Trading Tongues

Jonathan Hsy

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Although their life spans did not overlap, the works of poet John Gower (c. 1330–1408) and his first printer, William Caxton (c. 1421–1492), intertwine through their shared self-presentation as textual creators who worked across multiple tongues. Gower’s oeuvre spans French, Latin, and English, and during his lifetime the poet constructed a trilingual literary persona. Ambitious, even ostentatious, testaments to his polyglot character comprise his legacy: not only a number of illustrated, deluxe manuscripts containing his poetry, but also a tomb that features a Latin elegiac inscription on its base, a canopy with French couplets, and an effigy with the poet’s head resting upon three books.¹

William Caxton’s 1483 print edition of Gower’s Confessio Amantis (STC 12142) carefully engages with Gower’s multilingual persona, appending to the English text a Latin poem Eneidos bucolis (fol. CCxi recto). It notes that Gower, like Virgil, produced three major works—but his work

surpasses Virgil’s, encompassing three languages: “Gallica lingua prius, Latina secunda, set ortus/Lingua tui pocius Anglica complet opus” [first in the French tongue, Latin second, then English, the language of your birth, completes the work] (11–12). In his famous preface to his 1490 edition of *Eneydos* (STC 24796), Caxton adopts his own Virgilian logic of trilingual progression: he relates the epic’s movement from Latin to French to its present English form. Like Gower, Caxton considers his own legacy at a late stage in his life, and his preface even asks how “diuersite & chaunge of langage” (A1v)—linguistic transformation over space and time—might affect future readers of his printed works.

This chapter examines how Gower and Caxton conceived their own status as translingual writers. That is, it explores how the poet and the printer crafted polyglot literary personas, carefully reflecting upon their own modes of adapting—and producing—texts across many languages. Gower’s trifold self-presentation retroactively characterizes his own career as a progression from one language to another, belying a messier, more dynamic *modus operandi*. Throughout his oeuvre, the poet experiments with a manifold voice; e.g., he composes early and late works in French even while revising works in English and in Latin; some of his works are bilingual (Latin/French or English/Latin); and some Gower manuscripts are trilingual, eschewing any tidy segregation of tongues. Caxton, the first to set Gower in print, is typically deemed the first English printer, but such a title obscures his diverse, peripatetic career. In Cologne, Caxton helped produce texts in Latin while translating texts from French to English; in Bruges, he printed works in French and in English; and in Westminster, he printed a bilingual manual for overseas travelers (his English/French *Dialogues*, c. 1483). Our common perception of Gower and Caxton as foundational “English” figures says much about our desire to streamline their career paths and place them along a linear—and monoglot—path of literary historiography: a narrative that culminates in the arrival of English literature upon the global stage.

2. On the status of this poem’s attribution to Gower, see Machan, 4.
4. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Fairfax 3 contains *Confessio Amantis* (English), the *Traité* (French), and shorter Latin poems. London, British Library, MS Additional 59495 (formerly the Trentham MS) contains “In Praise of Peace” (English), *Cinkante Balades* (French), and Latin poems.
5. On the “normative monolingualism” underlying Anglophone literary and linguis-
This chapter argues that Gower and Caxton both exploit merchant discourses and related aspects of urban life to construct a literary persona that is deliberately translilingual, emphasizing a capacity to write and think in more than one language concurrently. My approach here is a comparative one: I trace, through a series of close readings, these writers’ shared interests in the commercial and literary life of London—particularly the activities of the Mercers and major guilds. Most importantly, I offer a sustained assessment of Gower’s polyglot persona and Caxton’s literary ambitions. Not only does the printer resonate with Gower in articulating a literary identity crafted across many tongues, but he also shares the poet’s interest in what might later be called sociolinguistic theory. Through first-person prologues and autobiographical excurses, Gower and Caxton develop innovative discourses for discussing cross-linguistic exchange and literary production, and each invests a considerable amount of thought into how his own translationalism informs an ever-shifting literary persona.

John Gower and London’s Legal Languages

One of Gower’s later works is a sequence of eighteen French balades, known to modern scholars as the Traité (c. 1385–1390). It ends with an envoy sending the work off to an imagined global audience, “l’université de tout le monde” [the community of the entire world], with this qualification: “si jeo n’ai de François la faconde,/Pardonetz moi qe jeo de ceo forsvoie:/Jeo suis Englois, si quier par tiele voie/Estre excusé” [if I don’t have eloquence in French, pardon me when I go astray with it; I’m English—thus I seek in such a way to be excused] (XVII.23–27). The poet imagines his lyric poems reaching a wide audience (e.g., anyone in the world, in England or the Continent, who reads French), but he tempers this ambition with a seemingly obligatory humility topos: his French isn’t perfect. Accompanying this passage in the manuscripts is an authorial Latin gloss: “Hic in fine Gower, qui Anglicus est, sua verba Gallica, si que incongrua fuerint, excusat” [here in the end Gower, who is English, excuses (or apologizes for)
his French words if any of them should appear *incongrua*, e.g., ill-fitting, inappropriate, or discordant]. We see in this moment a complex triangulation of languages: a rubric, in Latin, qualifies the English poet’s mastery of French. Moreover, an implicit spatial metaphor undergirds this disclaimer. The English poet, who does not consider himself a native speaker of French, risks straying from a perceived straight “path” of a properly fashioned (courtly or Continental) style of French writing.

The poet’s closing gambit artfully balances ambition and humility, and in its dense brevity this Latin gloss invites multiple interpretations. *Anglicus*, for instance, could signify national or cultural identity (or both), and *incongrua* could be read in many ways: e.g., suggesting a lack of “fit” between an English ethnic identity and writing in French, or implying that an anglicized variety of French is somehow ill-suited to a Continental courtly form. Most profoundly, this passage registers Gower’s own awareness that French is an acquired language. The poetic speaker diplomatically preempts any criticism (by hypothetical Continental readers) of his imperfect French idiom, and the marginal rubric even hedges its bets with the Latin subjunctive mood.

In this late work, Gower exhibits a mature, nuanced way of thinking about his own poetic voice, and the deliberative tone of his writing conveys his sensitivity to the varieties of French written in his day. The poet recognizes internal varieties of French and does not conceive it as a monolithic, uniform language. That his Latin gloss expresses anxiety for his “verba Gallica . . . incongrua” [ill-fitting French words] is all the more striking since this text is one of the poet’s later works. We shall soon see that an abiding concern across Gower’s oeuvre is how an English writer contends with French, a vernacular that is simultaneously familiar (used on an everyday, professional basis) but also subjectively felt to be artificial: a language that is apparently experienced—even later in life—as an acquired, second tongue.

We can now go back in time to Gower’s first major work (begun in the early 1360s, completed in the late 1370s), which claims a number of possible titles. Most familiar to modern scholars by its French title *Miroir de l’Omme* or Latin equivalent *Speculum Hominis* [Mirror of Mankind], it also bears an alternate Latin title *Speculum Meditantis* [Mirror of One Meditating]. The *Miroir* was composed in a non-Continental variety of

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7. The French title is derived from the surviving manuscript of the work (British Library MS Addington 59495); the Latin title is inscribed on one of the books under the head of Gower’s tomb effigy (St. Mary Overie, Southwark). On the poem’s dating, see R. F. Yeager, “John Gower’s French,” in *Companion to Gower*, ed. Echard, 137–51, esp. 142.
French variously called Anglo-Norman, Anglo-French, or “the French of England,” to name a few possible designations. However we categorize the poet’s variety of French, Gower was certainly well versed in Continental *formes fixes*. In the *Mirour*, Gower finds octosyllabic verse (rather than *balade* stanzas) his preferred vehicle for an ambitious project.

This poem exhorts all estates of humanity to engage in ethical reform, and its treatment of London’s educated working classes (members of the legal profession and “l’estat des Marchans,” including merchants, artisans, and victuallers) comprises the most expanded treatment of any social grouping in the poem. In this section, Gower foregrounds the close affinity between lawyers and merchants: “qui voldroit au droit descrire/Les plaisirs et les advocatz/Dirroit mervailles en ce cas:/Car quique vent, ils font purchas” [whoever would correctly describe lawyers and advocates, would speak marvels in this case—for whoever sells, they make the acquisition, i.e., gain the profit] (24809–12). Gower obliquely suggests the profit motive shared by lawyers and merchants (exploiting the exchange of goods and services for material gain), and the poet hints at the considerable overlap between the city’s professional discourses, including “business French” and “law French.” By launching his first major endeavor in a specialized register of French—the *lingua franca* of law courts, guilds, and business affairs—Gower crafts a social critique with the potential to resonate with an urban professional audience.

If French is not his native tongue, just where did Gower acquire it? A much-cited reference to a sleeved garment, commonly worn by men of law, suggests Gower’s prior training in the legal profession: “je ne suy pas clers,/Vestu de sanguin ne de pers,/Ainz vestu la raye mance” [I am not a cleric, arrayed in scarlet or blue cloth; rather, I am dressed in striped sleeves] (21772–74). In this first-person statement, the poetic speaker foregrounds language acquisition as part and parcel of his professional training: “Poy sai latin, poy sai romance” [I know a little Latin, a little French] (21774). Gower’s thinly veiled allusion to vocational identity takes the form of a metonymic reference to clothing as well as a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgment of an imperfect acquisition (or functional, working knowledge) of two prestige languages used in legal proceedings. The sonic correspondence between “raye mance” [striped sleeves] and “romance” [Romance

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language, i.e., French] further aligns the phenomena of clothing and language, imbuing the poetic speaker with a learned professional habitus or fictive legal persona.  

One seldom-acknowledged moment in the Mirour warrants closer examination, as it links this phenomenon of “law French” to the poet’s own command of languages. Chiding lawyers who tell clients what they want to hear (or say what they’re paid to say), the poet states: “Qant nay dirra, dirront nenil/Qant dist oil, si dirront il” [When he says “no” they say “no”/When he says “yes,” they say “yes”] (25063–64). Lawyers can argue both sides of any issue (yes/no, pro/contra), and a lawyer’s disregard for the truth is characterized thus: “Deux langes porte en un testier” [he carries two tongues in one head] (25079). In this rebuke of lawyers, Gower invokes the perception that arcane legal language—a specialized variety of French jargon—could signal (or mask) duplicity.

