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The Norman Conquest and the Subjection of English, 1066–1200

81. The Norman Conquest.

Toward the close of the Old English period an event occurred that had a greater effect on the English language than any other in the course of its history. This event was the Norman Conquest in 1066. What the language would have been like if William the Conqueror had not succeeded in making good his claim to the English throne can only be a matter of conjecture. It would probably have pursued much the same course as the other Germanic languages, retaining perhaps more of its inflections and preserving a predominantly Germanic vocabulary, adding to its word-stock by the characteristic methods of word formation already explained, and incorporating words from other languages much less freely. In particular it would have lacked the greater part of that enormous number of French words that today make English seem, on the side of vocabulary, almost as much a Romance as a Germanic language. The Norman Conquest changed the whole course of the English language. An event of such far-reaching consequences must be considered in some detail.

82. The Origin of Normandy.

On the northern coast of France directly across from England is a district extending some seventy-five miles back from the Channel and known as Normandy. It derives its name from the bands of Northmen who settled there in the ninth and tenth centuries, at the same time that similar bands were settling in the north and east of England. The Seine offered a convenient channel for penetration into the country, and the settlements of Danes in this region furnish a close parallel to those around the Humber. A generation after Alfred reached an agreement with the North-men in England, a somewhat similar understanding was reached between Rollo, the leader of the Danes in Normandy, and Charles the Simple, king of France. In 912 the right of the Northmen to occupy this part of France was recognized; Rollo acknowledged the French king as his overlord and became the first duke of the Normans. In the following century and a half a succession of masterful dukes raised the dukedom to a position of great influence, over-shadowing at times the power of the king of France.

The adaptability of the Scandinavian, always a marked characteristic of this people, nowhere showed itself more quickly. Readily adopting the ideas and customs of those among whom they came to live, the Normans had soon absorbed the most important elements of French civilization. Moreover they injected fresh vigor into what they

borrowed. They profited from their contact with French military forces and, adding French tactics to their own impetuous courage, soon had one of the best armies, if we may use the term, in Europe. They took important features of Frankish law, including the idea of the jury and, with a genius for organization that shows up as clearly in the Norman kingdom of Sicily as in Normandy and later in England, made it one of the outstanding legal systems of the world. They accepted Christianity and began the construction of those great Norman cathedrals that are still marvels to the modern architect. But most important of all, for us, they soon gave up their own language and learned French. So rapidly did the old Scandinavian tongue disappear in the Norman capital that the second duke was forced to send his son to Bayeux so that he might learn something of the speech of his forefathers. In the eleventh century, at the time of the Norman Conquest, the civilization of Normandy was essentially French, and the Normans were among the most advanced and progressive of the peoples of Europe.

For some years before the Norman Conquest the relations between England and Normandy had been fairly close. In 1002 Æthelred the Unready had married a Norman wife and, when driven into exile by the Danes, took refuge with his brother-in-law, the duke of Normandy. His son Edward, who had thus been brought up in France, was almost more French than English. At all events, when in 1042 the Danish line died out and Edward, known as the Confessor, was restored to the throne from which his father had been driven, he brought with him a number of his Norman friends, enriched them, and gave them important places in the government. A strong French atmosphere pervaded the English court during the twenty-four years of his reign.

83. The Year 1066.

When in January 1066, after a reign of twenty-four years, Edward the Confessor died childless, England was again faced with the choice of a successor. And there was not much doubt as to where the choice would fall. At his succession Edward had found England divided into a few large districts, each under the control of a powerful earl. The most influential of these nobles was Godwin, earl of the West Saxon earldom. He was a shrewd, capable man and was soon Edward's principal adviser. Except for one brief interval, he was the virtual ruler of England until the time of his death. His eldest son, Harold, succeeded to his title and influence and during the last twelve years of Edward's reign exercised a firm and capable influence over national affairs. The day after Edward's death Harold was elected king.

His election did not long go unchallenged. William, the duke of Normandy at this time, was a second cousin to the late king. Although this relationship did not give him any right of inheritance to the English throne, he had nevertheless been living in expectation of becoming Edward's successor. Edward seems to have encouraged him in this hope. While William had been on a brief visit in England, Edward had assured him that he should succeed him. Even Harold had been led, though unwillingly, to acknowledge his claim. Having on one occasion fallen into William's hands, it seems he had been forced to swear, as the price of his freedom, not to become a candidate or oppose William's election. But the English had had enough of French favorites, and when the time came Harold did not consider himself bound by his former pledge.

