneously. Rather than “crossing over” from Chicano Spanish and assuming a new (Anglo) identity, her writing interweaves English and Spanish to sustain a flexible locatedness, and she presents her lyrical language as “neither español ni inglés, but both.”11 In this book, I stress the capacity of medieval writers to employ many languages at once, not simply “crossing over” from one language or identity into another. Medieval writers inhabited a world prior to the establishment of modern nation-states with discrete official languages and national literatures, and my approach to translingual writing stresses the capacity of medieval people to both think and write in more than one language concurrently.

The medieval writers I examine all worked in busy urban environments where one so-called “primary” language or native vernacular, English, coexisted and commingled with professionalized forms of French and Latin.

9. Steven Kellman, Switching Languages: Translingual Writers Reflect on Their Craft (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), ix. Kellman’s Translingual Imagination (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2000) employs the identical definition of “translanguing” but only in application to modern contexts.


Approaching the mixed-language texts they produced as examples of translingual writing is particularly useful since the polyglot milieu of these writers troubles stable notions of linguistic difference in the first place. If “multilingual” denotes the fact that languages coexist and occupy the same di- or triglossic space, then “translingual” emphasizes the capacity for languages within such spaces to interact: to influence and transform each other through networks of exchange. As I will show in this book, medieval texts that cross between varieties of English and French can be mediated by interactions with a third language (often Latin or Dutch). And even within an English–French framework, the fluid quality of writing across these two vernaculars requires readers to break out of binary thinking altogether, shifting from “either/or” linguistic distinctions to more capacious “both/and” orientations. The flexible linguistic and literary practices of medieval writers provide ample opportunities for exploring the artistic features of translingual writing and its myriad cognitive effects.

Through close reading of texts by translingual writers, this book simultaneously investigates the wide-ranging literary and theoretical implications of medieval language traversal. Mixed-language texts reveal complex strategies for portraying trade, travel, cross-cultural exchange, and affective belonging, and I contend that medieval translingual writing offers new opportunities for conceiving these social phenomena that need not rely solely upon formulations developed in modern contexts. Throughout this book, I examine how medieval people created their own modes of thinking about language contact and linguistic transformation, drawing upon resources at their disposal in their own time and place: bureaucratic and legal registers, personification allegory, and artisanal craft discourses.

Just as this book shows how medieval people wrote and thought about their own multilingual environments, it reveals how they experimented with diverse modes of articulating their own identities in, and across, different tongues. To this end, I often stress how medieval social identities are expressed through transit across languages and movement across different spaces. By tracing the linguistic and spatial orbits of translingual writers, Trading Tongues might even have the potential to imagine the entire Western Middle Ages afresh: not as a fixed point of origin for nation- or language-based literary histories (or even as a precursor to later eras of globalization) but rather as a dynamic world that is already in perpetual motion.12

12. Literary and linguistic scholarship has increasingly engaged with the polyglot character of the Western Middle Ages. Recent approaches to medieval England most resonant
In the ensuing chapters, I will discuss Geoffrey Chaucer and other canonical writers who (by any account) loom as important early figures in the creation of English literature—but I am not invested in reinscribing them as foundations of an emergent or cohering literary tradition in the English vernacular. Instead, I reveal the pervasive translanguaging of their work. Resituating these medieval writers in a mobile world that decenters English per se, I offer an alternative to narratives of teleological development that trace the “rise of English” as a vehicle of literary expression. Indeed, I view Middle English as one vibrant vernacular whose intricacies are best understood by examining its relationship to, and interplay with, other tongues. Chaucer, a Londoner long revered as “the father of English poetry,” composed major literary works while simultaneously serving as a diplomatic envoy and customs official; conversant in (at the very least) English as well as French and Latin, he traveled in Flanders, France, Italy, and Iberia, and his writings engaged local and continental influences. William Caxton, the first English printer, was in addition a mercer, translator, and diplomat; he spent years in Cologne and Bruges before setting up shop in Westminster, and over his career he produced texts in English, French, and Latin, not to mention English translations from Dutch and a bilingual French–English phrasebook. As participants in a transnational flow of languages, ideas, and technologies, these agents so pivotal in what we later have come to call English literary history are most accurately conceived as wayfarers in medias res—textual creators who are spatially, linguistically, and temporally “in the middle of things.”

The fact that some medieval people could be so restlessly mobile may strike modern readers as counterintuitive, but sociologists like Georg Simmel have provocatively conjectured that merchants and scholars

London’s Languages and Translingual Writing

conducted more travel in the Middle Ages than their counterparts in the beginning of the twentieth century—presumably because modern postal systems, modes of transport, and technologies of mechanical reproduction dramatically lessened the imperative for people to physically move from one place to another in order to transport information and commodities. Sociologist John Urry observes that Simmel’s “schematic account of the Middle Ages is interesting for its emphases on movement and fluidity, and for the ways that travel was deemed obligatory for many to exchange information, money, and objects”—and, I would add, languages—prior to the “large-scale movement” that we tend to associate with our modern age. It is this sense of a hypermobile Middle Ages—a conception of the world that presumes an ongoing exchange of languages, media, and ideas—that animates this book. Trading Tongues challenges us to conceive of the entire medieval world as one in perpetual motion, and I invite us to interrogate the perceived singularity of the “large-scale movement” of peoples, goods, and tongues in our own time.