Such a charge against lawyers may seem conventional, but Gower’s poetry exhibits a more complex feature: the poet consciously engages the bivernacular social context of legal discourse in England. In The Parliament of Fouls, Gower’s contemporary Chaucer asks: “How shulde a Juge eyther party leve,/For yee or nay, with-outen any preve?” (496–67), and The Parson’s Tale rebukes false oaths in similar terms: “But seyth by youre word ‘ye, ye,’ and ‘nay, nay’; and what that is moore, it is of yvel” (589).  

In such moments Chaucer’s poetry evokes parliamentary debate and pleading in English, but Gower’s writing suggests that pleading could also have been conducted in French. Even if English words “yea” or “nay” were used in proceedings, the written trace (i.e., official record) of such utterances would have been set down in legal French, i.e., in the formalized equivalents “oil” and “nenil.” Gower’s rebuke of lawyers slyly combines two vernaculars: the English and French words for yes and no. Disrupting a tidy pairing of terms, “nay” pairs with “nenil” and “oil” accompanies “il.” In other words, Gower’s “yes-men” speak two tongues.


For Gower, bilingualism exceeds a mere trope for professional duplicity. This unequal pairing of English and French words evokes Gower's own lopsided vernacular bilingualism. Like the lawyer, the poet's speaking persona carries “deux langues . . . en un testier” [two tongues in one head], sustaining two languages within a single mind. As strange as it might seem to a modern reader, the professional practices of lawyers provide Gower with a ripe opportunity to explore the phenomenon of literary bilingualism. Lawyers, like poets, are shrewd translingual mediators: multiple-voiced, they convert the discourse of others into new, stylized forms. Gower's “autobiographical” excursus, pivoting into a seemingly tangential discussion of the legal profession, grants Gower permission to explore the messy contours of his own vernacular bilingualism.

Gower is carefully attuned to how English and French vernaculars coexisted within London's legal spheres. The city's guilds and craft communities—richly evoked later in the Mirour—maximized the linguistic resources they had at their disposal, strategically managing two vernaculars (alongside Latin) in the many petitions they submitted to the Crown. The Silkwomen of London, for instance, was a group of widows or wives of merchants and aldermen who conducted trade in their own right, even accepting other women as apprentices. Although they were never formally recognized as a guild (nor eligible for civic office), they produced petitions that feature carefully wrought language packing considerable force. In 1368, around the time Gower began the Mirour, the Silkwomen petitioned the King to limit the competition of foreign merchants. In the surviving French document, “les poures femmes appellez Silkwymmen de Loundres” [the poor women called the Silkwomen of London] accuse Nicholas Sardouche, a Lombard trader, of conspiring with “merchauntz aliens” [foreign traders] in a scheme to “forstaller et regrater . . . toute la soie [de] la dite citee” [buy up and resell all the silk in the city] and drive up the price, “en greuous enhancement du prys ducelles” [in serious increase of the value of the said commodity]. These actions cause “[grant] damage” [severe harm] to both “vous nostre seigneur le Roi” [you, our lord the


King] and the “poures femmes” [poor women], who now seek a “remedie” for these wrongs.

The process of petition writing was complex, both linguistically and logistically, as complaints arising in the “common voice” were heavily mediated—transformed into French, and in other cases again into Latin, by a network of scribes, city officials, and legal professionals. This collective documentary utterance, duly entered into civic records, is a largely conventional French-language petition. But its very conventionality is precisely what enables this petition to achieve an unusual goal: setting a female collective of Silkwomen on equal standing with established male-dominated London guilds. This French document additionally achieves extralegal effects through rhetorical formulae. Its opening gambit, “A nostre tresredoute lige seigneur le Roi prient les poures femmes appellez Silkwymmen” [the poor women, called the Silkwomen, pray to our most renowned liege lord the King], mobilizes the adjacent discourse of the literary complaint, constructing a collectively victimized body of women who beseech a high-status male to intercede on their behalf. Establishing a legal fiction veering close to feminine discourse in romances, these women humbly beseech protection from a “lige seigneur” against a malicious collectivity of “alien” men. Most importantly, the high style allows the prose to slip seamlessly into an aristocratic register. Deliberately formulaic, the petition’s hyperbolic terms for the King and city officials (“notre tresredoute lige seigneur le Roi . . . maire et Aldermans . . . vous notre seigneur le Roi . . . notre dit seigneur le Roi”) amplify the vertical hierarchical distance between the men in power and poor little women (“les poures femmes”) who submit the petition.

This French text thus positions the King as mediator between the Silkwomen and their Italian (male) rivals, and the Silkwomen mobilize gendered as well as ethnolinguistic difference to advance their political interests. Even if the Silkwomen originally recounted grievances in

14. “[P]etitions were written on behalf of the plaintiffs by experts—scriveners, legal attorneys, men of law and sometimes king’s clerks—who set the complainant’s narrative into a more specialist discourse of remedy that was designed to prompt particular actions by the crown” (Ormrod, “The Language of Complaint,” 32).


16. Indeed, the phrase “poure femmes [de] Silkwymmen” is a curiously redundant bilingual designation (it doubly emphasizes the group’s gender).
English, their plea for a “remedie” has not only been duly converted into appropriate “legalese” but it has also been transformed into an artful, stylized form of French intended to achieve maximum effect. This petition succeeded.\(^\text{17}\)

Comparing this Silkwomen’s petition to a later document submitted on behalf of a male collective, the Mercers, provides additional insight into the relationship between language choice and the idiosyncratic goals of London petitions. The Mercers’ Petition of 1386 records the guild’s grievances against Mayor Nicholas Brembre, and it too exploits language for rhetorical and political impact. Whereas the petition of the “poures femmes [de] Silkwymmen” adopts a high style of French—shifting from business to courtly registers—the petition of the powerful men “of the Mercerye” effects a less ornate vernacular style of Middle English. The guild members present themselves as the “folke of the Mercerye of London,” a humble posture belying their international connections and high social standing.\(^\text{18}\) This modest guise renders the English petition a foil to more grandiloquent proclamations by other guilds. The contrast between the Silkwomen’s use of French and the Mercers’ use of English marks a curious social phenomenon: the relative prestige of the language in which each petition is written is conspicuously at odds with the relative social status of the collective entities they represent.

The Silkwomen’s and Mercers’ petitions illustrate some of the strategic advantages a bivernacular landscape could afford urban professionals. Given the underprivileged status of the Silkwomen (an exclusively female pseudo-guild) relative to other mercantile groupings, a high style petition maximizes its efficacy in an elite circuit, and the aristocratic register of its French enables the petition to deploy courtly discourses that further advance the women’s cause. The male Mercers, an increasingly prominent guild, work under a different set of expectations: they distance themselves from the political center and obscure their power, rendering their own petition in a consciously “humble” vernacular of Middle English. The Mercers’ conspicuously monoglot posture is an exception to multilingual norms of legal discourse. Although the Mercers and Silkwomen certainly worked closely on a daily basis—and they must have, presumably, spoken the same language(s) to one another while conducting their affairs—they

\(^{17}\) For a related discussion based upon a later (English) version of this petition, see Stephanie Trigg, “Ye louely ladies with youre longe fyngres: The Silkwomen of Medieval London,” *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 38 (2002): 469–84.

made divergent choices in linguistic utterances they had committed to writing.¹⁹ Like the works of Gower, which exploit varieties of French as well as native capacity in English, these petitions engage in careful cross-linguistic negotiation. Both petitions and poems illustrate their makers’ abilities to manage language use for strategic, artful effects.²⁰

Gower’s Multilingual Merchants

Gower’s *Mirour* inhabits the legal and mercantile milieu of London with striking detail. Not only does his literary satire imbed itself in an environment where vernaculars coexisted, but the poet also suggests the careful negotiations of language choice undertaken every day by merchant-class Londoners. The *Mirour* delves even further into the city’s commercial life through the figure of a multilingual merchant. In the beginning of the “l’estat des Marchans” satire, Gower presents “un Marchant au jour present . . . ad noun Triche” [a Merchant nowadays by the name of Trickery, i.e., Fraud or Cheating] who changes his appearance frequently: “il ne chalt par quelle guise [s]on propre lucre vait querant” [he does not care what (dis)guise he takes while seeking personal gain].²¹ This “Marchant” seeks profit in many cities: “Triche en Bourdeaux, Triche en Civile,/Triche en Paris . . . a Florence et a Venise . . . a Bruges et a Gant” and “[l]a noble Cité sur Tamise” [Trickery in Bourdeaux, Trickery in Seville, Trickery in Paris . . . in Florence and in Venice . . . in Bruges and in Ghent . . . and the noble City on the Thames].²² As this trickster “Marchant” traverses nations and cultures, he exhibits great skill in language.²³


²³. This characteristic is repeated often in the text, as Triche noisily and continuously
In this passage, Gower ascribes to Triche stereotypical attributes drawn from antimerchantile satire: namely, the use of disguise (“guise”), pursuit of selfish gain (“propre lucre”) over the common good (“commun profuit”), and mastery of “straunge langage” (25257, 25259–60, 25303). Moreover, Triche is well adapted to commercial life in London, the “noble Cité sur Tamise.” A multitasker, Triche practices many trades: “Ascune fois Triche est grossour . . . Ascune fois Triche est draper” [sometimes Trickery is a Grocer . . . sometimes Trickery is a Draper], other times a Mercer, Goldsmith, or “[r]iche espicier . . . de nostre ville” [wealthy Spicer of our city].

The poet draws precise distinctions between the city’s trades, guilds, and professions, stating that “les mestiers sont infinit,/Nuls puet nombrer la variance” [the trades are infinite and no one could recount them all] (25970–71). Gower’s careful deployment of French business jargon transforms his satire into more than an antimerchantile convention. Although mestier can connote any profession (craft or trade), this French word is one of two terms (along with compagnye) used by London guilds to identify themselves. In launching a rebuke in the voice of an urban “insider,” Gower not only aligns the multilingual “Marchant” with multitasking; the poet also signals that the mestiers singled out for criticism in the ensuing discussion are some of London’s most prominent guilds: Mercers, Grocers, and Goldsmiths.