Only by force could William hope to obtain the crown to which he believed himself entitled. Perhaps the difficulty involved in an armed invasion of England would have discouraged a less determined claimant. But William was an exceptionally able man. From infancy he had surmounted difficulties. Handicapped by the taint of illegitimacy, the son of his father by a tanner's daughter of Falaise, he had succeeded to the dukedom of Normandy at the age of six. He was the object of repeated attempts upon his life, and only the devoted care of his regents enabled him to reach maturity. In early manhood he had had to face a number of crucial contests with rebellious barons, powerful neighbors, and even his overlord, the French king. But he had emerged triumphantly from them all, greatly strengthened in position and admirably schooled for the final test of his fortune. William the Great, as the chroniclers called him, was not the man to relinquish a kingdom without a struggle.

Having determined upon his course of action, he lost no time in beginning preparations. He secured the cooperation of his vassals by the promise of liberal rewards, once England was his to dispose of. He came to terms with his rivals and enemies on the continent. He appealed to the pope for the sanction of his enterprise and received the blessing of the Church. As a result of these inducements, the ambitious, the adventurous, and the greedy flocked to his banner from all over France and even other parts of Europe. In September he landed at Pevensey, on the south coast of England, with a formidable force.

His landing was unopposed. Harold was occupied in the north of England meeting an invasion by the king of Norway, another claimant to the throne, who had been joined by a brother of Harold's, Tostig, returning from exile. Hardly had Harold triumphed in battle over the invaders when word reached him of William's landing. The news was scarcely unexpected, but the English were not fully prepared for it. It was difficult to keep a medieval army together over a protracted period. William's departure had been delayed, and with the coming of the harvest season many of those whom Harold had assembled a few months before, in anticipation of an attack, had been sent home. Harold was forced to meet the invader with such forces as he had. He called upon his brothers-in-law in the earldoms of Mercia and Northumbria to join him and repel the foreigner by a united effort. But they hung back. Nevertheless, hurrying south with his army, Harold finally reached a point between the Norman host and London. He drew up his forces on a broad hill at Senlac, not far from Hastings, and awaited William's attack. The battle began at about nine o'clock in the morning. So advantageous was Harold's position and so well did the English defend themselves that in the afternoon they still held their ground. For William the situation was becoming desperate, and he resorted to a desperate stratagem. His only hope lay in getting the English out of their advantageous position on the hill. Because he could not drive them off, he determined to try to lure them off and ordered a feigned retreat. The English fell into the trap. Thinking the Normans were really fleeing, a part of the English army started in pursuit, intending to cut them down in their flight. But the Normans made a stand, and the battle was renewed on more even terms. Then happened one of those accidents more easily possible in medieval than in modern warfare. Harold, always in the thick of the fight, was killed during the battle. According to tradition, he was pierced in the eye by a Norman arrow (although the Bayeux Tapestry supplies contradictory evidence about the arrow). In any event, his death seems to have been instantaneous. Two of his brothers had already fallen. Deprived of their leaders, the

English became disorganized. The confusion spread. The Normans were quick to profit by the situation, and the English were soon in full retreat. When night fell they were fleeing in all directions, seeking safety under the cover of darkness, and William was left in possession of the field.

Although William had won the battle of Hastings and eliminated his rival, he had not yet attained the English crown. It was only after he had burnt and pillaged the southeast of England that the citizens of London decided that further resistance would be useless. Accordingly they capitulated, and on Christmas Day 1066, William was crowned king of England.

84. *The Norman Settlement.*

William's victory at Hastings and his subsequent coronation in London involved more than a mere substitution of one monarch for another. It was not as though he had been chosen originally as the successor of Edward. In that case there would doubtless have been more French favorites at court, as in the time of the Confessor, and Normans in certain important offices. But the English nobility would have remained intact, and the English government would have continued with its tradition unbroken. But William's possession of the throne had been a matter of conquest and was attended by all the consequences of the conquest of one people by another.