In order to set this book in motion, I begin with a brief discussion of a late fourteenth-century Latin/English poem commonly known as The Stores of the Cities, followed by an expanded treatment of the narrative and formal structure of London Lickpenny. In each of these texts, medieval poets incorporate multiple languages to depict urban life. The Stores of the Cities infuses Latin with Middle English nouns and place names, while London Lickpenny sprinkles its Middle English with snippets of French, Latin, and Dutch. Although these poems draw upon London’s languages in their own idiosyncratic ways, each text conceives of an urban subject on the go, in transit through multiple sociolinguistic spaces. In each poem, travel throughout the city is inextricably tied to the traversal of its tongues.

Stores of the City: London’s Properties

I turn to one of the most intriguing works of poetry about medieval London: a single stanza of just three lines. These verses appear in a riddling sequence of mixed-language stanzas, anonymously composed c. 1375–1400,

describing the attributes of English urban centers. This sequence opens with lines about London:

Hec sunt Londonis: pira, pomusque, regia, thronus,
Chepp, stupa, Coklana, dolium, leo verbaque vana,
Lancea cum scutis—hec sunt staura ciuitatis.

[These are London's: pear and apple (scepter and orb), palace, throne, Cheapside, the Stews, Cock Lane, the “Tunne,” the “Lion” and empty words, Lance and shields—these are the stores of the city.]

Rendered in Latin with internal rhyme and Middle English place-names thrown into the mix, these lines provide an overview of London’s attributes by referring to locations within and outside of city walls. Many of these locations have clear referents: e.g., “pira, pomusque, regia, thronus” (scepter, orb, palace, and throne, longstanding symbols of kingship) denotes Westminster, the seat of royal power; “Chepp” (a variant spelling of Middle English “Chepe”) refers to Cheapside, a busy commercial area; “Coklana” (a hybrid English-Latin coinage) denotes Cock Lane, the market in Smithfield. Some of this poem’s geospatial references are, by contrast, tantalizingly oblique. For instance, “leo” [lion] and “tunne” [i.e., tun, a large cask or barrel] may refer to specific prisons commonly known by these nicknames, but these Latin words could suggest signpost emblems that stood outside any number of inns. Moreover, “[l]ancea cum scutis” could refer to the sight of lances and shields at, say, one of the jousts at Smithfield, or the poem could suggest numerous heraldic devices (shields) that would have been erected throughout the medieval city.

In taking account of the “staura” [stores, properties] of the city in this fashion, these lines on London and the other stanzas that follow (York, Lincoln, Norwich, Coventry, Bristol, and Canterbury) explore the complex process by which any city comes to be perceived—or, at least, imagined—as a single entity. Each city, these verses suggest, is somehow greater than


the sum of its disparate parts. While such stanzas may appear alien and enigmatic to a modern reader, the verses foreground the metonymic function that landmarks (signs, emblems, or other symbols) can serve for city-dwellers as they make their way through urban environments. As Michael Camille states in a discussion of street signs in medieval Paris, “urban life”—medieval or modern—places considerable “emphasis on visual recognition, and the importance of visual signs certainly suggests some type of quotidian literacy, not based upon textual learning but another system of understood symbols and structure.”

We might say that this stanza on London, replete with “insider” knowledge and encoded visual symbols (and a clear understanding of the city’s locations), reveals how “the urbanized subject creates an imaginary urban landscape, which is constructed partly by the materiality of the city.”

These mixed-language verses, in their dense patterns of allusion, comprise more than a series of interpretive puzzles. They reveal the complex process by which the essence of any given city—a socially, politically, linguistically, and culturally complex entity—might be encapsulated in the form of a single literary text. This London stanza not only characterizes the city through key landmarks, but it also conveys this poet’s considerable interest in the city’s distinctive toponyms (place names). The text, by extension, exhibits a curious topophilia: a delight in employing toponyms (or strategically encoded allusions to locations) to capture the atmosphere of a city, or even its intangible character. Indeed, the rich array of toponyms in medieval London—suggested by this poem’s use of the Middle English “Chepp” and hybrid English-Latin name “Coklana”—suggests how any place name, in and of itself, can imbed clues to a location’s social life. In this poem, “Chepp” or “Chepe” (from Old English cēafian, “to bargain, trade”) signals the area’s longstanding commercial function. The name “Coklana” [Cock Lane] likewise signaled in its own time the sale of commodities (poultry). Of course, evocative toponyms still survive in the landscape of London to this day. Modern place names like Bread Street or Fish Street suggest the types of commercial activity once associated with these areas, and other surviving toponyms like Lombard Street

or Old Jewry evoke merchant communities that formerly occupied these neighborhoods.  

