

In englysch tonge I schal you telle  
Yif ye so longe with me wil dwelle  
Ne latyn wil I speke ne waste  
Bot englysch that men usen maste

For þat is your kynde langage  
þat ye haue most hey of vsage  
þat kan eche man vnderstonde  
þat is boȝe in engelonde  
For þat langage is most schewed  
As wel among lewed as lewed  
Latyn as I trowe can nane  
Bot þoo þat haue it at scole tane  
Some kan frensch and no latyn  
þat used haue court & dwelled þin  
And some kan of latyn a þty  
þat kan frensch ful febelly  
And some vnderston den englysch  
þat kan nouȝt latyn ne frensch  
Bot lewed & lewed olde & yonge  
Alle vnderston den englysch tonge  
Ifore I hold it most gey nan

In englysch tonge I schal you telle  
Yif ye so longe with me wil dwelle  
Ne latyn wil I speke ne waste  
Bot englysch that men usen maste  
For that is youre kynde langage  
That ye have most here of usage  
That kan eche man understonde  
That is boren in engelonde  
For that langage is most schewed  
As wel among lewed as lewed  
Latyn as I trowe can nane  
Bot thoȝ that haue it at scole tane  
Somme kan frensch and no latyn  
That used haue court and dwelled therein  
And somme kan of latyn a party  
That kan frensch ful febelly  
And somme vnderston den englysch  
That kan nouȝt latyn ne frensch  
Bot lewed and lewed olde and yonge  
Alle vnderston den englysch tonge ...

Extract from *Speculum Vitae*, a devotional poem in English for lay readers (WLC/LM/9 ff.1v-2).

# A Variety of Tongues

These manuscripts show the use of three different languages in England in the later medieval period – Middle English, Anglo-Norman, and Latin. They illustrate the choices made by authors and how English vernacular emerged as the standard literary medium.

The author of the *Speculum Vitae* (*The Mirror of Life*), writing late in the fourteenth century, chose to use English. He commonly uses the letters ‘yogh’ (‘3’) for ‘y’ and ‘thorn’ (‘þ’) for ‘th’; see the words ‘you’ (line 1) and ‘that’ (line 4) in this extract (*far left*). He says here that everybody, both the educated and unschooled, can understand English: “Bot lered and lewed olde and yonge / Alle vnderston den englysch tonge”. Latin and French were, by comparison, used by particular communities and for specific purposes.

hic i fte Gower q' zluglic est sua vba  
gallica si que idogrua fuerit: excusat  
P vnu site de toute le monde  
Johan Gower ceste balad enmoie  
Et si ieo nap de francois la faconde  
pdones moy qe ieo de ceo for siore  
qe sui englois. si quier par tiele voie  
Estre excuse mais quonqz muls en die

The explanation ‘Gower, qui Anglicus est, sua verba Gallica ... excusat’ introduces the poet’s reference to his use of French in *Traité pour essamplir les amantz marietz* (WLC/LM/8 f.203v).

John Gower, a contemporary and friend of Geoffrey Chaucer, wrote in all three languages. His *ballades* include the poem *Traité pour essamplir les amantz marietz*, promoting the virtues of married love. He modestly apologises for any mistakes in his French. The use of Latin to introduce the passage followed a familiar convention of bilingual presentation. Gower’s great English work was known by its Latin title *Confessio Amantis* and included Latin running titles and section headings.

For Robert de Gretham’s *Mirur* the appropriate language for lay education was French rather than Latin (WLC/LM/4 f.57v).

Although French remained familiar to Gower’s contemporaries at court and in educated or wealthy circles, the great days of Anglo-Norman as a literary medium were over. It had emerged as a distinct dialect of French after the Norman Conquest established a French-speaking aristocracy. It was still dominant when Robert de Gretham in the mid-thirteenth century wrote his advice on moral conduct, the *Mirur*.

Si est co mult grant fohe.  
A lai parler latinerie.  
C il sentremet de fol mester:  
K iuer lai uote latin parler:  
C lescun des estre a taimm nuf.  
P ar la langue dūc est apruf. il

Latin was still the preferred language for many purposes, particularly by the church and in the administration of law and government. With its fixed grammar and spelling, it was easy to abbreviate without misunderstanding. It remained the medium for international scholarship until the seventeenth century.

And of temperance pat nedeful es  
Sobrietas & temperance  
is a vtn a zeyn al chauce  
De sobrietate  
& temperancia

Marginal note in Latin ‘De sobrietate & temperancia’ flags the relevant English text in *Speculum Vitae* (WLC/LM/9 f.224).