Gower’s engagement with local mercantile practices is most evident not only on the level of narrative but also in his use of specialized vocabulary. Roger Ladd has demonstrated how Gower interweaves Francophone business jargon and courtly discourses throughout the Mirour’s description of the mercers. Gower’s discussion of Triche-as-Mercer, for instance, reflects perceived connections between the Mercers and fair, courtly speech that potentially disguises fraud; moreover, high-style speech elsewhere in the Mirour suggests the Mercers’ concerns with their own “courtoisie” and social standing.

The excursus on Triche-as-Goldsmith likewise manipulates local guild discourses through a well-conceived vocational allegory. At the time Gower wrote the Mirour, the Goldsmiths were already a prominent, powerful guild. Not only did they deal with precious metals

27. Ibid., 142–46.
and gemstones, but they were also charged with forging metal alloys that maintained the standard assay of minted coinage for the Crown. An oath entered into the Goldsmiths’ book of ordinances in 1370 declares that “le mestier . . . estre garde a sorver qe l’en overast argent ausi bon come la monnee nostre seignour le Roi” [the mistery was governed . . . and sworn to oversee that silver was worked that was as good a standard as the coinage of our Lord the King] and that “l’en asseist dreit piere en or, et nul faux” [one should set true gemstones in gold and no false ones].

Although the Goldsmiths could wield power and influence, the guild, like the Mercers, felt vulnerable to accusations of fraud. Indeed, the Goldsmiths’ records are obsessed with the false adulteration of metals and stones. In addition to the above oath, an ordinance on the proper assay of silver and gold maintains that “nul orfievre d’Engleterre” [no Goldsmith of England] should ever make “nul manere de vessel ne jeuaux ne autre chose d’ore ne d’argent qe ne soit et de verrei alay, c’est assavoir oor de certein touche et argent del alay del esterling” [any kind of vessel or ornamental object or any other things of gold or silver which be not of true alloy, that is to say gold of the specified quality and silver of the alloy of sterling]. Indeed, punishments were constantly meted out against counterfeiters, before and after Gower’s death.

As guild records attest, the Goldsmiths condemned the alteration of metals and using artificial colors to cast ordinary stones as valuable gems; such practices damaged the reputation of the “mestier” and kingdom as a whole. “Ore novelement” [in recent days], the Goldsmiths assert in their first charter, certain “marchantz . . . auxibien prives come estraunges” [merchants both native and alien] have brought into England “esterling contrefait” [counterfeit sterling] and “ils mettent veirres de diverses colours countrefaitz a pierrie” [they set glass-stones of various colors counterfeiting precious stones]; in the estimation of the “mestier des orfeveres” [guild of the goldsmiths], such fraudulent “marchauntz” cause “graunt damage et decette de nouse et de nostre poeple” [great loss and deceit both of us and our people]. Furthermore, the Goldsmiths preempt accusations of fraud with their own claims that they work only for the “commune profit de nous et nostre poeple . . . et de la communalte de nostre roialme” [common

29. Ibid., 134–35.
30. See the 1412–1413 case of Nicholas Barforee, who was found guilty of falsifying stones and consequently fined (qtd. and trans. Jefferson, 358–59).
weal of ourselves and our people].”32 By safeguarding their own “privitees” [trade secrets], they seek to prevent unauthorized practitioners from bringing “graunt discalaundre” [serious slander] upon “les gentz du dite mestier” [the men of the said profession].33

Gower’s poem effects a close mimicry of the guild’s discourse. Gower claims that “[Marchant] Triche est Orfevre au plus souvent” [Trickery is most often a Goldsmith] who uses “alconomie” [a process of metallic composition] to mix “orr et le fin argent” [gold and pure silver], which he then presents to a potential buyer in the form of a vessel of substandard assay: “Si fait quider a l’autre gent/Qe sa falsine soit verraie;/Dont le vessell, ainz q’om l’essai,/Vent et reçoit la bonne paie/De l’esterling” [Before someone can test the vessel to determine whether it is false or true, he sells it and receives a good price paid in sterling silver] (25513–21). Gower’s Marchant Triche as “Orfevre” is presented as a clear antitype to the idealized Goldsmith constructed by guild documents: a diligent practitioner should make “nul manere de vessel” [no type of vessel] unless it is “de verrei alay . . . de certein touche et argent del alay del esterling” [true alloy of the specific quality of silver and alloy of sterling].

In contrast to the idealized goldsmith, ever mindful of “grant disclaundre and decette” [serious slander and deceit] that false metals and stones and “diverses colours countrefaitz” [diverse counterfeit colors] may bring to the “mestier,” Gower’s “Orfevre” deliberately adulterates stones to deceive: “Qant il la piere ad contrefait . . . par deceipte et par aguait/Le vent” [When he counterfeits the stone, he sells it through deception and trickery] (25568–71). In an ironic assimilation of the guild’s specialized language, Gower even claims that Marchant Triche “fait . . . son pourchas” [makes his financial gain] “[d]u mestier qui l’orfevere meinen” [by means of the profession that the goldsmith practices] (25559–60). Through his strategic deployment of specialized French terms used by the “mestier des orfeveres,” Gower’s Mirour mirrors guild preoccupations. The internal and “privy” language of the “mestier des orfeveres” is, in other words, transported into a new field of literary production: a poetic form that reflects back to the reader the guild’s deepest anxieties: fraud, secrecy, and deceit.34
The richness of Gower’s representation of mercantile life in the city does not end here. Gower even extends his detailed examination of specific guilds to encompass a broader discussion of London and alien merchant communities writ large, and he launches a particularly pointed critique of Italian merchants in England. Gower is most explicit in deploying antimercantile rhetoric when rebuking “[c]es Lombars” (so-called Lombards, or moneylenders and traders of Italian origin) who cheat Londoners, exchanging straw for grain: “Ces Lombars nous font mal bargain,/Lour paile eschangont pour no [sic] grain . . . noz marchantz mettre en servage,/Et enfranchir pour le pilage/Les gens estranges trestout coy” [These Lombards cheat us; they exchange their straw for our grain . . . harshly oppressing our merchants, and making foreigners free (i.e., giving them license) to plunder everything] (25441–42, 25486–88).

Although “Lombard” in Middle English or Anglo-French usage can generically designate any merchant or trader, it’s clear from the use of first-person plural possessive pronouns here that Gower distinguishes between native Londoners (“noz marchantz”) and alien Lombards (“les gens estranges”) along the lines of some notion of cultural, or at least political, difference. Like the Silkwomen’s anti-Lombard petition, Gower’s poem carefully calibrates its use of French. The first-person plural strikes an intimate tone, invoking an elite aristocratic ethos as well as a collective guild parlance. The First Charter of the Goldsmiths, for instance, refers to the guild as “noz biens amez les orfeveres de nostre citee de Loundres” [our well-beloved Goldsmiths of our City of London], and when Gower goes on to claim that “noz marchauntz” [our merchants] in “nostre ville” [our city] are disenfranchised, the poet may very well imagine “nostre . . . noble Cité” of London as a community (or world) unto itself.

The above discussion demonstrates Gower’s nuanced perspective on mercantile activity and the poet’s ever-shifting alliances. The speaker condemns the actions of some merchants identified as Londoners or members of specific guilds, yet he also expresses sympathy for Londoners as a “communalte” disenfranchised by alien traders. Some passages in the Mirror are manifestly pro-commerce. Earlier in the poem, the poet states that


35. On Gower’s nuanced positions toward segments of the merchant classes in the Mirror, see Roger A. Ladd, *Antimercantilism in Late Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave, 2010), 49–75.

36. This charter, dated 13 March in the year 1 Edward III [1327], is transcribed and translated in Jefferson, 62–67.
merchants are divinely ordained: God divides commodities among lands and merchants distribute resources among them (25177–97). The oft-cited “encomium on wool” a few lines later, however, has the potential to strike the reader as excessive praise:

O leine, dame de noblesce,
Tu es des marchantz la duesse . . .
O leine, ensi comme le cristin,
Einsi paien et Sarazin
Te quiert avoir et te confesse.
O leine, l’en ne doit pas tere
Que tu fais en estrange terre;
Car les marchantz des tous pais
En temps du peas, en temps du guerre,
Par grant amour te vienot querre . . .
En Engleterre tu es née . . .
O belle, o blanche, o bien delie,
L’amour de toy tant point et lie . . .
Les cuers qui font la marchandie
De toy . . . (25369–409)

[O Wool, noble lady, you are the goddess of merchants . . . O Wool, Christians, pagans, and Saracens all seek to have you and pay their vows to you. O Wool, one should not conceal what you do in alien lands; for merchants of all countries, in times of peace and in times of war, come seeking you in great love. . . . In England you are born . . . O beautiful, white, delicate Wool, love of you pierces and binds . . . the hearts of those who trade in you.]

In a passage infused with courtly resonance, the poet praises wool as a universalizing force, born in England (“En Engleterre tu es née”), who unites merchants of all nations and religions (“les marchantz des tous pais . . . ensi comme le cristin,/Einsi paien et Sarazin”) under a commodity of common desire and worship (“amour”). This apostrophe to Lady Wool waxes patently erotic, invoking her as if an idealized female love object in Continental French poetry: “O leine, dame de noblesce . . . O belle, o blanche, o bien delie” [O Wool, noble lady . . . O beautiful, white, delicate wool] (25369–405). Compare, for instance, the opening of Eustache Deschamps’s Balade CCCXVII, which invokes a courtly maiden in strikingly
similar terms: “Belle, blanche, blonde, bonne, agreable” [beautiful, white, blonde, kind, pleasing].

Although one might be tempted to take this passage at face value, Gower's tone is actually quite difficult to discern: this “wool encomium” could transmit the genuine sentiments of a speaker who shares the views of merchants who earnestly worship the wool trade, or—in its rhetorical excess—it could suggest an ironically detached speaker who satirizes such hyperbolic literary conventions. In any case, the artful use of business and courtly discourses throughout the Mirour demonstrates some of the fluidity of Gower's poetic perspectives and his contingent attachments to social groupings. At times critical of merchants and guilds, at other times pro-commerce, and other times ambiguously situated, Gower claims shifting stances toward (and various degrees of identification with) subgroups of the merchant classes. By carefully exploiting different registers within local varieties of French, the poet expresses fluid social attachments toward professional groups within the city.