The mixed linguistic quality of this poem is an integral part of its *modus operandi*, since, as we have seen, the text synthesizes Latin and English in its use of place names. Modern scholars have tended to characterize these verses as “dog Latin” (i.e., a form of Latin seemingly corrupted by the use of English words and other vernacular graftings), and the poem’s internal rhyme within each line is often inexact, if not awkward. Nonetheless, the text’s idiosyncratic use of language achieves brilliant stylistic effects. The verses creatively interlace Latin and English toponyms, and the text’s transmutation of individual words and spellings including hybrid constructions like “Coklana” evoke the fluid, mixed character of contemporary civic documents along the Thames. Such documents, often concerning business matters, were written out in Latin or French while incorporating a hefty dose of local vocabulary in Middle English and other vernaculars. On a broader level, the linguistic transformations in this poem evoke the “verba vana” [empty words] of late-medieval London, which in its day had quite the reputation as a site of gossip, slander, and discursive conflict.

The seemingly garbled linguistic texture of this poem surprisingly enhances its literary resonance, and London toponyms are anything but arbitrary signifiers or “verba vana” [empty words]. “Chepp,” “Coklana,” and other locospecific indicators of commercial activity are as much a driving force in this poem as its encoded symbols of governance and power. Ultimately, the “staura” [properties] of the city include not just its stores but also its words (in all its languages). London—in just three lines—emerges as an important center of governance and also as a profoundly polyglot center of verbal storage, exchange, and circulation.

The mixed, riddling quality of this text is in many respects disorienting, as the poem refuses to chart a clear trajectory through the city; even seemingly discrete toponyms can lack clear referents. The term “stupha,” an


Anglo-Latin word recalling its Anglo-French cognates *estuwe* (or *estuwe*) as well as the Middle English “stewes,” is an ambiguous term that potentially denotes public “baths” or brothels of ill repute located just over the Thames river in Southwark; alternatively, “stupha” or one of its cognates could insinuate any number of public “stews” around town that were notorious as sites of illicit sexual encounters.\(^{24}\) The late fourteenth-century Anglo-French *Anonimallle Chronicle* recounts a 1381 riot against “une meusone de stwes” [a house of stews, i.e., bathhouse] frequented by certain “frows de Flaundres” [Flemish women], and a 1390 petition submitted by men of Southwark urges the King to close down “cynk Estufes de bordell” [five bordellos, i.e., brothels] in another part of town.\(^{25}\) In each of these texts, a reference to the site in question provokes a movement out of a formal style of French into a recognizable different linguistic register: e.g., Middle English “stwes” [*sic*], the loanword “frows” (Middle Dutch *vrouw*, “woman”), or the curious and linguistically indeterminate term “Estufes.” This brief excursus on the word “stupha” illustrates how toponyms can activate clusters of social meanings. In its oblique style and strategic incoherence, this highly compressed London stanza suggests the city’s status as a manifold place: the city functions as a fluid venue for linguistic intercourse or (to put things slightly differently) a dynamic stew of languages.

It must be said that this poem has garnered some praise for its oblique evocation of city life. As Catherine A. M. Clarke has observed, its “competing, incongruous and chaotic images [and] thematic and literal cacophony of aural fragments” offer a “[compelling] version of the urban experience.”\(^{26}\) Moreover, each city’s boundaries are not fixed but rendered porous through the translingual poet’s verbal artistry. Poetic topophilia is not confined within the London stanza but spills over into lines about other cities; indeed, this overarching rhetorical feature invites us to conceive this poem (or is it a series of smaller poems?) as an organic whole, a (net)work of writing with a dynamic, nearly stable refrain.

This text effectively demonstrates how any city, medieval or modern, does not exist in isolation but is readily implicated in a broader network of urban centers. Landmarks and other features in this poem individualize urban centers just as they invite comparisons among locations. Cities are aligned with appropriate cultural institutions and types of human activity:


\(^{25}\) Kelly, 360.

\(^{26}\) Clarke, 126.
London with the crown and apparatus of power and governance (1–3); Coventry with wool and its attendant trades (13–15); and Canterbury with the church, its authorities, and social practices such as pilgrimage (19–21). In addition, the poem’s refrain shifts depending on the location. The Coventry stanza, for instance, rhymes Latin (or French?) “cordons mille” [thousands of wool combs] with “hec sunt insignia ville” [these are the distinctions of the city] (15). If we grant, as Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift have asserted in a different context, that cities are not “systems with their own internal coherence” and have “boundaries [ . . . ] too permeable and stretched, both geographically and socially [ . . . ] to be theorized as a whole,” then each city in this poem emerges as an “amalgam of often disjointed processes [ . . . ] a place of near and far connections, a concatenation of rhythms; always edging in new directions.” Most importantly, these stanzas enact the conspicuous juxtapositions of unlikely phenomena that so often transpire in cities themselves. In creating a text that juxtaposes and combines languages, the anonymous translingual poet theorizes each city as a heterogeneous contact zone: a dynamic confluence of discordant elements and features.

