Travel and Language Contact in
The Book of Margery Kempe

Margery Kempe on Land and Sea

*The Book of Margery Kempe* (c. 1436), the spiritual account of a merchant-class housewife and frequent Continental traveler, is a Middle English narrative that conspicuously spans both sides of the sea. The Proem opens with an “Englyschman” who comes “into Yngland” from “beyonden the see [in] Dewchland” (Proem 66–89), and a merchant’s voyage from England “seylyng ovyr the see” (2.2.12) launches Book 2 of the text; the protagonist of the *Book* of course makes her own trips back and forth over the Channel, and the text traces her movements through a striking range of insular and Continental settings.¹ So well-traveled is she, in fact, that the narrator proclaims the text could not possibly relate all of her experiences “as wel on yen half the see as on this halfe, on the watyr as on the lond” (2.546).

This chapter considers the geocultural ramifications of the *Book’s* curious ineffability *topos*. In this moment in the Proem, the narrator asserts that overseas travel and trans-Channel perspectives are crucial to the text’s

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¹ All citations from the text are from *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Lynn Staley (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1996). For ease of reference across modern editions of the text, all my citations (with the exception of the Proem) include the relevant book, chapter, and line numbers.
operations—yet this claim would appear to run counter to the views of modern scholars who characterize *The Book of Margery Kempe* as idiosyncratically English or insular in its content, genre, or style. The *Book’s* first modern editors, for instance, sought to ascribe distinctive features of this text to “native influences,” only to acknowledge (however reluctantly) that the text incorporates Latin traditions as well as engages with Continental literary models. Moreover, the *Book’s* protagonist traverses diverse geographical spaces, languages, and nations far beyond England. In other words, the *Book’s* ineffability *topos* suggests how profoundly maritime and cross-cultural contexts inform the main character’s journeys, and the text asks readers to marvel at her very capacity to transcend linguistic and national boundaries.

In foregrounding the status of this English *Book* as a decidedly trans-Channel production, this chapter reassesses the text’s narrative not only as hagiography or spiritual autobiography (as many have done so well) but also as an intricate work of travel writing. The wondrous *Book* transports the reader over ground and water and inhabits “many divers contres and places” beyond England (Proem 115), and the text exhibits all the while a remarkable stylistic richness. Through my focus on the role of travel throughout the text, I seek to decenter the *Book’s* “Englishness” *per se* and trace how it explores translingual and intercultural modes of perception and understanding. Throughout the *Book*, Margery engages with an array of non-English speakers: Germanic scribes, Latinate and multilingual priests, and Continental (Romance-speaking) women, among others; each encounter not only sanctifies the protagonist but also provides (in many cases) an opportunity for creative literary experimentation, including artful portrayals of non-English speech patterns and modes of thought. Margery’s experiences are intricately shaped by her interactions with non-


English speakers on both sides of the sea (as the text dutifully reminds us), and her perpetual orbit through polylingual environments challenges readers to entertain the Book as something much more than the first English autobiography in English. The Book is in my view a textual participant in a translingual network of creation that effectively disperses authority and troubles stable linguistic orientations.4

The ensuing discussion follows the lead of Lynn Staley in bifurcating the name of Margery Kempe: “Margery” refers to the fictional protagonist inside the text, “Kempe” to an authorial figure or agent outside of it.5 Although this splitting of Margery (character) and author (Kempe) is not universally accepted by scholars—the distinction between the two could very well be an illusory one—I adopt this practice in order to stress that the “Margery” in the text is as much a rich fictional representation as “Geffrey” in Chaucer’s House of Fame (see chapter 1). Whenever I refer to Margery, I am careful to trace the character’s actions on the level of narrative fiction, and I only refer to Kempe when I am specifically invoking historical social circumstances outside of the Book itself.

Throughout this book, I have stressed the idea of attending to both the “roots” and “routes” of medieval culture, and my reading of The Book of Margery Kempe as travel writing continues this investigation outside of London-based contexts. The text’s narration of Margery’s travels evokes its particular roots in Kempe’s polyglot hometown of Lynn while also setting the reader in motion over terrestrial and oceanic routes. Staley has shown that our understanding of the Book must be informed by hometown contexts as well as travels abroad. In her influential reading, she discerns (among other things) a mobile “Englishness” in the Book, tracing the text’s connections to local, insular contexts (including debates over the vernacularization of the Gospel) and observing that “Margery . . . gathers around herself a ‘nation’ of folk who likewise define community in terms of language, relationship, and habit of unity” when she travels abroad; during such moments “the language—English—is a medium of true communication among otherwise unlike people” (170). This reading of Margery’s traveling English-language community—one that she “gathers around herself” and that defines a “habit of unity”—productively attends to Margery

5. Staley, 3.
in motion, but this idea of a “habit of unity” has the potential to diminish the richness of the protagonist’s participation in translingual forms of exchange. Margery, after all, does not maintain a hermetically sealed “English” bubble as she travels—among other things, her English company abandons her during her journeys, and she readily interacts with non-English speakers on both sides of the sea. As a result, the Book pursues non-anglocentric, transnational, and multidirectional trajectories.

This chapter has three sections. The first situates the Book in a polyglot historical context, illustrating the profoundly multilingual character of Kempe’s hometown of Lynn as well as the Book’s own accounts of travels abroad. The second section explores some of the translingual writing practices employed by others who worked in Lynn and their extended commercial network: namely, ports in East Anglia, London, and Continental urban centers linked together by members of the Hanseatic trade diaspora. This chapter’s third section examines a single motif in the Book, seaborne prayer, in order to bridge the text’s local East Anglian milieu and Continental maritime contexts. Since the Book asserts that events on both sides of the sea (“yen half the see as on this halfe”) comprise equally important aspects of the story, the text invites us to attend to travels “on the watyr as on the lond”—and the text challenges us to consider how both overland and overseas networks work to set people, and languages, in transit.

Cross-Linguistic Communication at Home and Abroad

The Book’s idiosyncratic interest in conjoining the processes of cross-linguistic exchange on land and over sea is evident from the text’s opening pages. The Proem initially situates the Book not in England or even in Britain per se but rather in a transnational, polyglot nexus of textual production. The text introduces a certain expatriated “Englyschman . . . dwellyng in Dewchlond”—that is, in present-day Germany or the Dutch-speaking Low Countries, or another Germanic region on the Continent—who sails “into Yngland wyth hys wyfe and hys goodys” to dwell in Margery’s home (66–72). This Anglo-Germanic scribe records Margery’s “felyngs” but produces an unintelligibly hybrid text: “neithyr good Englysch ne Dewch,” as the Book states (74). Only after Margery takes it to another priest “preyng hym to wrytyn this booke and . . . grawntyng hym a grett summe of good

for hys labowr” and praying God to “purchasyn hym grace to reden it and wrytyn it” is this garbled German/English text made legible (95–96). Aided by Margery’s prayer, the man reads the text and renders it into proper (“good”) English (95–96).