Mercantile Allegory: Transformation across Tongues

In the sections above I have examined Gower's fascination with the translingual capacities of lawyers and merchants, and this section turns to Gower's acute awareness of his status as a poet who writes across tongues. Gower's first major French work exhibits a considerable degree of flexibility in its representation of the merchant classes, but more conventionally antimercantile tropes circulate throughout Gower's work across three languages. His major poems in French, Latin, and English all localize at least some of the narrative action in the urban milieu of London and the Thames waterfront. Mirour de l'Omme offers a detailed mimesis of London trade; Vox Clamantis (c. 1377–1382) presents London as a dynamic site of civic unrest and political upheaval; and Confessio Amantis (c. 1386–1390,}

38. See also Epstein, 50.
39. Gower's account of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 in Book I of the Vox sets the action in “New Troy,” as London was often called: “A dextrisque nouam me tunc vidisse putabam/Troiam” [I believed that I saw, to my right, the new Troy] (1.879–80). The Latin rubric to Book I, chapter xiii, makes explicit that the action takes place in “nouam Troiam, id est ciuitatem Londiniarum” [New Troy, that is, the City of London]. For an excellent translation of
revised in the early 1390s) features a prologue in which Gower and King Richard meet when the poet’s rowboat and the king’s barge pass upon the Thames. As we move beyond the Mirour to address Gower’s trilingual oeuvre, we will see how merchants figure as key vehicles for showcasing the poet’s own rhetorical skill.

In his major works in three languages—the Mirour, the Vox, and the Confessio—supplantation (“Supplant” in Anglo-French and Middle English) is Gower’s idiosyncratic term for the usurpation of another’s position or the illegal appropriation of another’s property. A personification of subversion and illicit exchange, “Supplant” shares attributes with “Marchant Triche,” a figure who will haunt Gower throughout his career. Supplant makes an initial appearance in the Mirour as a daughter of Envy:

Car quique voet bargain avoir  
Du terre ou du quiconque avoir,  
Et en bargain mesure tent,  
Quant Supplant le porra savoir,  
Tantost ferra tout son povoir  
A destorber que l’autre enprent,  
Et sur ce moulit plus largement  
Ferra son offer au paiement,  
Pour l’autri faire removoir  
De son bargain; car voirement  
Il se damage proprement,  
Dont son voisin doit meinz valoir. (3301–12)

[Indeed, whoever wishes to conduct a transaction regarding land or taking possession of whatever property, and takes moderation into consideration (e.g., makes a reasonable offer), when Supplant gains knowledge of it, she will immediately do everything in her power to obstruct what the other is undertaking, offering a much greater amount as payment in order to make the other remove his or her offer (or remove the other from his or her claim); for truly one who seeks to deprive one’s neighbor personally harms oneself.]

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this section of the poem, see David Carlson, ed., and A. G. Rigg, trans., John Gower: Poems on Contemporary Events: The Visio Anglie (1381) and Cronica tripertita (1400), Studies and Texts 174 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2011).

40. The poet states he was “[u]nder the toun of newe Troye [i]n Temse whan it was flowende/As I be bote cam rowende . . . My liege lord par chaunce I mette . . . whan he me sygh,/He bad me come in to his barge” (Prologue, 37–45).
In this passage, Gower’s Supplaunt engages in a series of clever transactions. Anyone entering a negotiation (“bargain”) over land or other property can be thwarted by Supplant, who offers a much higher payment (“plus largement . . . son offer au paiement”) to thwart other people’s endeavors. The poet indicates that Supplant might profit financially from her own actions and effectively thwart a business rival’s attempts to claim property, but Supplant ultimately loses on moral grounds: she causes great ethical harm (“damage”) to herself in this process.

The poet recounts Supplant’s actions in a detached professional register, with terms like “largement,” “paiement,” and “damage” marking clear poetic appropriations of Francophone merchant jargon. The term “bargain” refers to any number of possible business negotiations, and the word’s repetition conveys the ever-shifting value of the property at stake in this exchange. In this passage, Supplant exceeds a mere stock figure from anti-mercantile satire. The poet suggests, through his nuanced deployment of business terminology, that one actually does disastrous harm (“damage”) to oneself even as one tries to deprive (i.e., devalue or depreciate) one’s neighbor.

A similar merchant figure performs subversive transactions in the Vox, but in this case Gower re-personifies Fraud as the daughter of Avarice and sister of Usury; like the French “Supplant,” the Latin “Fraus” is curiously a transgendered reincarnation of “Triche,” the Mirour’s (male) merchant.

Nititur hec magnas sub claue recondere summas,
   Ex quibus insidias perficit ipsa suas:
   Ista soror dampno solum viget ex alieno,
   Alterius dampna dant sibi ferre lucra:
   Est soror ista potens, aulas que struxit in urbe,
   Et tamen agrestes dissipat ipsa domos;
   Ista soror ciuem didat, set militis aurum
   Aufert et terras vendicat ipsa suas. (V.ii.711–18)

[She (Fraud) exerts her effort toward hiding huge sums of money under lock and key, and with them she (ipsa) carries out her crafty plotting. That sister (Ista soror) prospers only by the misfortune of another, for somebody else’s losses bring a profit to her. It is that powerful sister (soror ista potens) who has built the houses in the city, yet the homes in the country she (ipsa) destroys. That sister (Ista soror) enriches the city man, but robs the knight of his gold and she (ipsa) lays claim to his lands as her own.]
Whereas “Triche” in the Mirour is personified as a male figure (i.e., a merchant or a goldsmith by vocation), the equivalent embodiment of trickery in the Vox, “Fraus” [Fraud], is an emphatically female personification. Although Latin does not require the use of a feminine pronoun (“she”) in conjunction with verbs, Gower’s text conspicuously emphasizes the feminine (i.e., grammatical) gender of this newly personified Fraus. A proliferation of grammatically inflected pronouns distances the poet from the vice: “ipsa” [she, i.e., this female one], “Ista soror” [that sister], “soror ista” [that sister]. In this passage, Gower carefully distinguishes between the female sin and male victim, the dispossessed knight [miles] with whom he implicitly identifies. Moreover, alliterative Latin doublets stress the verse imbalance in these exchanges [dampno/dampna, dant/didat, aurum/aufert], all of which benefit “that sister” Fraud. This Latin passage in the Vox focuses not so much on the mechanics of the transaction itself, as seen in the Mirour’s use of French business vocabulary; rather it expresses the poet’s disdain for subversions of hierarchy (estate, gender) and rightful possession that transpire.41

The poem with which English speakers are most familiar, the Confessio, once again conjoins fraud with merchants. In this text, “Supplant” is characterized as the wrongful seizure of another’s longtime investment, reaping what another has sown:

Bot thei that worchen be supplaunt,  
Yit wolden thei a man supplaunte,  
And take a part of thilke plaunte  
Which he hath for himselfe set:  
And so fulofte is al unknet,  
That some man weneth be riht fast.  
For Supplant with his slyhe cast  
Fulofte happneth forto mowe  
Thing which an other man hath sowe. (2.2368–76)

Gower’s Middle English poetry exploits linguistic features that are not deployed in his analogous French or Latin verse. First of all, Gower repeatedly puns on the English name of the personification “Supplant” and the English word “plant,” developing the conceit that to supplant is to “mowe/Thing which an other man hath sowe.” In addition, Gower enacts another

(now familiar) shift in register, bringing an abstract concept (personification) back into economic territory. Supplant, here reincarnated as male, seeks profit from another man’s loss:

He reccheth noght, be so he winne,
   Of that an other man schal lese,
   And thus ful ofte chalk for chese
He changeth with ful litel cost,
   Wheref an other hath the lost
   And he the profit schal receive. (2.2344–49)

In this passage, the central transaction is expressed in the form of an alliterative and proverbial substitution: exchanging chalk for cheese (“changeth . . . chalk for chese”). In this case, Gower strategically avoids a more specialized domain of French-derived business vocabulary to showcase the impact of more homely “native” English expressions. The poet’s lexicon also registers the mixed heritage of English vocabulary, as the Germanic word “winne” coexists with Romance-derived “profit.” In one more discursive shift, supplanting is explicitly aligned with merchants (mercers):

The Chapmen of such mercerie
   With fraude and with Supplantarie
   So manye scholden beie and selle,
   That he ne may for schame telle
   So foul a Senne in mannes Ere. (2.3059–63)

The Confessio, like the Mirour and the Vox, presents merchant transactions as exempla for supplantation, and the Confessio experiments with manifold forms of expression. At the same time, the Confessio interweaves strands of Gower’s translinguistic production. By conjoining “fraude” and “Supplantarie” in this passage on mercers, Gower evokes the previous incarnations of Supplant/Fraus in two languages (Mirour and Vox). Each text conveys its exemplum in a distinct manner, exploiting unique resources each language affords the poet. The Mirour deploys Francophone business jargon, carefully outlining the mechanics of Supplant’s transactions and how the central economic metaphor carries ethical value; the Vox exploits Latin grammatical gender and anaphora to convey the moralist persona’s disdain.

for Fraus; and the Middle English Confessio conveys the transaction three different ways: a plowing or plant metaphor, a homely substitution of chalk for cheese, and a wholesale rebuke of bad merchant practices.

The Confessio’s discourse of supplantation is quite intricate, but the poem is even more playful than either the Mirour or Vox on another level: it is a bilingual text. Throughout the Confessio, Latin verses precede sections of Middle English verse, and the Latin lines on supplantation exploit some of the puns concurrently employed in English:

Inuidus alterius est Supplantator honoris,
   Et tua quo vertat culmina subtus arat.
Est opus occultum, quasi que latet anguis in herba,
   Quod facit, et subita sorte nocius aest.
Sic subtilis amans alium supplantat amantem,
   Et capit occulte, quod nequit ipse palam;
Sepeque supplantans in plantam plantat amoris,
   Quod putat in propriis alter habere bonis. (II.v, De supplantacione)

[The supplanter is envious of another’s honor, and where he plows deeply he turns up your field. That which he performs is a secret deed, just as a snake that lies in the grass, and, by a sudden chance, the evil one is present. Thus the subtle lover supplants another lover, and he sneakily seizes that which he is not able to have openly; and often the supplanting one grafts onto the plant of love what another one believes he has among his own possessions.]