**London Lickpenny: Negotiating the City**

Through its topophilia and rich linguistic texture, *The Stores of the Cities* conceives cities as interconnected zones of exchange. Each stanza invites us to consider the cognitive process by which an urban subject conceives any city, and reading the stanzas in sequence suggests how profoundly cities are linked by the movement of goods, people, and languages. *London Lickpenny*, as mentioned above, narrates the movements of a single person throughout the city, illustrating how one individual encounters speakers of many different tongues within a single day. If the *Stores* poet attempts to theorize the city in the abstract, then the *Lickpenny* poet gives more thought to the nuances of urban social practice. The text attends to how people deploy languages and adapt, often abruptly, to the different types of social interactions that city life requires.

As mentioned above, *London Lickpenny* transports the reader on a journey through London’s linguistic communities. Westminster constitutes a particularly disorienting environment for the first-person narrator, as its
legal professionals use specialized forms of Francophone and Latinate jargon: at the Court of Common Pleas, the speaker addresses a man in a silk hood who says nothing in response (28); in the Chancery, the speaker hears many a “qui tollis” yet nobody announces his name (36). The narrator’s estrangement from language and power in Westminster is compounded by spatial and sartorial distinctions: the hatless, penniless narrator stands below men on high, who are arrayed in costly robes and “longe gowne of ray,” i.e. legal garments with striped sleeves (41). Throughout the Westminster episode, the first-person narrator is profoundly alienated—by language and by social status—from an elite professional circle.

The narrator soon abandons his endeavors, and once he is “[w]ithout the dores” of the Hall, he enters a strikingly different milieu. As mentioned above, the narrator encounters “Flemings grete woon” (great crowds of Flemish merchants, i.e., immigrants from the Low Countries), and as they approach en masse, they cry: “Mastar, what will ye copen or by—/Fine felt hatts, spectacles for to rede?” (51–54) In a reversal of sociolinguistic positioning, this narrator finds himself addressed as if he were the social superior. By addressing the unnamed protagonist as “Mastar” (cf. Middle Dutch meester), these Flemish vendors plead for the man’s favor. Here, the mixed use of verbs could convey a subtle interpersonal dynamic. A Flemish vendor might attempt to identify the ethnic origin of a passerby “on the fly” in an impromptu attempt to make a sales pitch. Such a strategy could suggest that a medieval pedestrian might not be able to distinguish between a native English person and a Flemish immigrant on sight.

At this point, the speaker proceeds “[i]nto London,” retracing some of the territory covered in the London stanza of The Stores of the Cities. For instance, he enters “into Chepe” or Cheapside, where he sees “moche people” offering “Paris thred, coton” and other commodities (73–76). Going “forth by London Stone”—an important medieval landmark—the poet wends his way “[t]hrwghe-out all Canwyke strete” (81–82). In the Candlewick Street area, working location for many involved in cloth production, the poet encounters “[d]rapers [calling] to me” offering “[g]rete chepe of clothe” (83–84).28 In “Estchepe,” a victualing district that housed butcher’s stalls and cookshops, the poet hears Middle English cries of “[r]ibes of befe, and many a pie!” (89–90) Remarkably, when he makes a brief detour “[i]nto Cornhill”—an area filled with less wealthy vendors and

more transient populations—he sees “myn owne hode” for sale in a shop (96–103).

As the poem wends to a conclusion, the narrator ventures south “to Byllingesgate,” the waterfront district nearest to London Bridge (113). The Billingsgate ward, the location of London’s fish market and customs house, was a particularly busy area, not only for fishmongers but also for sailors, importers, and customs officials. The medieval London Bridge has even been characterized as “a village in itself,” as it was covered with shops, residences, two taverns, and a chapel. At this point in his journey, the speaker seeks a barge to take him across the Thames and out of the city: “I praye a barge man, for Gods sake, [to] spare me myn expens” (115–16). As he lacks money he is, predictably, rebuffed: “Ryse up, man, and get the hens!” [Get up, man, and get thee hence, i.e., get out of here!] (117)

This final encounter in the poem, concluding with the harsh words of a bargeman, leaves an especially unflattering impression of this part of the city. To late-medieval merchant classes and city officials, the Billingsgate ward was strongly associated with coarse, abusive language. Disputes and transactions in the vicinity of the “woolkee de londres” [wool quay of London]—the site of the Customs House, where commodities were processed prior to export—produced a voluminous amount of French, Latin, and mixed-language texts, many attesting to tensions among city-dwellers, native and alien, of different trades. When the narrator fails to persuade the bargeman to “spare me myn expens,” the poem suggests just how readily Billingsgate resonated as a setting for such contestation and negotiation.

In its vivid detail, London Lickpenny associates different linguistic communities with particular urban spaces: Latinate and French-speaking legal professionals work in Westminster; Flemish vendors outside the gates of Westminster Hall negotiate two related Germanic vernaculars; and retailers in Chepe and bargemen in Billingsgate cry out in Middle English.