One of the most important of these consequences was the introduction of a new nobility.¹ Many of the English higher class had been killed on the field at Hastings. Those who escaped were treated as traitors, and the places of both alike were filled by William's Norman followers. This process was repeated several times during the next four years while the Conquest was being completed. For William's coronation did not win immediate recognition throughout England. He was in fact acknowledged only in the southeast. Upon his return from a visit to Normandy the following year he was faced with serious rebellions in the southwest, the west, and the north. It was necessary for him to enter upon a series of campaigns and to demonstrate, often with ruthless severity, his mastery of the country. As a result of these campaigns the Old English nobility was practically wiped out. Although many lesser landholders kept small estates, the St. Albans Chronicler was but slightly exaggerating when he said that scarcely a single noble of English extraction remained in the kingdom.² In 1072 only one of the twelve earls in England was an Englishman, and he was executed four years later.³ What was true in the time of the Conqueror was true also in the reigns of his sons, and later. For several generations after the Conquest the important positions and the great estates were almost

¹ On the fate of the Old English aristocracy see F.M.Stenton, "English Families and the Norman Conquest," *Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, 4th ser., 26 (1944), 1-12.

² Roger of Wendover, ed. H.O.Coxe, II, 23 (*Eng. Hist. Soc.*).

³ P.V.D.Shelly, *English and French in England, 1066-1100* (Philadelphia, 1921), p. 32.

always held by Normans or men of foreign blood. As an English poet, Robert of Brunne (1338), sums up the situation,

To Frankis & Normanz, for þar grete laboure,
To Flemmynges & Pikardes, þat were with him in stoure,

He gaf londes bityme, of whilk þer successoure
Hold **3it** þe seysyne, with fulle grete honoure.⁴

In like manner Norman prelates were gradually introduced into all important positions in the church. The two archbishops were Normans. Wulfstan of Worcester was the only Old English bishop who retained his office until the end of the Conqueror's reign, and even his exceptional personality did not prevent him from being scorned by Lanfranc as a simple and untutored man, ignorant of the French language and unable to assist in the king's councils.⁵ The English abbots were replaced more slowly, but as fast as vacancies occurred through death or deprivation they were filled generally by foreigners. In 1075 thirteen of the twenty-one abbots who signed the decrees of the Council of London were English; twelve years later their number had been reduced to three. Foreign monks and priests followed the example of their superiors and sought the greater opportunities for advancement that England now offered. A number of new foundations were established and entirely peopled by monks brought over from Norman houses.

It is less easy to speak with certainty of the Normans in the lower walks of life who came into England with William's army. Many of them doubtless remained in the island, and their number was increased by constant accretions throughout the rest of the eleventh century and the whole of the next. The numerous castles that the Conqueror built were apparently garrisoned by foreign troops.⁶ In the chronicles of the period we find instances extending all through the twelfth century of foreign forces being brought to England. Many of these doubtless made but a short stay in the island, but it is safe to say that every Norman baron was surrounded by a swarm of Norman retainers. William of Newburgh speaks of the bishop of Ely, in the reign of Richard I, as surrounding his person with an army of friends and foreign soldiers, as well as arranging marriages between Englishmen of position and his relations, "of whom he brought over from Normandy multitudes for this purpose."⁷ Ecclesiastics, it would seem, sometimes entered upon their office accompanied by an armed band of supporters. Turolde, who became abbot of Peterborough in 1070, is

⁴ *Chronicle*, ed. Hearne, I, 72:

⁵ Roger of Wendover, II, 52.

⁶ Orderic Vitalis, Bk. IV, *passim*.

⁷ William of Newburgh, Bk. IV, chap. 14, 16.

To French and Normans, for their great labor,
 To Flemings and Picards, that were with him in battle,
 He gave lands betimes, of which their successors
 Hold yet the seizin, with full great honor.

described as coming at the head of 160 armed Frenchmen to take possession of his monastery;⁸ and Thurston, appointed abbot of Glastonbury in 1082, imposed certain innovations in the service upon the monks of the abbey by calling for his Norman archers, who entered the chapter house fully armed and killed three of the monks, besides wounding eighteen.⁹ Likewise merchants and craftsmen from the continent seem to have settled in England in considerable numbers.¹⁰ There was a French town beside the English one at Norwich and at Nottingham,¹¹ and French Street in Southampton, which retains its name to this day, was in the Middle Ages one of the two principal streets of the town.¹² It is quite impossible to say how many Normans and French people settled in England in the century and a half following the Conquest,¹³ but because the governing class in both church and state was almost exclusively made up from among them, their influence was out of all proportion to their number.