Wordplay abounds. Gower not only perpetuates puns on “plantus” with words like “herba” but he also multiplies words derived from the “plant”’s etymological root: “Supplantator . . . supplantat . . . supplantans in plantam plantat.” Sonic devices feature as well, as many words begin with sup- and sub- like “subtus” [profound], “subita” [suddenly], and “subtilis” [crafty]. Moreover, repeated “s” sounds evoke the snake metaphor that subtly insinuates itself through the text.

Sîan Echard and Claire Fanger read the Confessio’s versions of Supplantation through an implicit hierarchy of languages: “The effect created by these Latin lines proved next to impossible to duplicate in English,” and while “Gower here plays with similar ideas and even similar paranomastic

echoes,” he cannot “achieve the coherence of the developed conceit that the Latin made possible.” Nonetheless, Gower’s Middle English diction, proverbial expressions, metaphor, and alliteration have a sophistication of their own. The poet enacts linguistic exchange—a virtuoso act of Latin/English code-switching—precisely at the moment he condemns an unethical economic exchange.

Although all these passages on fraud and illicit exchange might appear to perpetuate antimercantile tropes and figures, Gower’s stylistic and aesthetic flourishes create a nuanced, manifold perspective. By showcasing the poet’s own linguistic acuity precisely through moments portraying business transactions, Gower demonstrates the affinity between the merchant and the poet. In other words, his flexible poetic style achieves a close imitation of the fluid linguistic capacities of merchants themselves. Even if the recurring figure of the fraudulent merchant (Triche, Fraus, Supplaunt) may seem like a static trope, Gower’s ongoing poetic exploration of the merchant’s role as an agent of (illicit) exchange makes this figure an important discursive device for displaying the poet’s mastery of languages.

In Gower’s major works across three tongues, legal and economic transactions are encoded as linguistic transactions. Expressing a persistent concern over the illicit transfer or acquisition of goods (and fears over dispossession of property and social status), the poet inhabits the mindset of subsections of London’s urban elite. On a deeper level, Gower exploits commerce to explore fraught internal processes of verbal substitution and transformation. As Matthew Giancarlo observes in a different context, the “sense of a fractured self—or of an alienated propria—comes to characterize Gower’s poetry as much as its desire for resolution and unity.” Gower’s trilingual oeuvre exploits the disjunctions between tongues as much as their exchangeability. The poet illustrates how languages can resist equivalence and thwart any direct, one-to-one substitution of individual words or concepts.

Language Choice: Native and Acquired Tongues

Having examined Gower’s major works across three tongues, I would like to return to an issue I addressed near the beginning of this chapter. In this

44. Echard and Fanger, xlvi–xlvii.
45. Giancarlo, 93.
trilingual poetic oeuvre, how exactly does Gower characterize the relationship between his “first” (native) language of English and his other, acquired tongues? The *Cinkante Balades*, a series of French courtly love poems likely composed late in Gower’s life (c. 1391–1393), provides some intriguing insights. The surviving manuscript begins with a dedication to Henry IV in Latin meter and prose, followed by two laudatory French *balade* stanzas. The remaining *balades* exhibit a distinctly Continental flair, interweaving lines from French poets like Guillaume de Machaut, Eustache Deschamps, Jean Froissart, and Oton de Grandson. In *Balade XVII*, an unexpected moment of cross-linguistic communication occurs just as the lady refuses the advances of the poet-lover:

> Ma dame, qui sciet langage a plentée,  
> Rien me respon quant jeo la priera;  
> Et s’ensi soit q’elle ait a moi parlée,  
> D’un mot soulein lors sa response orrai,  
> A basse vois tantost me dirra, “nay.”  
> C’est sur toutz autres ditz qe jeo plus hee;  
> Le mot est brief, mais qant vient a l’essay,  
> La sentence est de grant dolour parée. (XVII.17–24)

[My lady, who has a full command of language, makes no response to me when I entreat; but thus it is, should she speak to me, then I hear her response in one word alone. A worthless voice immediately will say to me *Nay*. It’s the word above all others that I hate most; the word’s brief, but when it comes into use, the meaning is draped with great sadness.]

The traversal of languages in this *balade* achieves subtle effects. When the poet entreats his lady, this “dame”—who knows how to speak very well, or knows many languages—responds with just one word (*mot soulein*). This word is in English: “nay.” This lone word *nay* in the middle of a French poem marks the lady’s “vois” as distinct from the lover’s. Given the lady’s fluency in languages, this utterance also foregrounds the power of the lady’s devastating choice of “langage.” Although she only utters a single word “nay,” the greater meaning of this *mot* resonates far beyond this

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word alone. Within the larger narrative context of these ballades, “nay” transmits more than a refusal. The “langage” of the lady suggests a certain degree of personal familiarity with the poet-lover she addresses; that is, this non-French response marks a colloquial crack in an otherwise well-maintained courtly façade. Capitalizing on linguistic difference, the lady’s English word paradoxically conveys distance (it’s a denial) and intimacy (it’s his vernacular).

As transient as this moment is, this episode has wide implications for our understanding of Gower’s French and how Gower perceives it: French is a language that is clearly well known to the poet, but he still experiences it as distant or unfamiliar. In this and other works, we have seen Gower deftly negotiate different registers of French that map onto different social spheres, business and courtly. At the same time, the linguistic features of Gower’s French places it “in between” two geographically marked varieties: Anglo-Norman (or Anglo-French, or “the French of England”) and Continental French. Gower’s French is thus simultaneously local and Continental; one might even say his work constructs a hybrid, trans-Channel idiolect, a literary mode of expression that alternates at will between registers: local/Continental and professional/courtly.

The unexpected use of Gower’s “native” tongue—an English word voiced by a female interlocutor, rather than the poet himself—has an eerie, almost uncanny effect. In a later balade, the woman’s “mot” [word] obliquely resurfaces when an allegorical personification of the lady’s “Danger” [distance, disdain, resistance] repeats the lady’s utterance “nai.” In this balade sequence, Gower foregrounds the alterity of the lone English word spoken by a fictive French speaker, and he dramatizes this word’s increasing estrangement from its original moment of utterance. Through this ensuing narrative, the poet suggests the corresponding unease an English speaker experiences when acquiring (and using) a second language like French, a tongue that is at once very close to the speaker but perpetually eluding his grasp.

48. For an excellent reading of the aftereffects of the woman’s response, including later balades in her voice, see Holly Barbaccia, “The Woman’s Response in John Gower’s Cinkante Balades,” in Trilingual Poet, eds. Dutton et al., 230–37.

49. Since the lady receiving the ballade knows French—“ceste ballade a celle envoier-ay” (25)—her decision to reply in another “langage” is deliberate.

50. On the “a mix of both insular and continental terms” in the Mirour, see Brian Merrieeles and Heather Pagan, “John Barton, John Gower and Others: Variation in Late Anglo-French,” in French of England, ed. Wogan-Browne et al., 118–34, at 126.

Although this discussion has focused on Gower’s French works and intervernacular communication, movements across English and Latin are a salient feature of his works as well. Many such moments are well known to literary scholars: Gower’s *Confessio* announces the poet will compose in “oure Englishe [a] boke for Engelondes sake” (Prologue, 24–25), and a Latin epigram (discussed below) expounds upon Gower’s first turn to English as a literary language. In the *Vox*, Gower encodes his own proper name, incorporating its English sounds, syllable by syllable, into Latin elegiac verses.\(^5\) Elsewhere, a passage allegorizing the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 features beasts whose English names are carefully incorporated into the poem’s metrical structure (I.xi.783–98). At another point, Gower expresses an intense affective connection to England as the land of his birth [*propriam terram*].\(^5\) Read collectively, such instances convey Gower’s strong emotional ties to England, his native land, even when he is not writing in his native tongue of English.\(^5\)

Although Gower’s orientation toward England is apparently fixed, his orientation towards its languages is, as we have seen, quite fluid. Gower’s final major work conveys a strong attachment to the land of England, but *Confessio* manuscripts are not exclusively English: they incorporate English verse, Latin epigrams, and extratextual commentary delivered in a voice not entirely consistent with a monoglot English narrator. Drawing upon Bakhtinian literary discourses, Diane Watt has identified an “active heteroglossia” in the *Confessio* and across Gower’s oeuvre.\(^5\) In addition to foregrounding its own heteroglossia (use of multiple languages) in its visual layout, the *Confessio* explores polyvocality—i.e., the capacity to have more than one voice—through Gower’s self-consciously bilingual speaking persona. That is, the *Confessio* is heteroglossic on the level of narrative, but it is also polyvocal on the level of its first-person narration.

The poem’s opening Latin epigram (set apart in the manuscript tradition by rubrication or by extension into marginal space) acclimates the


reader to the notion of a poet speaking with a dual voice. The epigram’s explication of bilingualism asks the reader to consider the very epistemological status of tongues:

Torpor, ebes sensus, scola parua labor minimusque
Causant quo minimus ipse minora canam:
Qua tamen Engisti lingua canit Insula Bruti
Anglica Carmente metra iuuante loquar
Osibus ergo carens que conterit ossa loquelis
Absit, et interpres stet procul oro malus. (Prologue, lines a–f)

[Dull wit, slight schooling, torpor, labor less, make slight the themes I, least of poets, sing. Let me, in Hengist’s tongue, in Brut’s isle sung, with Carmen’s help, tell forth my English verse. Far hence the boneless one whose speech grinds bones, far hence be he who reads my verses ill.]56

Like Gower’s other Latin verses, these are densely packed. This epigram presents a poetic speaker who is simultaneously embodied and immaterial, singing and writing (he speaks and sings with the letters of Carmen), Latinate and English (using the language of Hengist on the Island of Brutus). Moreover, the epigram’s network of allusions make it an intertextual showpiece: “Engisti lingua” [tongue of Hengist] alludes to Geoffrey of Monmouth’s famous Latin account of a royal daughter’s Anglo-Saxon utterance “wassail” [be well], and Carmen is known for bringing the alphabet to the Italians; with her help, the poet utters “Anglica metra” [English verses].57 Although these verses are set out in Latin, the epigram requires readers to imagine that the poet is nonetheless speaking in English. The compact Latin syntax, moreover, intertwines allusions: the words “Carmente . . . iuuante” [aid of Carmen] alternate with “Anglica . . . metra” [English verses]. Activating simultaneous allusions, this Latin epigram gestures outward to a world of other texts and another language (“Engisti lingua”) outside of itself.