32. This phrase “wolkee de londres” comes from a French document pertaining to Chaucer’s work as a customs official for the Port of London (Kew, The National Archives, C 18/1394/87). See chapter 1 for further discussion. On mixed-language writing along the Thames, see Wright. On the status of English in London’s “variously di- or triglossic” civic culture and waterfront disputes over the use of waterfront space—including instances of scolding, angry talk, and “vnlawfull langage,” see Butterfield, Familiar Enemy, 210–16.
Employing a satisfying geographical methodology, this poem’s itinerary lends shape to its restless narrative. In addition, verse form lends structure to the narrator’s movements. When the speaker transitions from one place to another, the new location is announced in the first line of a new stanza, and the sentiment concluding each stanza—“But for lacke of money I might not spede” (88)—regularizes what might otherwise be a chaotic literary enterprise. The refrain, in other words, provides a discursive point of return despite the perpetual motion of the narrator.

In presenting a fictive itinerary through different neighborhoods or even a methodical survey of London as a whole, this poem’s mode of locating the reader in the city offers a marked contrast with the disorienting presentation of urban phenomena in *The Stores of the Cities*. This being said, *London Lickpenny*’s clear narrative itinerary belies the profound mobility of medieval city dwellers themselves. Mapping discrete vocational or merchant communities onto discrete neighborhoods is a difficult project, as it would require good deal of rhetorical simplification and poetic license. To see how this works, just a few words about medieval London’s structure are useful. Late-medieval London was organized into wards, which served as administrative districts for the city. Throughout the later Middle Ages and beyond, the city’s council consisted of a mayor, aldermen, and key officials elected from the merchant classes. Those involved in similar crafts and trades tended to cluster within the same ward (or wards).

As one might suspect, medieval toponyms often signal types of commercial activity typically conducted in the area (the Vintry, Fishe Strete, Brede Strete, and others), and the merchant classes did self-segregate to some extent. Some of the most prominent merchants, among them mercers and goldsmiths, occupied wealthier areas in the Chepe. Mercers, for instance, lived predominately in the Chepe and adjacent Cripplegate and Cordwainer wards.


34. “[T]he area [in the Cheap] east of Ironmonger Lane was the Mercery, one of the wealthier sections of the city. On the south side of the street was the Great Seld, a covered market where many merchants had stalls” (Robertson, 39). For more on the prominence of the Goldsmiths in West Cheap, see A. R. Myers, *Chaucer’s London: Everyday Life in London, 1342–1400* (London: Amberley, 2009), orig. published as *London in the Age of Chaucer* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972, repr. 1988), 23–24. For a map indicating the highest concentration of mercers’ dwellings by wards in 1475, see Anne Sutton, *The Mercery of London: Trade, Goods, and People, 1130–1578* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005), Fig. 7.1, at 192.
and bricklayers were “well represented in the Aldgate ward,” within the city walls on the eastern part of the city.\textsuperscript{35} Fishmongers and international traders occupied much of Billingsgate, with some traders holding valuable waterfront properties in this and neighboring wards.\textsuperscript{36}

In \textit{London Lickpenny}, the itinerary of the speaker—fictional though it may be—conforms to the geography of a historically verifiable London, strengthening the poem’s veneer of authenticity. The speaker moves from Westminster in the southwest, eastward through the City through the Chepe, to Candlewick Street, and East Chepe, and after a brief detour up to Cornhill he turns southward to the waterfront and (presumably) back across the Thames into Kent. However, the poet-narrator’s linear itinerary runs counter to the restlessness of an urban populace that does not fix itself so easily. Merchants, most conspicuously, occupy the space of the entire poem—no matter where in the city the speaker happens to locate himself.

Insofar as it presents a sociolinguistic survey of urban space, \textit{London Lickpenny} reveals some of the messy aspects of urban mobility, and it illustrates how languages are only contingently tied to categories like vocation or ethnicity. The poet’s use of the Flemish verb “copen” constitutes a mild stylization of non-native Middle English speech, but other London texts could use non-English vernacular speech as a more insidious form of marking ethnic difference. The late fourteenth-century \textit{Anonimalle Chronicle}, written in what one modern reader characterizes as “a quasi-legal style” of Anglo-French, depicts anti-Flemish and anti-Lombard violence during the 1381 uprising: “[L]e commons fesoient crier que chescune que porroit prendre ascune Fleming ou ascun manner de alien de quel natione que il fist que ils deueroient couper lour testes” [the commons proclaimed that anyone who could lay hands on any Flemings or any other non-native persons of whatever nation must cut off their heads]; the houses of “Lombardes et des aliens” [Lombards and foreign merchants] are robbed, and “hideus cryes et horrible noies” resonate throughout the city.\textsuperscript{37} As the violence against the “Fleminges” ensued, tradition holds that the mob asked

\textsuperscript{35} Robertson, 51.

\textsuperscript{36} Namely, the Vintry and Queenhithe. For more on merchants’ houses on the waterfront, see Myers, 26–30.