In this convoluted opening gambit, the Proem situates the reader on the English “side” of the Continent through well-chosen prepositions: this “Englyschman” returns “into Yngland . . . fro beyonden the see . . . in Dewchland” (66–84) [emphasis added]. That is, the text initially presumes a narrative orientation with England as its reference point, and the Continent is somewhere “beyonden” the sea. Nonetheless, the Proem gives the Book a restless maritime orbit, with the implicit geographical orientation of the reader fluctuating throughout the ensuing narrative. For instance, the Proem defines the first amanuensis as “a man dwelling in Dewchlond” (placing the reader on the Continent looking toward England) before the text claims him as “an Englyschman in hys byrth” (67–68). The second scribe whom Margery prays (and pays) to rewrite the hybrid German/English text “had sum tym red letters of the other mannys wrytyng sent fro beyonden the see whyl he was in Dewchland” (86–87).

The exact referent of the masculine pronoun in the phrase “whyl he was in Dewchland” is potentially ambiguous; while most would read the text as suggesting the second scribe was in England when he received the first man’s letters from overseas, it could also be the case that the second scribe was himself in “Dewchland” when he received the first man’s letters from England. The Proem presents the Book—initially composed in “neithyr good Englysch ne Dewch” (75), and only later transmuted into its current form—as a piece of writing that owes its existence not to a single point of origin in England but rather to a circuit of transactions: an exchange of goods, letters, and services launched by an act of overseas travel.

The very casual way in which the Proem characterizes movements between “Dewchland” and “Yngland” and marriages between different ethnic and linguistic groups suggests how readily Kempe’s hometown of Lynn incorporated Germanic visitors and intertwined their lives with those of native English inhabitants. Contemporary documents produced in Lynn, including multilingual epistolary and business correspondence, attest to frequent exchange between Lynn residents and overseas communities.

throughout the Hanseatic trade diaspora. The trilingual commonplace book (or memorandum book) of Kempe’s contemporary William Asshebourne, town clerk of the town then called Bishop’s Lynn, was collated between 1408–1417 and it gathers together (among other documents) letters between Lynn’s mercantile community and Hanseatic traders overseas. A friendly Latin letter to Lynn’s mayor from authorities in Danzig (or Gdańsk, in modern-day Poland) fondly recalls one “Edwardus Faukes noster convicinus dilectus qui nobiscum Dansik in naccione Anglico diu moratus est” [Edward Faukes, our beloved neighbor who dwelled for a long time among us within the English “nation” (merchant community) in Danzig] (fol. 56v), and an English letter sent back to England from Lynn merchants in Danzig establishes ordinances for the community while residing abroad (fols. 6v–8). In the broader context of such intimate English/Hanseatic neighboring in port cities, the marriage of Margery’s merchant son to a “wife in Pruce [Prussia] in Dewchelond” (2.1.51–52) and her own journey to accompany her daughter-in-law (“a Dewche woman”) back to “hir owyn cuntré” may very well have struck Kempe’s neighbors as relatively routine (2.2.109–112).

Just as the Proem situates the Book within broader networks of Anglo-Hanseatic epistolary, economic, and cultural exchange, the narrative also exploits the mixed local sociolinguistic landscape of Lynn in the service of bolstering Margery’s saintly status. In order for Kempe’s narrative fiction to claim a powerful rhetorical effect, readers must believe that the protagonist Margery is both illiterate and monolingual. By narrating the repeated and tortuous acts of cross-linguistic conversion that must transpire in order to bring the text into being (and, eventually, to transform it into legible “good Englysch”), the Proem renders the Book all the more authoritative—and amazing.

Despite the culturally hybrid coastal setting that the Book so breezily acknowledges in its Proem, Margery’s linguistic “Englishness” (that is, her identity as a woman who speaks only English) is frequently asserted throughout the text. Kempe or her amanuenses often highlights Margery’s purported monolingualism as a narrative device, seeking to extend the motif of the protagonist’s unlikely, miraculous authority. In one famous
episode, the steward of Leicester addresses Margery in Latin and she responds: “Spekyth Englysch . . . for I undyrstonde not what ye sey” (1.47.2650–51). But inside York Minster, Margery responds to Latinate clerics with great aplomb, suggesting she has at least some aural facility with Latin (and, as the narrator asserts, divine inspiration). Once the protagonist has crossed onto the “other” side of the sea, a complex chain of inter-vernacular and Latin/vernacular miracles ensues. In “Seynt Jonys Cherch Lateranens” in Rome, Margery delivers her confession to another German priest, who understands no English. Elsewhere, Margery tells a story “in hyr owyn langage in Englysch” to the same “Duche preste” who repeats it, in “the same wordys,” to a rapt audience—in Latin (1.40.2280–99). Through “mervylows” episodes of cross-linguistic communication, the Book repeatedly affirms the protagonist’s saintly status.

While the language miracles within the Book are compelling, we should not take at face value the text’s narrative assertions about the character’s limited language capacities. Elsewhere, the narrative reveals that Margery’s language proficiencies extend beyond Latin to include other vernaculars. Wandering “in the strete” near Rome, an impoverished Margery encounters a wealthy lady, “Dame Margarete Florentyn,” whom she first met in Assisi (1.38.2169). Neither woman speaks the other’s language, so they communicate through a mixture of simplified French and assorted gestures:

[Margery] met wyth a worshepful lady, Dame Margarete Florentyn, the same lady that browt hir fro Assyse into Rome. And neithyr of hem cowl wel undirstand other but be syngnys er tokenys and in fewe comown wordys. And than the lady seyd onto hir, “Margerya in poverté?” Sche, undirstondyng what the lady ment, seyd agen, “Ya, grawnt poverté, Madam.” Than the lady comawndyd hir to etyn wyth hir every Sonday and set hir at hir owen tabil abovyn hirself and leyd hir mete wyth hir owyn handys. (1.38.2177–84)

10. See book 1, chapter 51.
11. See book 1, chapter 33.
12. On medieval representations of female xenoglossia (the miraculous ability to speak or understand language that is previously unknown), see Christine Cooper-Rompato, The Gift of Tongues: Women’s Xenoglossia in the Later Middle Ages (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State Press, 2011), 103–42.
In this encounter, the *Book* effects a stylized portrayal of a mundane cross-linguistic exchange. In contrast to the miraculous language encounters that occur elsewhere in the *Book* (which carry strong Pentecostal and hagiographical resonances), this encounter between English Margery and her Continental namesake Margarete foregrounds the earthbound mechanics of human communication. “Margerya in poverté?” “Ya, grawnt poverté, Madam.” Here, Margery pleas for aid, and Dame Margarete responds with acts of charity. By offering direct discourse, and narrating its immediate aftereffects, the *Book* showcases the very worldly circumstances that shape Margery’s speech.