Gower’s affective relationship to his tongues is noticeably volatile, shifting from context to context. As we have seen, Gower often articulates his poetic identity across linguistic difference: the Mirour presents a legal persona who knows French and Latin; the Vox encodes the poet’s English name in Latin meter; and the Confessio asks the reader to sustain

56. Trans. Echard and Fanger, 3; punctuation slightly altered.
57. For an excellent reading of this poem and its relevant textual tradition, see Davidson, Multilingualism, ch. 2, “Hengist’s Tongue: A Medieval History of English,” 45–75.
the fiction of the poet speaking in English even while reading in Latin. Gower most often puts two languages in play at any one moment (French/English, English/Latin, or Latin/French), but he is not exclusively interested in delineating the contours of bilingualism per se. Rather, he exhibits a truly polyglot mentality that renders binary linguistic oppositions provisional, and this linguistic multiplicity animates his shape-shifting literary persona. Even if the poet purports to speak in propria persona—for instance, when describing the translingual reincarnations of an allegorical concept (Fraus, Supplant, Supplantator, Supplantarie)—Gower never actually writes in a “single” tongue. Any one of Gower’s texts provokes unexpected, even unconscious “ripple effects,” activating meanings in other languages and previous literary forms, and the poet’s translingualism cannot help but shape a manifold poetic subjectivity.

Translingual Mediation: William Caxton

William Caxton was an avid reader of Gower, and he found a clear affinity between himself and the polyglot poet. To offer one example, Caxton respected Gower’s knowledge of Latin enough to employ the poet’s Middle English verse as the basis for his own English prose edition of Ovid. As Gower’s first printer, Caxton ushered in a technological transformation of the poet’s work from manuscript into a new medium. Caxton’s copytext for the Confessio has not been identified (or it does not survive), but in his printings of Gower’s work Caxton adheres to the general layout of surviving Confessio manuscripts, deeming its multilingual features integral to the work itself. The printer preserves all of its Latin summary glosses and verses before each Middle English section, as well as its sustained Latin marginal commentary.

Caxton most visibly takes Gower’s work in new directions in what Sian Echard has called the “pre-text” or the introductory apparatus to the

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Caxton's table of contents provides a detailed summary of Gower's frame narrative, the plot of each tale, and the concepts each tale represents—far surpassing the introductory tables or rubrics in existing Gower manuscripts. Moreover, Caxton's table foregrounds the diversity of narratives and sources out of which Gower's Confessio is constructed. On a broader level, the Caxtonian table of contents showcases the transformative hand (mediating role) of the printer who reshapes this source-text, offering his own incarnation of the Confessio as a compilation of “diuerse historyes & fables”—an attractive collection of tales for a new generation (and expanding market) of readers.

One of the most arresting moments in Gower's Confessio, in manuscript or in print, is Daniel's interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream. Within this dream, a statue (“ymago” in Latin, “ymage” in Middle English) symbolizes different ages of humanity, each represented by its own element (Prologue, 595–662). In the Confessio manuscript tradition, this moment is often afforded clear visual prominence, not only through a large illustration of this “ymage,” but also through marginalia, rubrics, and floriated borders. As Deanne Williams has provocatively suggested, this hybrid “ymage” can serve as an emblem for Gowerian translation as a whole: the Confessio, like the statue composed of disparate parts, is a “kind of literary monster,” that is, a palimpsest of languages and literary influences.

In Caxton's new medium of print, the Latin verse just before Nebuchadnezzar's dream takes on a new significance:

Prosper et adversus obliquo tramite versus
Immundus mundus decipit omne genus.
Mundus in euentu versatur ut alea casu,
Quam celer in ludis iactat auara manus.

Sicut ymago viri variantur tempora mundi,
Statque nichil firmum preter amare deum. (Prologue, verse v)

[In crooked circuit turning, good then bad, the sordid world deceives each race of men. The world is tossed and turned by chance, as dice are quickly thrown by greedy hands at play. So in man’s image earthly seasons shift, and nought stands firm except the love of God.]^64

The Latin epigram develops the conceit of the “ymago,” emblematic of stability as well as change. The verses suggest cyclical and linear notions of time, punning appropriately on verbs for turning (“versus,” “versatur,” and the adjective “adversus”), and sonically evoking cycles of history and continuity through thick anaphora (“immundus mundis,” “Mundus . . . tempora mundi”). The central conceit for turning and chance—a hand rolling dice—coexists with an emblem of eternal stableness, the steady love of God. The Latin epigram beautifully articulates the paradox of Gower’s transmission through Caxton’s print technology: it is an instance of textual continuity amidst change.^65

These Latin verses on the “ymago” might very well resonate with Caxton’s transformation of Gower: the printer preserves the source-text’s integrity and coherence while also transforming it into a different medium. Even without illustrations, this “wonder strange ymage” (Prologue, 604) is obliquely suggested by the layout of Caxton’s printed two-column pages. Latin rubrics like “de pectore argenteo” [concerning the silver chest], “de ventre eneo” [concerning the brass stomach], “de tibris ferreis” [concerning the iron legs] occupy the center of the “body” of a single column of text, graphically segmenting portions of the dream’s central “ymage” (STC 12142, fol. 12r).

Caxton’s print edition closely engages with the Latin and English features of the poem, despite a shift in medium. The printer maintains and augments Gower’s careful self-construction of a polyglot literary persona, reproducing at the end of the Confessio some additional Latin verses, including Eneidos bucolis (which began this chapter). In other respects,

64. Trans. Echard and Fanger, 13 (punctuation slightly altered).
65. For an extended reading of the opening of Caxton’s preface which curiously identifies Gower as a “squyer, borne in Walys” and the potential that Caxton sees an affinity between his own Kentish dialect and Gower’s own English idiolect, see Blake, Caxton and Literary Culture, ch. 7, “Continuity and Change in Caxton’s Prologues and Epilogues,” 89–106, esp. 89–90.
Caxton himself resembles Gower: the printer, like the poet, creates over the course of his career a literary persona who thoughtfully reflects on the shifting status of his own multilingualism. In the “pre-texts” to his editions—including not only tables, but also first-person editorial prologues in *propría persona*—Caxton’s oeuvre enacts a complex interplay between prose autobiography and what we might call sociolinguistic theory. Like Gower, Caxton deems facility with languages a key element of a deliberately crafted literary persona. His abiding interest in translingual practice provides one constant across a mobile career.

Caxton’s *Dialogues in French and English*, also known as the *Vocabulary in French and English* or *Instructions for Travelers* (STC 24865), is a particularly apt nonliterary counterpoint to Gower’s work (indeed, it was printed c. 1483, about the same year as Caxton’s edition of the *Confessio*). Although the *Dialogues* are presented in the form of a practical manual, Caxton’s bilingual text explores some of the creative potential of merchant languages. The title page and prologue for Caxton’s text do not survive, but its opening lines present “[r]ight good lernynge/For to lerne/Shortely frensshe and englyssh” (3.13–16); by means of “this book,” readers “shall mowe/Resonably vnderstande/Frenssh and englisssh” (3.17–24). Most importantly, reading the book is a “prouffytable” endeavor: “Who this booke shall wylle lerne/May well entreprise or take on honde/Marchan-dises fro one lande to another” and also to “knowe many wares/Which to hym shalbe good to be bought/Or solde for rich to become./Lerne this book diligently;/Grete prouffyt lieth therin truly” (3.37–4.7). In addition to offering the names of “many wares” and household items in both English and French, the text presents (among other things) proper forms of address according to rank and gender, the vocabulary of various crafts and trades, and a series of dialogues between household servants and their masters and between merchants and prospective buyers.

Caxton repeatedly asserts the “prouffytable” qualities of this book:

1. Cy commence la table
2. De cest prouffytable doctrine,
3. Pour trouuer tou par ordene
4. Ce que on vouldra apren dre

Hier begynneth the table
Of this prouffytable lernynge,
For to fynde all by ordre
That which men wylle lerne. (1.1–4)

In this the form of “la table,” the printer produces a nicely ordered text in parallel translation. Here, the text purports to rehearse “by ordre” all the English and French terms one could desire and it will hence be “prouffytable lernynge” to the reader who wants to trade (“well enterprise . . . Marchandises”). Caxton further asserts that the words one will “fynde” in this “table” will have value in facilitating travel:

Et les parolles que chescun And the wordes that everyche
Pourra apprendre pour aler May lerne for to go
Dun pays au ville a autltre; Fro one lande or toune to anothir;
Et puls auttres reysons And moo othir resons
Que seroyent trope longues That shold be over longe
De mettre en cest table. To sette in this table. (2.39–3.4)

It is clear that the “tables” construct an audience of merchants, for whom facility with languages is essential. Through this book, anyone desiring to “enterprise or take on honde/Marchandiese fro one lande to another,” “knowe many wares,” and become “rich,” will gain “[g]rete prouffyt” from the text. However, Caxton extends his audience beyond merchants, as the text implies there is something innately “prouffytable” in knowing “the wordes” (“les parolles”) in and of themselves. Regardless of whether the reader is actually a merchant or desires to travel for any number of “othir resons,” he (or she) can still “prouffyt” from reading this book.