\textsuperscript{37} George Trevelyan, “An Account of the Rising of 1381,” \textit{The English Historical Review} 13, 51 (July 1898): 509–22, esp. 517–18. The phrase “hideus cryes et horrible noies” resonates with the “hydous . . . noyse” and shrill “shoutes” that transpire as Kentish rebels kill Flemish merchants in Chaucer’s \textit{The Nun’s Priest’s Tale} (3394–3406); see chapter 1 in this book. For a transcription of the chronicle and discussion of its linguistic features, see Vivian Hunter Galbraith, \textit{The Anonimalle Chronicle, 1333 to 1381: from a MS. written at St Mary’s Abbey, York} (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1927; repr. 1970).
merchants to say the English words “bread and cheese,” and anyone who pronounced the words as “brod and case” was deemed Flemish in origin and immediately killed.\textsuperscript{38}

In less tumultuous circumstances, however, London was “overwhelmingly polyglot and multilingual” and the coexistence of different peoples in the city was relatively naturalized and even taken for granted, as Ardis Butterfield and Christopher Cannon have both described in slightly different contexts.\textsuperscript{39} In both literary and nonliterary texts, the presence of foreign victuallers, traders, and artisans is common knowledge, from repeated references to Italian-speaking “Lumbardes” (mostly moneylenders and bankers) and Dutch-speaking “Fleminges” (including itinerant vendors, craftsmen, and other skilled workers) to German-speaking “Esterlynges” (traders of the Hanseatic League), and other types of people with overseas origins.

Even though non-native merchants were participants in the everyday life in the city, medieval Londoners viewed Flemings with a discernible degree of ambivalence, as these immigrants could be considered simultaneously alien and assimilated. Chaucer’s fictional Cook “of Londoun” cites a Middle Dutch proverb in response to one of the Host’s comments—“sooth pley, quaad pley, as the Flemyng seith” (4357)—a joking proverbial citation that suggests Londoners could be quite familiar with the cadences of Flemish speech.\textsuperscript{40} The degree to which London assimilated speakers of different languages who came from outside the city—including immigrants of Flemish, Hanseatic, Italian, and Iberian origins—varied from group to group, and the rates at which Continental immigrants gained citizenship varied as well.\textsuperscript{41} Although some Flemings (like the ones evoked in London

\textsuperscript{38} Charles Oman, \textit{The Great Revolt of 1381} (Kitchener, ON: Batoche, 1906; repr. 2001), 49. London, British Library MS Cotton Julius B.ii (dated 1483) is written out in Middle English and uses the phrase “Case and Brode” (fol. 16v); see \textit{Chronicles of London}, ed. Charles Lethbridge Kingsford (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 15 (see also xxxvi). Although the veracity of this account is debatable, the very idea that a Flemish shibboleth could be detected suggests the perceived significance of linguistic difference in areas of cross-cultural contact. Moreover, this episode potentially alludes to the Biblical account of how the Gileadites managed to identify and kill the Ephraimites (Judges 2:5–6).


\textsuperscript{40} Craig Bertolet, “Wel bet is rotten appul out of hoord’: Chaucer’s Cook, Commerce, and Civic Order,” \textit{Studies in Philology} 99, 3 (Summer 2002): 229–47.

\textsuperscript{41} Derek Keene, “Introduction: Segregation, Zoning, and Assimilation in Medieval Towns,” in \textit{Segregation, Integration, Assimilation: Religious and Ethnic Groups in the Medieval Towns of Central and Eastern Europe}, eds. Derek Keene, Balázs Nagy, and Katalin Szende
Lickpenny) were itinerant, other more skilled craftsmen known as “Duchmen”—an expansive Middle English term that could denote a range of Flemish, Dutch, or German laborers—were highly valued, and a few of these immigrants even gained admittance into some of London’s most prominent craft guilds.42

Other mercantile communities within London, by contrast, formed more self-contained linguistic and cultural islands within the city. The merchants of the Hanseatic League, for instance, occupied a residence known as the Steelyard (German *Stalhof*), a walled community within the city complete with its own warehouses and lodgings and which operated largely under its own jurisdiction, exempt from London taxes or customs.43 Italian moneylenders along the wool wharf drew themselves apart from other Londoners through language use as well as distinctive accounting practices.44

The fleeting reference to Flemings in *London Lickpenny* suggests that aliens were not entirely segregated into discrete parts of the city and could intermingle with native Londoners on an everyday basis. For the most part, as James Bolton observes, coexistence was the norm: “Malgré quelques difficultés, étrangers et Londoniens cohabitaient dans la ville et ses banlieues, et il n’y avait pas de ghettos de Gastarbeiter comme on trou-

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vait, par exemple, à Florence” [Despite some difficulties, alien and native Londoners dwelled together in the city and its surroundings, and there were no ghettos of Gastarbeiter (i.e., guest workers) like one would find, for example, in Florence]. In comparison with other urban centers throughout Europe, boundaries between native and alien communities in the city were in many cases quite fluid, and alien Londoners were not necessarily segregated from native residents, nor confined to ethnic enclaves.