This Margery/Margarete encounter is also conspicuous for another reason: it suggests the potential malleability of national and ethnic affiliations for travelers who are far from home, when conventional social codes and rules of interaction are held, as it were, in suspension. The ethnic and linguistic origin of Margarete is, after all, unspecified; “Margarete” works as a Germanic or Romanic form of the name, and “Dame Florentyn” comes not from Florence but “fro Rome.” Whatever language(s) the women use at home, both the English Margery and her Continental namesake Margarete speak an improvised *lingua franca* on the road. Touchingly, the two women bridge a gulf of socioeconomic difference by converging upon the “comown” word *poverté*—which works equally well as (say) a French or a Middle English word. Moreover, the adjectival form of “grawnt” is a peculiar usage that appears nowhere else in the *Book*, perhaps reflecting Margery’s intuitive approximation of French. In short, the “Englysch” Margery may not actually speak Latin, but she can, when push comes to shove, display a functional proficiency in at least one other vernacular language.

This transient dialogue arguably incorporates elements of three different languages (Middle English, French, and Margery’s “Ya” has a certain Germanic tinge), and the *Book* depicts the fluid, dynamic sort of linguistic exchange that readily occurred along travel routes when people from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds were forced, by necessity, to interact. The *Book* may even record snippets of a Franco-Italian trade pidgin, or some other Romance-based vernacular.\(^1^4\) Although this representation of mixed language is indeed fleeting, there is a cumulative effect to such instances of interpersonal communication throughout the *Book* that evince a spoken *lingua franca* just beyond the text’s reach.\(^1^5\)


\(^{15}\) A similarly hybrid vernacular exchange occurs between Margery and a housewife
This term “lingua franca” of course has its origins in maritime cultural settings, and sociolinguistic research on pidgin and creole languages has revealed the complex hybridization of languages and cultural accommodation between speakers that occurs most conspicuously in maritime contact zones around the globe. Taxonomizing the reported speech in this episode as “belonging” to any particular language is admittedly problematic; Sanford Brown Meech, for instance, characterizes Margery’s speech as “a mongrel Italian,” while Barry Windeatt discerns “attempts to recall the question and [Margery’s] own response in broken Italian.” However, the women’s speech could more accurately be considered a functional adaptation rather than any attempt to replicate “one” particular language (be it French, Italian, or something along the lines of a spoken franco-veneto); as the text suggests, the women are converging upon a “comown” improvised tongue. Indeed, we can discern in this exchange many discourse features surprisingly consistent with contemporary maritime pidgins: the lack of personal pronouns, the omission of the copula, and a drastically reduced lexicon drawing from different substrate languages. In short, this fleeting snippet of dialogue offers a tantalizingly lifelike and artfully stylized representation of language contact.

My close reading of these lines of dialogue in the Margery/Margarete episode foregrounds the Book’s interests in both pragmatic and transcendent modes of cross-linguistic communication. Christine Cooper-Rompato shows that the Book as a whole pursues parallel interests in “miraculous earlier in Assisi. Margery asks the wife to help her find her ring signifying marriage to Christ: “Madam, my bone maryd ryng to Jhesu Crist, as ho seyth, it is away” (1.31.1822–23). The housewife retrieves the ring from under the bed and asks for forgiveness: “Bone Christian, prey pur me” (1.31.1830). The words “bone” [good] and “pur” [for] occur only in this passage of the Book, suggesting the women adopt a shared, Romance-derived speech.

17. Meech and Allen, footnote to 93/26–27 (p. 303).
18. Windeatt, footnote to line 3059 (p. 201).
19. See footnote 16 (above) for sociolinguistic overviews of pidgins and creoles. McMahon observes that the lexicon of a pidgin is characteristically reduced when compared to its superstrate and substrate languages (258); its words are often multifunctional, acting as nouns, verbs and adjectives; and expression of complex ideas often involves circumlocution and periphrasis (259). Romaine notes that pidgins are characterized by minimal pronominal systems (26) and often lack the copula (29).
and mundane translation,” and in this respect the narrative engages with broader medieval notions of female xenoglossia (i.e., the capacity to speak or communicate in a language that is previously unknown). I agree that the Book exhibits a noticeable parallel interest in both “miraculous and mundane” forms of communication, but I would hesitate to characterize this particular episode as narrating a process of “translation” per se. If we understand “translation” as a unidirectional movement—a conversion of an alien language into one’s own—then Margery and Margarete enact a mutual and bidirectional exchange, an interlinguistic process that results in a “comown” tongue that belongs to neither speaker.

This episode on the Continent marks a contrast with the language miracles that launch the Book, but if we read backwards to the beginning from this moment in the text we might see those earlier episodes in a new light. In the Proem, an expatriated “Englyschman in hys byrth” dwells in Margery’s own home to record her dictation, producing a text that floats uneasily between his native and acquired tongues (“neithyr good Englysche Dewch”). In the Margery/Margarete episode, the English woman and Continental lady arrive at shared idioma in which is “neithyr” speaker’s native tongue. In this case, neither speaker is entirely at home, yet each woman may nonetheless understand the other’s speech and make herself be understood. The “comown” language these women inhabit is, paradoxically, both familiar and strange.

In the Proem’s unnamed “Englyschman” and in Margery herself, we see two travelers who find themselves displaced, not quite at ease in their own language. For all its interests in miraculous and transcendent forms of communication, the Book reveals the dual nature of cross-linguistic exchange in medieval contact zones: such spaces can provide opportunities to forge a “comown” ground with people other than ourselves but can also create environments in which nobody feels entirely at home. In this episode, the Book asks us to consider not only how Margery’s language use evinces a transcendent sanctity but also how our shared earthly existence and experience of the world is shaped through language itself. When speakers of different languages come together in shared spaces, they can all find themselves partially estranged from their respective native tongues, discovering in a “comown” indeterminate language a temporary space to negotiate a new sense of belonging.