As a commercial enterprise, this print endeavor pursues financial gain as well as symbolic profit, to slightly adapt the insights of Pierre Bourdieu; he contends that literary or poetic works are “purely communicative” but any use of language (regardless of its content) can nonetheless, unconsciously, pursue “symbolic profit.” If one takes Caxton’s work at face value as what Bourdieu would call a “distinctly instrumental use of language” (i.e., a practical, nonliterary production), then the text pursues its own “symbolic profit” in a noticeably explicit manner. When the “table” claims to be “prouffytable lernynge” to its readers and that “[g]rete prouffyt lieth therin,” these sentiments bespeak Caxton’s desire that the printed text will yield financial gain (for his readers, but also presumably for himself). The text also conveys a more intangible symbolic profit to

68. Ibid., 67.
its reader in the form of increased cultural capital (i.e., all “the wordes” of French and English). This knowledge, in turn, will enable the reader’s further pursuit of “Marchandiese.” It is important to keep in mind that “symbolic profit” is just as important as “material profit” in Caxton’s endeavor.69 As we shall see, Caxton’s work asserts its symbolic power through its aesthetic and stylistic features, and these features—rather than lying outside the domains of literature and poetry, as Bourdieu might contend—are profoundly literary in function. Namely, the manner of expression and “communicative” style of this bilingual phrasebook includes identifiably literary rhetorical tropes and devices, and by shifting from pragmatic instruction into a “purely communicative” register, Caxton expresses ambitions beyond a narrowly conceived “material profit” (financial gain).

The various prologues to Caxton’s other print editions attest to how deeply his English production was situated within the mercantile life of London, particularly through his connections (in England and abroad) as a member of the Mercers’ Company. The Royal Book (c. 1484) is “translated or reduced out of Frensshe into Englysshe by me, Wyllyam Caxton, atte request of a worshipful marchaunt and mercer of London” (136); The Book of Good Manners (1487) is requested by “an honest man and a special frende of myn, a mercer of London named Wylliam Praat” (60); Caton (c. 1484), moreover, is dedicated to the City of London itself: “I William Caxton, cytezeyn and conjurye . . . of the fraternyte and feelauship of the mercerye . . . present [this] book [which] I have translated . . . oute of Frensshe into Englysshe [u]nto the noble, auncyent and renommed cite, the City of London in Englond” (63).70

By Caxton’s time, there was a substantial increase in the use of English among the guilds in London, in comparison to Gower’s day.71 In addition, surviving late fifteenth-century letters by members of the merchant classes indicate they not only corresponded among themselves in English but could also employ French, Latin, and Flemish when necessary.72 The fact that Caxton prints many of his later texts in English for an audience that

69. Any “communication” between a “sender” (producer) and a “receiver” (market) is “capable of procuring a certain material or symbolic profit” (Bourdieu, 66).
70. Citations from Caxton’s prologues are from Caxton’s Own Prose, ed. N. F. Blake (London: Deutsch, 1973).
71. Chambers and Daunt, 194.
includes merchants does not, in other words, suggest a monolingual (or even local) target audience. Rather, a polyglot cosmopolitanism informs his production as a whole. Indeed, Caxton served as acting Governor of the English “nation” of Merchant Adventurers at Bruges (1462–1470), and other prologues attest to his connections to Flanders. Caxton’s prologue to the History of Troy (c. 1473), for instance, states he has spent much time in “the contres of Braband, Flandres, Holand and Zeland” (98). As Anne Sutton has observed, the final stage in the apprenticeship of an English merchant-adventurer was frequently a journey abroad that was undertaken so that one might practice other languages, specifically French and Dutch. A former mercer and merchant-adventurer himself, Caxton prints in English a range of texts he has “translated or reduced” out of Dutch, Latin, and French, and his printed French/English handbook draws from a preexisting French/Dutch manuscript tradition. Considering that he produced French texts during his time in Bruges, Caxton could even be considered the first French, as well as the first English, printer.

In the manuscript tradition of these merchant phrasebooks, Dutch occupies a position as “second language” to French, but in order to make his printed dialogues viable in a London market Caxton replaces the Dutch with English. As he produced his “tables,” Caxton did not translate the Dialogues directly from French into English; rather he employed the Dutch text as the basis for his English. Caxton claims elsewhere that he has an imperfect command of French: “in France was I never, and was born and lerned myn Englysshe in Kent” (Prologue to History of Troy, 98). Given his extensive experience “in the countres of Braband, Flandres, Holand, and Zeland,” it would make sense that the printer would employ

76. Among the changes he makes in the manuscript tradition, Caxton inserts the names of commercial centers within England: “Of many tounes/Of London, of yorke/Of bristowe, of bathe” (18.26–19).
the more familiar Dutch passages in his sources in order to construct his corresponding English translations. This triangulation of French, Dutch, and English yields curious results. For instance, the French “respaulme cet hanap” [rinse the cup] is rendered in English as “spoylle the cup,” a phrasing apparently influenced by the Flemish *spoel den nap* (26.27); the French “aual la maison” [throughout the house] appears in English as “after the house,” a non-idiomatic English usage akin to the Flemish *achter huse*; and the English phrase “It en is not” [it is not] conspicuously recalls the Flemish *het en es niet*: the Middle English inserts the grammatical particle “en,” which is used only in Middle Dutch verb negation (18.18).77

The French/English text that Caxton prints does not fully suppress the influence of Dutch, as its role as the intermediary or “relay language” between French and English resurfaces through nonidiomatic expressions: moments of what Gower, a century earlier, would call “verba incongrua” [ill-fitting words]. Such incongruent, apparently non-native English constructions have invited modern editors of Caxton’s text to claim that “Caxton had become more familiar with Flemish than with his native tongue” and he had, by that time, “forgotten English,” his birth language.78

Given Caxton’s frequent acts of translation, as well as his stated attachments to various locations, including Kent, Westminster, London proper, and Flanders, what (really) is Caxton’s “own” language? It might “properly” be some form of English, as he states he “was born and lerned myn Englysshe in Kente,” yet his own Flemish idiom and expressed marginality to London-based English (as someone who originally hails from Kent) could suggest an idiolect “in between” Flemish and some dialect of English. Caxton, in any case, registers an acute awareness that he is estranged from both his native English as well as aristocratic forms of Continental French. Indeed, his prologues communicate a distinct anxiety over the status of his own idiolect of English—“I doubte not [in Kente] is spoken . . . brode and rude Englishe”—as well as a more pervasive concern about what he dubs the “dyversite and chaunge of langage” over time (80).

In his famous preface to *Eneydos* (c. 1490), Caxton observes that “dyversite” of English dialects and the “chaunge” that language exhibits over time create particular challenges for a professional printer. Choosing any one form of English could alienate readers who speak other varieties (since vernacular language varies across space), and it could also reduce the text’s staying power (since languages constantly change, regardless of

77. For more examples of Caxton’s Flemish-inflected English, see Bradley, iv, vi, xi.
78. Bradley, xi.
location). In an example of the confusion that linguistic variation over space can cause, Caxton tells a story of London “merchauntes . . . in a shippe in Tamyse” en route to Flanders (“Zelande”) who make an unexpected stop on the Isle of Wight in the Channel; “one of theym named Sheffelde, a mercer,” asks a woman for “egges”—but since his plural noun differs from the form used in the woman’s own English dialect (“eyren”), the “goode wyf” mistakenly thinks the merchant is speaking “Frenshe.”

In explaining how quickly the English vernacular changes over time, Caxton relates his own experience of reading an “olde boke” in which the “Englysshe was so rude and brood that I coude not wele understande it” and that what was “wryton in old Englysshe [was] more lyke to Dutche [than] our Englysshe now usid” (79). Caxton concludes by observing that “certaynly our langage now used varyeth ferre from that whiche was used and spoken whan I was borne,” and that “we Englysshemen ben borne under the domynacyon of the mone whiche is never stedfaste . . . wexing one season, and wan[ing] another” (79). In Caxton’s estimation, late fifteenth-century English is an especially fluid and mercurial vernacular (perhaps even more so than it was a generation before), and the assertion that forms of “Englysshe” can be alien and estranging—variously mistaken for “Dutche” or “Frenshe”—attests to Caxton’s ability to use narrative anecdotes to demonstrate how languages change across space or time.

William Kuskin has demonstrated that Caxton constructs a deliberate, highly reflective literary persona through his first-person prologues. Caxton, to extend Kuskin’s insights, takes advantage of the Eneydos prologue to engage in a retroactive form of autobiography as much as he enacts sociolinguistic theory. On a more profound level, the “first English printer” expresses a deep sense of dépaysement: a disorienting, uneasy state of feeling out of place even within one’s own country. Transported from Kent to Cologne to Bruges to Westminster—and even after being (re)settled in the country of his birth—this mercer-turned-printer conveys a lingering alienation from his own language across space and across time.

79. “In my dayes happened that certayn marchauntes were in a shippe in Tamyse, for to have sayled over the see to Zelande. And for lacke of wynde thai taryed atte Forlond, and went to londe for to refreshe them. And one of theym named Sheffelde, a mercer, cam into an hows and axed for mete and specially he axyd after eggys. And the goode wyf answerde that she coude speke no Frenshe. And the marchaunt was angry for he also coude speke no Frenshe, but wolde have hadde eggs and she vnderstode hym not. And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde haue eyren. Then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstood hym wel [. . .] Loo! what sholde a man in thyse dayes now write, ‘egges’ or ‘eyren’? Certynly it is harde to playse every man bycause of dyversite and chaunge of langage” (79–80).

80. See Kuskin, Symbolic Caxton, 260.
Amidst this disorienting linguistic landscape, Caxton tries—often unsuccessfully—to impose order upon chaos. When the “table” provides ranks of people, it rehearses “by ordre” the titles of clergy and nobility, adhering to conventions of estates literature: “prelates of holy chirche . . . the pope, cardinals, bisshops,” “themperour [sic], kynges, and queens,” “dukes,” “princes,” “barons, knyghtes, and squyers” (2.22 et passim). However, once it reaches the mixed group of the merchant classes, the “table” shifts into a new conception of “ordre.” Instead of listing crafts according to any naturalized hierarchy, the “table” purports to list them alphabetically: “Les noms dhommes et des femmes/ Et des mestiers, selon lordre de a b c,” or in English, “The names of men and of wommen,/And of craftes, after thordre of a b c” [sic] (22.9–10).