In seeking to represent a population so diverse and potentially unwieldy, the poet of *London Lickpenny* adopts a formal strategy to structure the work. Employing stanzas with a fixed rhyme pattern, and concluding each with a refrain about money, the poet at times levels out internal variations within each of the city’s communities (including differences in trade, status, profession, or ethnicity). Merchants are conspicuously dispersed across multiple urban spaces. Form and content reinforce one another quite well in this poem, as the text conveys a coherent tone and theme despite the inherent heterogeneity of the communities it depicts. The refrain insists that commerce (or rather, money itself) is the engine of urban life and the shared motivation of the city’s varied social groupings. In its formal integrity, *London Lickpenny* provides much more than an engaging satire: the text imposes a provisional unity upon a mixed collective of native and alien peoples that resists coherence.

Through its narrative trajectory and stanzaic structure, *London Lickpenny* lends shape to a diffuse, ever-shifting zone of economic and linguistic exchange. Its vivid account of movement through urban communities explores how city life provokes rapid shifts in linguistic and social positioning. In his musings on pedestrian experience in the modern city, Walter Benjamin observes that “[p]orisity” (i.e., the porous quality of the urban environment) is the “inexhaustible law of the life of [the] city,” and the potential to interact with different types of people and penetrate disparate spaces makes the city an improvisational “theatre of new, unforeseen

45. James L. Bolton (tr. Fournier), 431–32. I have slightly adapted the punctuation here, capitalizing the German word Gastarbeiter.


47. While I have emphasized the speaker’s capacity to move through diverse linguistic environments, Liana Farber stresses how the speaker is excluded from the guild communities he encounters. *An Anatomy of Trade in Medieval Writing: Value, Consent, and Community* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 174–89.
constellations.\textsuperscript{48} London Lickpenny's pedestrian itinerary illustrates the dizzying array of encounters and reconfigurations that medieval urban life enables. All in all, the poem presents the medieval city as a multilingual venue for improvisation and invention. London is a crowded space that engenders perpetual shifts in sociolinguistic positioning, and its mixed urban environments inspire experimentation in poetic language and literary form.

**Polyglot Perspectives**

The two poems discussed above exhibit divergent strategies for representing polyglot London: the London stanza from *The Stores of the Cities* employs toponymic riddles and abstracts the city through oblique, richly coded allusions; the later stanzaic poem *London Lickpenny* explores the city as an intricately rendered lived experience. Each poem adopts a slightly different orientation toward the city as a whole, and these texts—when read as a pair—provide mutually informing vantage points on a shared urban environment. One posits a more totalizing, omniscient view, while the other conveys a ground-level perspective. By creating texts that richly incorporate different languages, these two anonymous poets suggest some of the ways a medieval city dweller might move across tongues as well as urban spaces. The ensuing chapters continue this exploration of commerce and city life, examining how other medieval writers perceived, represented, and theorized the commingling of peoples and languages in their respective environments. Within each chapter, I suggest how a particular subset of medieval materials can reshape current thinking about literary translingualism.

Chapter 1 investigates the relationship between language and dwelling. It approaches the most famous of medieval Londoners, the poet Geoffrey Chaucer, as an urban writer deeply engaged with the medieval city's many tongues. In *The House of Fame* (which evokes locations throughout London) and *The Shipman’s Tale* (set in the market town of St. Denis in France and the busy port of Bruges in Flanders), Chaucer depicts the richness of commercial life. Most importantly, the poet employs poetic language to fictively inhabit polyglot spaces along London's waterfront as well as continental France. By infusing his Middle English with French and Latin

influences—and inviting the reader to think across languages through intertextual allusions and interlinguistic puns—Chaucer creates a flexible poetic style that evokes foreign (Continental) locations just as vividly as it recalls local hometown spaces.

Chapter 2 explores connections between translingual writing and overseas travel. It examines texts about maritime trade composed by poets on both sides of the Channel, including Geoffrey Chaucer, John Gower, and Charles d’Orléans (primarily known as monoglot, trilingual, and bilingual poets respectively). Through polyglot protagonists and first-person speakers, these writers align traveling and displaced poets with seafarers and international traders. When taken as a whole, such writing exhibits a keen awareness of the types of language that take shape in transit, when one’s social identifications are temporarily suspended between destinations or diffused across locations. Translingual maritime writing challenges its readers to entertain flexible, ever-shifting conceptions of geographical orientation, native language, and affective belonging.

Chapter 3 offers a comparative analysis of John Gower and the printer William Caxton, tracing the ways these figures exploited resources of the city (especially the social practices of lawyers and merchants) to construct their own literary authority. Both Gower and Caxton produced texts in Latin, French, and English, and my readings trace how the poet and the printer theorized their respective translingual careers—most conspicuously through first-person excursuses. Rather than tracing the role that Gower and Caxton play in establishing an English literary language or shaping a London-based standard of written English, this chapter demonstrates how far their literary ambitions extended beyond English per se to encompass transnational circuits of exchange. Although Gower resided along the Thames and Caxton was much more peripatetic, both the poet and the printer produce forms of literary autobiography that reflect upon the status of their own translingualism and engage in ad hoc sociolinguistic theory.