Margery Kempe’s Multilingual Peers

What truly makes the Margery/Margarete exchange so striking in comparison with xenoglossic “Duche preste” moments is the Book’s uncharacteristic refusal to attribute any “gret mervayle” or transcendent “undirstondyng” to such exchanges. The text emphatically renders the Margery/Margarete interaction as an entirely earth-bound form of communication that relies upon functional adaptation rather than divine intervention. Consciously representing a middling speech, the text narrates a series of gestures, physical “syngyns er tokenys” produced during a reciprocal exchange. At the same time, the shared language of Margery and Margarete is the first step in bridging the gulf of social difference between the women. Through third-person utterances, they mutually recognize that the English “Margerya” is in “poverté,” and the semiotic exchange of “syngyns er tokenys” facilitates a socioeconomic trade-off: “Dame Margarete” places the impoverished Margery “at hir owen tabil abovyn hirself and leyd hir mete wyth hir owyn handys” (1.38.2184). Ultimately, the Book goes so far as to narrate the very “goodys” that change hands from one woman to the other: Margarete “filled [Margery’s] botel wyth good wyn [a]nd sumtyme sche gaf hir an eight bolendins [Bologna coins] therto” (1.38.2188–89). Through this episode, mundane linguistic exchange—the sort that travelers (like pilgrims and merchants) undergo on an everyday basis—goes hand in hand with an exemplary act of worldly charity.21

Such quotidian episodes suggest Kempe’s apparent desire to authorize her text in pragmatic, secular ways that augment the more transparently saintly or miraculous moments throughout the Book. Kempe’s early monastic readers may very well have assimilated her text into available hagiographic templates, as the Latin and English marginalia in the surviving Kempe manuscript suggest.22 Nonetheless, Kempe’s imagined contemporary audience could have conceivably included not only women and men of the cloth but also secular city dwellers of a social standing similar to her own; that is, a well-to-do, functionally multilingual audience that included members of the merchant classes.

22. Staley, 6.
In the case of “Dame Florentyn,” her Continental origins, impressive “worschepful” entourage, and her admirably high social status are marked by her participation in a Frenchified if not Romance-inflected exchange. In the Book, Continental Margarete’s elegant name, “Dame Florentyn,” signals her high social standing, but we see a much less flattering take on French appellations and French language proficiency in the General Prologue to Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales just a generation or so earlier. Chaucer’s Prioress “peyned . . . to countrefete cheere/Of court” (139–40), is “cleped Dame Eglantyne” (121), and speaks a local, non-Continental variety of “Frenssh [a]fter the scole of Stratford-atte-Bowe,/For the Frenssh of Parys was to hire unknowe” (145–46). The wives of Chaucer’s Guildsmen “ech [semed] a fair burgeys/To sitten in a yeldehalle on a deys” (369–70) and even if they cannot speak French per se, they—like the French-speaking Prioress—find it “ful fair to been ycleped madame” (376).

Curiously enough, the functionally proficient Dame Florentyn and merchant-class housewife Margery Kempe occupy social positions not altogether different from Chaucer’s city women (the wealthy and pious “Dame Eglantyne” and status-obsessed burgesses who desire to be “ycleped madame” in the guildhall).23 Early in the Book, Margery openly announces her origins among the town’s urban elite: she proudly declares she is “comyn of worthy kenred . . . for hir fadyr [i.e., John Brunham] was sumtyme meyr of the town” of Lynn and “sythyn he was alderman of the hey Gyld of the Trinyté,” i.e., the merchant guild or parish fraternity of the Holy Trinity (1.2.197–99). Civic records indicate that one “Margeria Kempe” was enrolled as a member of this prestigious and powerful charitable organization c. 1438 (around the time the Book was completed).24 In another episode in the Book, Margery attends Mass in St. Margaret’s Church while holding “hir boke in hir honde” (1.9.484), presumably an illustrated book of hours of the sort that was mass-produced in France or the Low Countries in Kempe’s day.25 A wooden plank falls upon Margery, causing her to cry in pain, and a “good man” named “John of Wyreham” (invoked elsewhere in Lynn civic records as a mercer and member of the Guild of St. Giles and St. Julian) politely attends to the distressed Margery, and she thanks

23. Chaucer’s urban(e) Wife of Bath expresses a similar sentiment to one of her husbands, albeit with a heavy dose of irony: “Thou seist also that it displeseth me/But if that thou wolt preyse my beautee,/And but thou poure alwey upon my face,/And clepe me faire dame in every place” (The Wife of Bath’s Prologue, 293–96).

24. See also Meech and Allen, Appendix III, I (358–59) and III, II (359–62). For more on guilds, charity, and merchant culture in Kempe’s day, see Ladd.

25. Windeatt, footnote to line 659, p. 83.
him for “hys cher and his charyté” (9.489–91). In this context, French-derived words like “cher” [gentle expression] and “charyté” [benevolence] have distinctly courtly resonances, signaling some of the social affectations of Lynn’s merchant-class elite.

Such depictions of partial or effected French proficiency may have conveyed a sense of Margery’s own class pretensions to Kempe’s contemporary English audience, particularly in the context of the other passages suggesting Margery’s guild affiliations and relating her prideful endeavors as an entreprenue. Whereas depictions of French-speaking city people could signal strong class pretensions (as they could in the case of Chaucer’s readers a generation earlier), the women’s use of language in the Book’s episode overseas represents social difference in a subtler way. In the context of the Book’s narrative of travel, this instance of language contact between Margery and Margarete (which transpires far away from Lynn) evokes a generalized urban class resonance, but it also stages an encounter between English and Continental vantage points. Kempe portrays Dame Florentyn as an identifiably Continental, high-status woman who gives charity to a poor English Margery across perceived class and ethnic differences. An exemplary matron, this “Dame” stands in marked contrast to the Book’s other Continental travelers of expressly “Englysch” origin: the ones who scorn, reject, or even abandon their “owyn” Margery throughout their travels. The remarkable quality of Dame Florentyn’s kindness—that is, her capacity to recognize Margery’s unique spiritual status across socio-cultural boundaries—is conveyed all the more persuasively through the women’s converging speech patterns. We may see the very opposite of linguistic transcendence—that is, the willful adaptation and mutual convergence of speech—as one parallel mechanism for authorizing the account of interpersonal contact.

We have seen that this Book, despite its hagiographical drive, is not solely concerned with a transcendental communication that overcomes the barriers of human speech; the text carefully manipulates earth-bound languages, including trade registers or mixed vernacular speech. If we read such moments more closely, we also gain access to a Margery Kempe whose linguistic proficiencies extend much further than most modern readers have assumed. Although the figure of Margery within the text is indeed char-

26. For more on Wyreham, see Meech and Allen, Appendix VI, p. 372.
27. See book 1, chapter 2.
28. Throughout the Book, Margery is rebuked, scorned, and abandoned by others identified as English. In book 2, chapter 6, she is abandoned by her own “cumpany” of pilgrims.
acterized as monolingual—she claims she only speaks “hyr owyn langage [of] Englysch”—the Book’s intricate internal operations suggest that Kempe outside the text could have had more wide-ranging language capacities.