This claim to follow “thordre of a b c” marks a radical departure from estates satire and courtesy manuals, as the alphabetical system superimposes an arbitrary linguistic “ordre” upon a heterogeneous social grouping. Moreover, the “table” does not even arrange these mestiers by the names of individual crafts but instead by (apparently random) names of individuals who practice them. The ensuing sequence of names, crafts, and utterances is just as unorganized—and impractical—as a non-alphabetical list. Although the initial names are loosely grouped by craft or trade (for instance, under “C” are grouped workers in the cloth trade, including “Cyprien the weuar” and “Clarisse the nopster”), “its personal alphabet provides a rather bizarre and decidedly non-utilitarian form of commercial access.”

Within the mestiers section, Caxton populates his “tables” with familiar merchant stereotypes: “Iohan the userer/Hath lente so moche/That he knoweth not the nombre/Of the good that he hath . . . gadred to gedyr./He leneth the pounde/For four pens” (39.23–34); “Peter the betar of wulle/Gooth alle ydle,/For his dene/Hath forboden hym his craft/Vpon thamendes of xx. shelynges,/Till that he shall haue/Bought his franchyse” and he “shall complaine hym/Unto bourghmaistre,/And the wardeyns of the crafte/sette not therby” (44.5–15). These figures evoking condemnations of avarice, usury, and fraud in antimercantile satire have

81. For a more detailed analysis of Caxton’s alphabetization of the mestiers, see Cooper, 44–50.
82. Cooper, 46. Bradley speculates that Caxton shuffles the sequence of names so they correspond to names of actual tradesmen living and working in Bruges at the time the text was printed (viii).
their origins in the manuscript tradition from which Caxton draws. However, Caxton’s “table” augments his sources by inserting some passages not attested in manuscripts. The most expanded profession is the bookseller:

George le librarier
A plus des liures
Que tout ceulx de la uile.
Il les achate tous
Tels quils soient,
Soient embles ou enprintees,
Ou aultrement pourchacies.
Il a doctrinalx, catons,
Heures de nostre dame,
Donats, pars, accidens,
Psaultiers bien enluminees,
Loyes a fremauls dargент,
Liures de medicines,
Sept psalmes, kalendiers,
Encre et parcemyn,
Pennes de signes,
Pennes dauwes,
Bons breuiares,
Qui valent bon argent.

George the booke sellar
Hath moo bookes
Than all they of the toune.
He byeth them all
Suche as they ben,
Be they stolen or enprinted,
Or othirwyse pourchaced.
He hath doctrinals, catons,
Oures of our lady,
Donettis, partis, accidents,
Sawters well enlumined,
Bounded with claspes of siluer,
Books of physike
Seuen salmes, kalenders,
Ynke and perchemyn,
Pennes of swannes,
Pennes of ghees,
Good portoses,
Which ben worth good money. (38.31–39.9)

This bookseller passage suggests that Caxton is essentially advertising his own wares, maximizing both the material profit (financial value) of the books as commodities as well as the cultural capital (symbolic profit) that accrues to him if people buy his works.

What makes these expansions unlike other utterances within the “table” is the addition of first-person utterances: statements are not attributed to any fictional speaker within any of the dialogues. These interjections, apparently disembodied, assert Caxton’s own claims to discursive authority. Some of these interruptions mark transitions between sections: “Now standeth me for to speke/Of othir thynges necessarie:/That is to saye of thinges/that ben vsed after the house,/Of whiche me may not be withoute” (6.16–20). In other passages, Caxton disclaims knowledge: “For that I am not/Spycier ne apotecarie/I can not name/All maneres of spycies;/But I shal name a partie” (19.33–37). Most strikingly, some utterances assume a highly expressive style: “I am all wery/Of so many names to name/Of so many craftes,/So many offices, so many seruises;/I wyll reste me”
(47.26–30). Invoking Gower’s claim that the “mestiers” are “infinit” and no one could recount them all, the Caxtonian narrator voices weariness in a modified inexpressibility topos. This “exhaustion” claim, moreover, features anaphora while invoking a longstanding *ars longa, vita brevis* motif. Rather than rendering Caxton invisible, this moment of first-person rhetorical indulgence in the “table” overtly acknowledges the labor of the printer-translator who creates the text.

These “authorial” utterances stray from the stated purpose of the text. Even though a French translation accompanies these passages, these moments cannot merely be construed as being part of an imperative to teach an English speaker how to speak French. As first-person utterances, these interruptions are superfluous to the purported objective of the “tables.” Rather than helping the reader pursue any symbolic or material “prouffyt,” the first-person utterances only demonstrate the symbolic power of the printer. Moreover, the presentation of such utterances in parallel columns of text suggests that the expressive efficacy of English might even rival that of Continental French. The series of expansions and interruptions, as a whole, advertise Caxton’s labor as the driving force behind the bilingual production. A text presented as a practical handbook simultaneously makes a powerful assertion of Caxtonian authority. Through literary tropes and allusions, narrative interpolations, and first-person interjections, the merchant-writer creates a sophisticated text that is profoundly “prouffytable,” both materially and symbolically.

**Language Accumulation**

The multilingual milieu of merchant classes in late medieval London facilitated many forms of urban writing, from John Gower’s engagement with merchant culture in his French, Latin, and Middle English poems, to an overt assimilation of commercial discourses by William Caxton a century later. The printer, indeed, conflates the roles of merchant, translator, and literary writer. Whereas trilingual Gower delves into the commercial life of London and the close affinity between merchants and poets, Caxton produces a bilingual text that expresses some of the creative capacities

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83. For the similar inexpressibility topos of John of Salisbury, see Cooper, 43; on Caxton’s understanding of the weariness of scribal labor, see Cooper, 52, footnote 103.

84. The facing-page layout of text is unique to Caxton (i.e., a practice not followed by later English printers); see Cooper, 38, footnote 66.
of merchants. As a merchant, Caxton is uniquely suited to advertise the “prouffytable” aspects of his own textual production, both in the economic and symbolic senses of the word. The text promises to increase the reader’s cultural (and financial) capital while advancing the ambitions of the printer himself. In its presentation of practical instruction as well as its more artful and creative aesthetic flourishes, Caxton’s bilingual phrasebook employs a shrewd two-pronged strategy of appealing to notions of practicality and prestige, targeting an expanding marketplace of merchant class readers.

This comparative analysis, to invoke the title of this book, reveals how both Gower and Caxton trade in tongues. Gower exhibits a pervasive fascination with lawyers and merchants as figures who traffic in the city’s tongues (i.e., make a living by working across languages), and Caxton fuses the roles of merchant and author, quite literally by means of trafficking in tongues (i.e., creating a bilingual trading phrasebook). Through the creation of texts depicting urban life, each cultivates a translingual literary persona, finding at times unexpected opportunities to theorize language acquisition, cross-linguistic exchange, and the question of what language(s) can be properly be considered one’s own. This extended comparison of the poet and the printer highlights the creative potential available to medieval city dwellers with access to second (or third) languages.

How might this analysis of medieval translingual writers reshape our thinking about modern authors who write across tongues? In certain respects, the distinctive features of the first-person reflections of Gower and Caxton regarding their own translingualism emerge all the more sharply through cross-temporal comparison. In a postscript to his English novel *Lolita* (1955), Russian-born Vladimir Nabokov reflects upon his own translingual career in *proprīa persona*, articulating an acute sense of loss that a modern author feels after choosing to write in a second language. In composing *Lolita* in English, Nabokov laments that “I had to abandon my natural language, my natural idiom, my rich, infinitely rich and docile Russian tongue, for a second-rate brand of English.”

Jenefer Coates characterizes Nabokov (who wrote texts in Russian and English, as well as translating from French) as “tri-literary” but not trilingual *per se*; since Nabokov was not raised speaking English, he could not claim access to what he himself called “domestic diction,” so he converted (in Coates’ words) an “impediment to advantage by giving his [English] style

a baroque, hyper-literary tone.” The “mature Nabokovian voice,” in all its stylistic complexity, emerged as “self-conscious, richly intertextual, and always a little foreign.”

The first-person musings of the so-called “tri-literary” Nabokov on language, loss, and literary creation resonate, however obliquely, with the modesty *topoi* of trilingual Gower and polyglot Caxton. Both these medieval writers produced highly stylized texts in a second tongue (i.e., French), even as they acknowledged a perceived lack of “native” fluency and “domestic diction” in that language. To a certain extent, Gower might even anticipate the so-called “tri-literary” status of Nabokov, as the medieval poet writes major texts across three different languages with the result that his writing (as we have seen) is highly stylized in its diction and rich in intertextual resonance.

In my comparative reading of Gower and Caxton, I have sought to show how medieval discourses on translingual writing exhibit a complexity more profound than their superficial expressions of loss, lack, or deficiency in an acquired language might otherwise imply. Close reading of the first-person reflections of Gower and Caxton reveals their underlying appreciation for the very advantages of linguistic multiplicity. In their capacity to use Latin alongside a number of vernacular languages (English, French, and in Caxton’s case Dutch), these medieval translingual writers actually reap the benefits of experiencing *all* of their tongues (however unevenly) as living languages; as such, they position themselves as much less impoverished than Nabokov does centuries later. Rather than casting their writing in a second tongue as a process of exchanging an “infinitely rich” native tongue for one that is “second-rate,” Caxton and Gower approach language acquisition as a form of “proffyt” and generative production. In other words, these medieval translingual writers script their shifting literary practices over time as a perpetual expansion of possibility, and they engage in a complex transformation of their writing personas across tongues.

When their writings are read alongside each other, Gower and Caxton both reveal that language crossings can be profoundly enriching, with each additional language offering new opportunities (literary and economic) and facilitating creative experiments in thought and expression.

87. Ibid., 378.
Medieval translingual writers do not just reflect on their own accumulation of language skills or the even the desire to expand an ambitious oeuvre to encompass multiple languages; they suggest how readily languages coexist and transform one another over time, contributing to the genesis of manifold literary voices.