Chapter 4 moves to an urban center beyond London to Lynn, a busy port in East Anglia. The Book of Margery Kempe (c. 1436), written down a generation after the deaths of Chaucer and Gower, is often considered the first autobiography in English, yet I contend that Kempe’s urban contexts and multilingual networks invite us to consider the entire text as an intricate work of travel writing. Not only does the Book evoke the polyglot milieu of Kempe’s hometown—which included Latinate clerics, Anglo-Germanic immigrants, and French-speaking traders and burgesses—but it also offers stylized episodes of cross-language encounter during its accounts of overseas travel. From Anglo-Hanseatic contexts to cross-
cultural exchanges elsewhere on the Continent, the Book exhibits a sustained interest in mundane and miraculous forms of translingual communication. Most profoundly, the Book foregrounds its status as a text dictated to and written by multiple scribes, implicating the text in an active network of linguistic and cultural exchange. In its rich verbal texture, the Book challenges us to consider how one’s orientation toward home and native language can shift by virtue of travel.

Chapter 5 returns to London through multilingual merchant compilations, discussing three manuscripts that were each compiled by a merchant across the late-medieval and early Tudor periods. These compilations—which gather together works in English, French, and Latin, as well as texts that mix languages—reveal how merchants recorded and organized wide-ranging interests in commerce, history, and literature. At the same time, the mixture of languages and genres that each book assembles challenges longstanding monoglot biases in Anglophone literary and linguistic historiography. By examining code-switching practices in each of these collections, I explore these merchants’ individual literacies and language capacities, and I reveal their creative approaches to translingual writing, comparative literary study, and translation theory avant la lettre.

Trading Tongues concludes with a brief coda, which reconsiders the Channel-crossing, bicultural poet Charles d’Orléans through a more experimental theoretical framework. Drawing upon ongoing conversations between medieval and postcolonial literary studies, this discussion explores the potential for medieval translingual writing to take comparative literary criticism in new directions.

The chapters in Trading Tongues explore different facets of translingual writing throughout a number of medieval contact zones. As stated above, this book serves two purposes within medieval studies: it demonstrates how pervasively trade languages inform literary production, and it explores the complex code-switching practices of literate urban communities. On a broader level, this book seeks to model forms of literary analysis that are just as rigorous in their understanding of local linguistic practices as they are in exploring wider movements of languages and people. In his collection of essays on modern travel, anthropologist James Clifford advocates an approach to cultural studies that is sensitive to everyday practices like dwelling but also mindful of the experience of travel: a critical mode that attends carefully to “roots” as well as “routes.”49 In its approach to medieval

literature and culture, *Trading Tongues* addresses both the “roots” and the “routes” of translingual writing.

Extending the implicitly botanical metaphor of “roots” a bit further, it could be said that *Trading Tongues* sustains an interest in arborescent (tree-like) understandings of linguistic development as much as it limns rhizomatic modes of interconnection: organic networks that extend and disperse in multiple directions with no single point of origin.\(^5\) To restate these parallel investments in more conventional disciplinary terms, my approach to medieval literary texts respects the methodological underpinnings of traditional philology and historical linguistics while also setting languages in motion through broader social circuits and systems of exchange.

As I will suggest throughout this book, our approach to English literary history changes dramatically once we consider the pervasive contact and interpenetration between Middle English and other languages, and writers (such as Caxton or Chaucer) whom we might perceive as quintessentially “English” or associated with a particular city like London emerge as writers who are profoundly implicated in negotiating polyglot spaces beyond England *per se*. If, as Clifford states in the context of modern travel, we can adopt “a view of human location as constituted by displacement as much by stasis,” then “travels and contacts [become] crucial sites for an unfinished modernity.”\(^5\) In an insightful reflection on the perceived status of medieval culture in our time, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen observes that the Middle Ages is “characterized too often as a field of undifferentiated otherness against which modernity [emerges].”\(^5\) In the heterogeneous writings of medieval polyglots, we can discern a social environment that evokes Clifford’s sense of an “unfinished modernity”—a dynamic un- or premodern world that is always-already in change and motion. By examining how travel and language contact shape literary production, I aim to help us gain a richer understanding of the cultural meanings of medieval texts, and suggest new ways to challenge the perceived intractable alterity between the Middle Ages and our present. This book not only examines how cultural

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\(^5\) The terms “arborescent” and “rhizomatic” derive from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; for important readings that attend to the rhizomatic aspects of *The Canterbury Tales*, see Glenn Burger, *Chaucer’s Queer Nation*, Medieval Cultures 34 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, *Medieval Identity Machines*, Medieval Cultures 35 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 22.

phenomena like commerce and code-switching shape medieval literature in its own time; it also maintains that texts by medieval translingual writers present unexpected opportunities to rethink the processes of travel and linguistic exchange—the endless migration of peoples, media, and tongues—in our own globalizing era.