The degree of Margery Kempe’s Latin knowledge has, so far, attracted the most attention among those who have thought in depth about her language capacities. The presence of Latin citations throughout the text despite the Book’s assertion that Margery does not know the language (see 2648–53, 1875–81, and 2058–64) has invited modern critics to reach varying conclusions.\(^{29}\) Karma Lochrie’s influential assessment of Margery Kempe’s Latinity, for instance, requires one to read the Latin citations in the Book as Margery Kempe’s voice, but other critics read such moments in the text as interpolations by her own priest-scribe.\(^ {30}\) Even if these Latin citations have been supplied by the “Dewche preste,” the instances of direct mixed-vernacular discourse as in the episodes discussed above would appear to have a more consciously literary or at least a stylized mimetic quality. As lifelike portrayals of vernacular speech, they provide an alternate form of authorization to the Book to interwoven Latin or Scriptural citations. We can perhaps best imagine the Book as a palimpsest of different narratives dictated, written, and rewritten over time: a dense text that layers any number of constitutive languages, influences, and speech patterns. Rather than linguistic hierarchies that would privilege Latin over vernacular languages, the Book superimposes a hagiographical baseline of Latin/vernacular miracles with a layer of inter-vernacular exchanges.

The Book’s layered polyvocality certainly enhances its narrative richness: the text, dictated by Margery Kempe to multiple interlocutors, is written out by scribes with varying linguistic skills and cultural backgrounds. Other texts produced throughout medieval Lynn’s trade network help create a fuller picture of the mixed linguistic capacities of Kempe’s urban peers. The busy multilingual character of Lynn is conspicuously documented through merchant-class textual collections regarding civic life and overseas trade. The Red Register of Lynn, for instance, records important local charters in French and Latin, and it was stored in Kempe’s beloved Trinity

29. Also see book 2, 367–69, in which Margery cites passages from the Psalter. For an influential reading of this and other passages in which Margery speaks Latin or directly cites Latin Scripture, see Lochrie.

Travel and Language Contact in *Margery Kempe*

William Asshebourne, the aforementioned common clerk of Lynn, occupied a social orbit that readily overlapped with Kempe’s: Robert Spryngolde, named in the *Book* as one of Margery Kempe’s own confessors and scribes, is mentioned in a French record within Asshebourne’s *Liber*; this entry appears within the pages of his diverse collection transmitting French epistolary correspondence, documents in English and Latin regarding Anglo-Hanseatic trade, and mixed-language accounts of local political disputes.

Elsewhere in East Anglia, Robert Reynes of Acle, a manorial administrator and guild member himself, compiled a text steeped in urban culture including devotional and hagiographical poetry (for performance in a local guild of St. Anne), and the collection exhibits pervasive interests in travel through urban networks: e.g. Latin–English verses, itineraries between cities, Latin numbers, French vocabulary for currency amounts, and numerous contracts and legal materials. The *Liber Lynne*, a cartulary compiled around 1430 for John Lawneye, citizen and grocer who married a Lynn fishmonger’s widow, records a series of deeds concerning London’s relationship with the Hanseatic Steelyard in Lynn.

This manuscript collection, intended for private family use, transmits English and Latin documents along with French headings identifying the genre of each text (letter, deed, charter, power of attorney, etc.) and summarizing its contents. The fact that such textual aids would be written out in French suggests the extent to which merchant-class readers could use—or, at the very least, have the skills to navigate—an array of concurrent languages.

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31. The fourteenth-century Red Register is now housed in King’s Lynn Borough Archives. The Red Register of King’s Lynn, transcribed by R. F. Isaacson and ed. Holcome Ingleby. 2 vols. (King’s Lynn: Thew & Son, 1919–1922).

32. In the *Book*, Margery’s “confessowr, parisch preste of Seynt Margaretyes Cherche” (1.67.3859–60) is elsewhere identified as “Maistyr Robert Springolde” (1.57.3285–86). Asshebourne’s *Liber* contains a French letter to the Bishop of Norwich on behalf of the same “Robert Spryngald” (fol. 49v). See also Owen, *Asshebourne’s Book*, no. 148, p. 83.


35. The *Book* recounts multiple visits to London. In book 1, chapter 16, Margery and her husband John reside in the palace of Archbishop at Lambeth; in book 1, chapter 55,
of Kempe’s social peers are taken into account, we gain further insight into the sociolinguistic nuances of the Book’s mode of representation. Keeping Kempe’s social milieu in mind, we can now turn to a particularly resonant register throughout Margery’s speech: her seaborne prayers.

Maritime Language and Seaborne Prayer

In rerouting this discussion of the Book’s protagonist via other multilingual urban contexts in Lynn and beyond, we can gain a fuller appreciation for how this text transmits verbal traces of dispersed cultural and linguistic environments on the sea and in the city. I have discussed Margery’s encounters with non-English speakers, and we have witnessed the character’s capacity to engage in Romance-derived and French-inflected forms of speech. This section explores how Margery’s frequent prayers to Christ and the Virgin Mary—uttered immediately before, during, or after sea voyages—exploit trade discourses prevalent in the port towns through which Margery travels. When Margery departs Rome “pursyng to gon ageyn into her owyn natyf lond” (1.42.2339), she makes her way “into Inglondward . . . owte of Rome” (1.42.2359–60) to the port of “Medylborwgh” [Middelburg, in the present-day Netherlands] (1.42.2366). Fearing the “many thevys be the wey which wolde spoyl hem of her goodys,” she prays to Christ:

Crist Jhesu, in whom is al my trost, as thow hast behyst me many tymes befor that there schulde no man be disesyd in my cumpny, and I was nevyr deceived ne defrawdyd in thi promyss . . . grawnt that I and myn felawschep wythowtyn hyndryng of body er of catel . . . may gon hom ageyn into owr lond lych as we come hedyr. (1.42.2340–46)

Both Sebastian Sobecki and David Wallace have elaborated upon the complex hagiographical discourses prevalent in such moments of prayer and how the holy seafaring motif links the Book to Chaucer’s Custance and other holy seafarers. As we have seen in chapter 2, medieval texts they again travel to London to receive a dispensation from the new Archbishop. In book 2, chapter 9, Margery travels alone and is graciously received by some Londoners but rebuked by others.

36. See Sebastian Sobecki, The Sea and Medieval English Literature (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 137–38. See also Wallace, 6–7. For more on women seafarers, see the discussion in chapter 2 (above).
can portray seafaring women as nimble navigators who traverse linguistic and geographical boundaries on land and sea. During Margery's later sea voyages en route to Danzig “tempestys weryn so grevows and hedows that thei myth not rewlyn ne governe her schip” (2.3.208); the narrator observes that they “cowde no bettyr chefsyawns than comendyn hem self and her schip to the governawns of owr Lord; thei left her craft and her cunnyng and leet owr Lord dryvyn hem wher he wolde” (2.3.203–10). In this moment, the text puns on God as the *gubernator* (guide, rudder) or helmsman of the ship, activating numerous spiritual resonances at once.

Elsewhere in the text, the sea acts quite transparently as a spiritual metaphor, conjoining movements across language with movements across space. In a vernacular echo of James 1:8, the *Book* at one point states that “a dubbly man in sowle is evyr unstabyl and unstedfast in al hys weys” and such a man is “evyr mor dowtyng is lyke to the flood of the see, the whech is mevyd and born abowte wyth the wynd, and that man is not lyche to receyven the gyftys of God” (1.18.969–72). In such moments, travel serves as a figure for spiritual wavering, and God’s steadfast guidance stands in marked contrast to the capricious winds and tempests of the sea: “Dowtyr, for alle thes cawsys and many other cawsys and benefetys whech I have schewyd for the on this half the see and on yon half the see, thu hast gret cawse to lovyn me” (1.65.3817–19). Throughout the *Book*, tempests can serve a clear signifying function. The cessation of such storms often suggests the efficacy of Margery’s prayers, and—as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has observed—tempests and winds in and of themselves can often register for Margery as divine communication.37

In Book 2 we witness a significant shift in the sea’s spiritual significance: the spiritual instability of mercantile life is projected onto the sea itself, stressing its importance for the livelihood of Lynn traders. “The seyd creatur had a sone, a tal yong man, dwellyng wyth a worschepful burgeys in Lynne, usyng marchawndyse and seyling ovyr the see,” the *Book* reveals, and Margery seeks to “drawyn [him] owt of the perellys of this wretchyd and unstabyl worlde yyf hir power myth a teynyd therto” (2.1.11–14). Indeed, it is “sone aftyr the same yong man passyd ovyr the see in wey of marchawndyse” that he falls “into the synne of letchery,” and the discourse that the narrator employs in order to describe the merchant-son’s spiritual error is unmistakably nautical. He errs “thorw evyl entisyng of other personys and foly of hys owyn governawnce,” and this highly-charged term “governawnce” once again evokes the steering and guidance of God (2.1.24–27).

37. Cohen, 118.
Margery's seaborne prayers suggest both divine guidance and spiritual allusions, yet the protagonist's prayers simultaneously deploy discourses that are much more mundane and pragmatic. Many modern readers have remarked upon the pervasive use of contractual language throughout the Book, and the pragmatic register of the agreements between Margery and Christ have been characterized either as symptoms of "a very material mysticism" or, to put it more pointedly, a "very mercantile mysticism." But all of these maritime prayers slip into an identifiable linguistic register as well: Francophone business correspondence. Maryanne Kowaleski makes a case that daily "communication between English mariners" and non-English speakers "may have been eased by the use of French as the lingua franca of not only maritime law and some port-town records, but also as the basis of a common argot in the Atlantic littoral." Indeed, we could extend Kowaleski's insight to that most maritime of ports, Kempe's hometown of Lynn. East Anglian city folk, including the mayors, aldermen, and guild members of Margery Kempe's hometown—or, as a fourteenth-century entry in the town's Red Register puts it, "les burgeys de la ville de Lenne" (fol. 142d)—recorded their own letters to foreign merchants and instructions for native and alien fishers and traders in this language.

French documents included in the Red Register of the Mayor and Commonalty of Lynn often invest in relating final bequests or dispensation of charity, or offering a written record of quotidian business transactions. In a French "lettre" within the Register, Paul Lomb states that he and two other men of Lynn have pooled their money to jointly purchase two houses in another town: "nous eyons jointement purchacee de nostre commun argent deux places mesones en la ville de Seynt Boltoff" (fol. 16). In another part of the Red Register, a French ordinance proclaims that "touz les burgeys de la ville de Lenne qui tenount ou tentreunt hostes qils averont la vjme partie de lour hostes de totes maners de marchandises venantz ala dite ville" [all the burgesses of the town of Lynn who take in strangers (non-native traders) shall have the sixth part from those strangers all manner of merchandise coming to the said town], with the exception of

40. Transcriptions from the Red Register follow Ingleby.
various sorts of “peysshon fresch” [fresh fish] (fol. 142d). In addition, these strangers “ne conceaulunt nule manners de marchaundises” [shall not conceal any manner of merchandise] and “sil nul hoste soit trove coupable en nul des poyntz avauntditz [il] perdraient le profyst” [if any stranger be found guilty of the aforesaid matters, they should lose the profits] (fol. 142d). In this coastal context, we see once again the proximity between “naytif” English and “straunge” inhabitants, and for the burgesses of Lynn Anglo-French is both a foreign and a native language (note the hybrid, macaronic quality of the phrase “peyshon fresch”).

Given its status as a trade language in major urban centers, French appears particularly useful when members of the merchant classes must communicate with people outside (or from outside) Lynn itself: e.g., a letter recording a purchase of a property in a different town, or an ordinance concerning the treatment of foreign traders in Lynn. For the burgesses and civic community of Lynn, French serves not only as a literal lingua franca with the potential to communicate with people beyond the city itself, but it also functions as an identifiable trade register, one that commonly narrates the movements of commodities, property, and people.41

In this context, Margery’s pre-travel prayer to Christ—uttered just before yet another sea voyage—assumes a clear localizing resonance. When Margery prays in the port of Middelburg, she asks that Christ protect her “cumpayny,” reminds Him that she was “nevyr deceived ne defrawdyd in thi promyss,” and requests that Christ “grawnt” her freedom of movement without “hynderawnce of body er of catel” (1.42.2340–6). The contractual terms throughout her appeal—compaignye, graunt, promyse, hinderaunce, and catel—are all, unsurprisingly, terms of French origin. From a sociolinguistic and historical standpoint, we can readily see that Margery’s prayers mobilize a great deal of business vocabulary, and the fact that French was the dominant mode for recording everyday transactions goes far in explaining why the Book would code-switch into a conspicuously French-inflected register in order to record such utterances.

41. In Asshebourne’s Liber, letters concerning diplomacy, maritime trade, or international conflicts are recorded in French, although some letters on behalf of Lynn’s Mayor and merchant community are written down in English (see footnote 8, above). French documents to and from Lynn’s Mayor and burgesses concern Exchequer documents, “chev[is] aunce” (a loan request), and the confiscation of certain vessels arriving in Lynn (see folios 20v, 21v, and 22v); French letters between the Mayor and burgesses of Lynn and Admiral Thomas Beaufort appear on folios 26v and 50. For letters in English, see folios 6v–8, 51v, and 52 (these folios include letters from Lynn merchants to authorities in Wismar, Rostock, and Stralsund).
Practical considerations notwithstanding, I would like to foreground the literary resonances of such code-switching moments in the text, and consider how such language use is functioning within the fictive narrative context of travel. It is precisely when Margery moves across the sea, or stands on the verge of embarking onto the water, that the *Book* breaks into its clearest Francophone register. Insofar as the *Book* is a literary text, the French-inflected language in Margery’s maritime prayers resonates with other fictional representations of merchant-class characters across medieval genres, particularly in East Anglian coastal settings. William Langland’s “Covetyse,” for example, whose speech abounds with Francophone merchant jargon, speaks “no Frensh, but of the ferthest ende of Norfolk” (*Piers Plowman*, B.V.235); that is, he claims mastery only over the professional variety of French used in Norfolk ports (like Lynn) and other areas where he must conduct trade, with the “ferthestende” (the sea itself) as Norfolk’s outer limit.42

The Digby *Mary Magdalen*, written down in East Anglia around 1500, is a “littoral [play] . . . where much of the narrative consists of boarding ships and disembarking, with stage directions frequently referring to coasts.”43 In one scene, “Galaunt” and “Coryosite” approach Mary, speaking in overtly Frenchified discourse. Galaunt, who identifies himself as a “frysch new . . . marchant” by vocation, suddenly appears (presumably “frysch” off the boat) and Coryosite marvels at his “ressplendant” clothing (500–503).44 Not only does their discourse employ a great deal of Francophone vocabulary, but the rhyme patterns that give form to their speeches consistently stress French-derived word endings: “galaunt,” “marchant,” “peneawnt,” “constant,” “ressplendant” (500–508).45

This general Francophone tenor of Margery’s prayers strongly evokes the worldview of merchants and practical considerations of everyday life in Lynn. In Book 2, mundane considerations over maritime travel serve to further authenticate the account. This section opens with an unchar-


acteristically detailed description of the logistics of sea travel, drawing the Book’s resonance even closer to the style and tone of epistolary and business correspondence of Margery’s hometown burgesses. Margery writes “letterys” to her merchant son on the Continent, “seying that whedyr he come be londe er be watyr” he should be “certifiid of hys moderys cownsel,” and the narrative states the son dutifully

hiryd a schip er ellys a part of a schip in whch he putt hys good, hys wife, hys childe, and hys owyn self, purposyng alle to comyn into Inglond togedyr. Whan thei weryn in the schip, ther resyn swech temp estys that thei durstyn not takyn the see, and so thei comyn on lond ageyn, bothyn he, hys wife, and her childe. (2.2.90–96)

The intricate prose style evokes French epistolary conventions and business parlance. Exploiting stylized repetition (“hys good, hys wife, hys childe, and hys owyn self . . . he, hys wife, and her childe”), this passage mimics the reckoning of merchandise and transport of people and goods that so often concerns Francophone maritime writing. Indeed, Margery’s prayers to cease this tempest at sea closely resemble Francophone contractual agreements: “thu hast oftyn tyme behite me that I schulde nevyr perischyn neithyr on londe ne in watyr ne wyth no tempest” (2.3.213–14); “I, unworthy wretche, am deceyvyd and defrawdyd of the promys that thu hast mad many tyme onto me . . . wythdrawe thes tempestys and schewe us mercy” (2.3.217–20).

These seaborne prayers to Christ and the Virgin Mary strategically adopt the French-inflected register of business correspondence, and these anaphora-laden, formulaic requests and responses throughout the Book nicely echo the rhetorical devices in contemporaneous mercantile documents. Compare, for example, the letter of Lynn ambassadors to the Queen of Denmark, Sweden, and Norway concerning negotiations between Hanseatic and Lynn merchants (c. 1416), one of many texts transmitted in Asshebourne’s Liber. Lynn merchants pray that the Queen excuse their delayed arrival, and the letter, recorded in Middle English, evokes high-status French epistolary models:

oure merchauntes being here ate Lenne for nedefull causes hadden non er understondyng of this matere because that schippes of oure merchauntes for divers tempests and contrarious wyndes hav ben in comyng and seiling from your cite of Northberne [i.e., Bergen] to Lenne . . . these same procuratours in her viage at this tyme be taryed by tempests contrarious
wyndes or ellis be swich other cause reasonable they mighten be yowre godly and gracious mediacion ben fully had [sic] excused. (fol. 94v)\textsuperscript{46}

Although this letter serves a practical purpose, it deploys some rhetorical flourishes. The capricious whims of the sea (“divers tempests and contrarious wyndes”) are a justifiable excuse for a delayed arrival, and a formulaic repetition of phrases (“tempests and contrarious wyndes . . . tempests contrarious wyndes or ellis”) evokes the ebb and flow of sea-travel and the uneven turning of waves. In the French-inflected Middle English of the Book, earnest prayers amid “tempests” recall such pragmatic discursive rhythms, and at one point the Virgin Mary’s response, “I telle the trewly thes wyndys and tempestys schal sone sesyn” (2.3.239) echoes Christ’s own formulaic language regarding winds and “tempestys.”

The Book code-switches into an identifiably French-inflected register at key moments in its narrative, evoking the very sounds of home even as the protagonist sails far afield in foreign waters. The bureaucratic language of the civic scribe, merchant, or burgess “outre mere” or “beyonden the see” in Lynn is still readily heard and preserved through the text’s intricate style of narration. It is precisely during such moments across the sea—or even physically upon the sea itself—that Margery’s speech registers as most homely, most local, and most Francophone. By evoking the ways business varieties of French were used across different urban centers, the Book provides yet another secular mechanism for authorizing Kempe’s account.

Margery Kempe’s Language-Worlds

This chapter ends with the most self-consciously “mervylows” section of the Book: the account of the protagonist’s overseas journey to Hanseatic ports in Book 2. In this narrative section, which concludes the Book as a whole, the major cultural phenomena discussed above ultimately converge. The Book makes a final detour into another (Germanic) language context, transporting its protagonist through a varied itinerary of towns: Danzig, Stralsund, Calais, Dover, Canterbury, London, and Lynn.

As we have seen, the Book’s account of Margery’s overseas travel code-switches into an identifiably Francophone register at key moments in the text. Margery fears the potential “hynderawnce of body er of catel” while traveling over land, and her anxieties over sea travel are even more pronounced. When “sche come fro Seynt Jamys” [Santiago de Campostela

\textsuperscript{46} See also Owen, Making of King’s Lynn, no. 365 (pp. 286–87).
in modern-day Spain] (1.45.2385–86), she utters a similarly contractual prayer for protection: “Befor that sche entryd the schip, sche mad hir prey-erys that God schulde kepe hem and preserve hem fro venjawns, tem-pestys, and perellys in the se” (1.45.2587–88). Fears over loss of life or goods while traversing these North Atlantic sea routes preoccupied medieval merchants and shipmen alike, as Chaucer states slightly earlier.47 In a convergence of travel, trade, and tale-telling, Margery arrives on land post-tempest and tells “good talys” in order to earn some money:

And, whan thei wer in the lityl schip, it began to waxin gret tempestys and dyrke wedyr. [ . . . ] And, whan thei wer on the londe, the forseyd creatur fel downe on hir knes kyssyng the grownde, hyly thankyn g God that had browt hem hom in safté. Than had this creatur neithyr peny ne halfpeny in hir purse. And so thei happyd to meten wyth other pilgrimys whech govyn hir three halfpenys, inasmeche as sche had in comownyng telde hem good talys. (1.43.2396–2404)

In this moment, the heavy use of parataxis employs not so much the lexi-con but the bureaucratic syntax of French business documents. If we read the prose stylings as a deliberate rhetorical or stylistic strategy, then this passage resonates with the Book’s wider aesthetic and mimetic qualities.48 The anaphora-laden prose (“And, whan thei wer. . . . And, whan thei wer. . . . And so thei happyd . . . ”) has a lulling, rhythmic effect; its nar-rative flow conveys the ups and downs of movement over sea and land. Moreover, the loss of goods that begins this passage (“neithyr peny ne half-peny in hir purse”) leads to the generation of narrative (the “good talys”) that the reader consumes.

The Book’s resonance as travel writing becomes most apparent in the spectacular collision of hagiographical, mercantile, and maritime motifs in Book 2: “tempestys,” “perellys,” “merveyls,” and seaborne prayers, all nar-

47. Chaucer states: “Us moste putte oure good in aventure./A marchant, pardee, may nat ay endure . . . Somtyme his good is drowned in the see./And somtyme comth it sauf unto the londe” (The Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale, 946–50). In The General Prologue, the Merchant fears sea piracy along the same Middelburg trajectory that Margery follows: “He wolde the see were kept for any thing/Bitwixe Middelburgh and Orewelle” (276–77). The Shipman draws “many a draughte of wyn . . . whil that the chapman sleep” during his own journeys “[f]ro Burdeux-ward” (396–97), tracing much the same route that Margery takes “fro Seynt Jamys ageyn” (1.45.2585–86) and “hom ageyn to Bristowe” (1.45.2600). For Lynn docu-ments concerning Middelburg-Lynn trade matters, see KL/C10/2, fols. 87v and 124.

rated along the way to the Hanseatic port of “Danske in Duchelond,” or Danzig (2.4.259). Margery arrives safely at this port in 1433, but when it is time for her to depart she is not granted leave: “sche han no leve to gon owt of that lond, for sche was an Englisch woman, and so had sche gret vexacyon and meche lettyng er sche myth getyn leve of on of the heerys of Pruce for to gon thens” (2.4.283–85). As Staley and others have noted, 1433 was a time of rocky relations between England and the Hanseatic League, and Margery’s status as “an Englisch woman” leaves her movements at the discretion of “the heerys of Pruce,” or the Teutonic Knights in Prussia. Wallace has observed that the honorific title “heerys”—a term conferred upon Teutonic Knights—marks the sole occurrence of this Germanic loan word in the Book. The unexpected slippage into Germanic honorifics signals Margery’s submission to the authority of those who can permit or restrict her motion.

Eventually, Margery’s itinerary takes her through other port towns (Calais, Dover, London), and the Book wends its way to a conclusion. After travels in “divers contres and places” and encounters with speakers of “divers” languages, Margery at last returns to her hometown of Lynn. In a lengthy prayer to God and a final appeal to the audience, the Book’s narrator proclaims that “this world . . . wolde merveylyn and wonderyn” at what the text relates (2.3.234–35). If, as Staley has suggested, “Kempe uses the prayer to establish Margery’s singular position,” then “she also uses it to compose a world” (182). The Book’s intricately rendered prayers transmit aspects of the discrete language-worlds through which Margery has journeyed.

The Book of Margery Kempe employs fictional geography to depict scenes of cross-linguistic communication both at home and overseas, and it highlights the many ways that languages converge and disperse across maritime settings. Unlike other tales of sea-tossed protagonists, some of the Book’s most fluid linguistic exchanges occur, strangely enough, on land. Diverging from common “generic crossroads” in romance and hagiography (see my discussion of the complexity of overseas and littoral encounters in chapter 2), the Book employs roadways, homes, and urban domestic spaces as settings for narrating geographically disparate moments of language contact.

These many instances of translinguistic slippage in the narrative and the layered verbal texture of the Book’s prose augment Margery’s wide-ranging travels. Just as the Book slides into a hybrid Romance-inflected vernacular when narrating encounters in northern Italy and code-switches into an identifiably Francophone contractual register when transmitting seaborne prayers, so does the text drift toward Germanic speech (however subtly) as Margery sails through Hanseatic ports. Narrative episodes like these legitimize the Book—giving the text a veneer of authenticity or imbuing the text with some “local color”—and their rhetorical flourishes, all the while, enhance the story stylistically. In its capacity as travel writing, the Book evokes some of the varied linguistic features of cultural environments at home and abroad.

Throughout my reading of The Book of Margery Kempe, I have attended to the ways particular shifts in language and register convey movements into different social spheres. Extending Staley’s suggestion that Kempe “uses [prayer] to compose a world,” I see the French-inflected register of Margery’s maritime prayers effectively creating what Hans-Georg Gadamer calls a language-world [Sprachwelt] within the text.⁵¹ Rather than suggesting the habitus (linguistic and social practice) of a particular merchant-class woman, such instances of French-inflected contractual speech show how language itself can transmit a worldview shared by a larger community. Code-switching into a Francophone business register readily evokes a pragmatic language-world that would have been not only familiar to merchant-class Margery but also readily recognizable to Kempe’s own urban peers.

When English Margery and Continental Margarete meet on the road and forge a “comown” tongue between them, the Book breaks new ground, suggesting the potential permeability of language-worlds for people in transit. Neither woman is speaking her “own” language in this episode, yet they each manage to stumble into a “comown” language-world that can, however provisionally, sustain them both. While Gadamer believes that “our experience of the world is bound to language,” this does not “imply exclusiveness of perspectives,” and when we “[enter] foreign language-worlds . . . this does not mean that we leave and negate our own world.”⁵² By representing travels through such nuanced forms of language, the Book suggests the possibility that Margery accumulates the resonance of multiple language-worlds over time, and that she can transport these disparate

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⁵². Ibid., 448.
language-worlds (northern Italy, Hanseatic ports, her own hometown of Lynn) wherever she may go. Ultimately, the Book offers more than a stylized narrative that traverses land and sea: it suggests how profoundly our perceptions of our homes and our orientations toward our native tongues can shift through the social dynamics of travel.