85. *The Use of French by the Upper Class.*

Whatever the actual number of Normans settled in England, it is clear that the members of the new ruling class were sufficiently predominant to continue to use their own language. This was natural enough at first, as they knew no English; but they continued to do so for a long time to come, picking up some knowledge of English gradually but making no effort to do so as a matter of policy. For 200 years after the Norman Conquest, French remained the language of ordinary intercourse among the upper classes in England. At first those who spoke French were those of Norman origin, but soon through

⁸ Freeman, *Norman Conquest*, IV, 457, 459.

⁹ Freeman, IV, 390–93. Both incidents are related in the Peterborough Chronicle.

¹⁰ A contemporary biographer of Thomas Becket tells us that many natives of Rouen and Caen settled in London, preferring to dwell in this city because it was better fitted for commerce and better supplied with the things in which they were accustomed to trade. *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, IV, 81 (Rolls Series).

¹¹ W. Cunningham, *Alien Immigrants to England*, pp. 35–36.

¹² P. Studer, *Oak Book of Southampton*, I, xii ff.

¹³ F. York Powell in Traill's *Social England*, I, 346, says: "One may sum up the change in England by saying that some 20,000 foreigners replaced some 20,000 Englishmen; and that these newcomers got the throne, the earldoms, the bishoprics, the abbacies, and far the greater portion of the big estates, mediate and immediate, and many of the burgess holdings in the chief towns." We do not know what the estimate is based upon, but unless it refers, as it seems to do, to the years immediately following the Conquest, it does not seem to be too high.

intermarriage and association with the ruling class numerous people of English extraction must have found it to their advantage to learn the new language, and before long the distinction between those who spoke French and those who spoke English was not ethnic but largely social. The language of the masses remained English, and it is reasonable to assume that a French soldier settled on a manor with a few hundred English peasants would soon learn the language of the people among whom his lot was cast. The situation was well described, about the year 1300, by the writer of a chronicle which goes by the name of *Robert of Gloucester*:

Pus com lo engelond in to normandies hond.
 & þe normans ne couþe speke þo bote hor owe speche
 & speke french as hii dude atom, & hor children dude also teche;
 So þat heimen of þis lond þat of hor blod come
 Holdeþ alle þulke spreche þat hii of hom nome.
 Vor bote a man conne frencs me telþ of him lute.
 Ac lowe men holdeþ to engliss & to hor owe speche **3ute.**
 Ich wene þer ne beþ in al þe world contreyes none
 Pat ne holdeþ to hor owe speche bote engelond one.
 Ac wel me wot uor to conne boþe wel it is,
 Vor þe more þat a mon can, þe more wurþe he is.¹⁴ (7537–47)

An instructive parallel to the bilingual character of England in this period is furnished by the example of Belgium today. Here we find Flemish and French (Walloon) in use side by side. (Flemish is only another name for the Dutch spoken in Belgium, which is practically identical to that of the southern Netherlands.) Although the use of the two languages here is somewhat a matter of geography—Flemish prevailing in the north and French in the part of the country lying toward France—it is also to some extent dependent upon the social and cultural position of the individual. French is often spoken by the upper classes, even in Flemish districts, while in such a city as Brussels it is possible to notice a fairly clear division between the working classes, who speak Flemish, and the higher economic and social groups, who attend French schools, read French newspapers, and go to French theaters. In the interest of accuracy, it may be noted

¹⁴ Thus came, lo! England into Normandy's hand.
 And the Normans didn't know how to speak then but their own speech
 And spoke French as they did at home, and their children did also teach;
 So that high men of this land that of their blood come
 Hold all that same speech that they took from them.
 For but a man know French men count of him little.
 But low men hold to English and to their own speech yet.
 I think there are in all the world no countries
 That don't hold to their own speech but England alone.
 But men well know it is well for to know both,
 For the more that a man knows, the more worth he is.

parenthetically that fluency in French is becoming less common in the north, especially among the younger generation.

86. Circumstances Promoting the Continued Use of French.

The most important factor in the continued use of French by the English upper class until the beginning of the thirteenth century was the close connection that existed through all these years between England and the continent. From the time of the Conquest the kings of England were likewise dukes of Normandy. To the end of his life William the Conqueror seems to have felt more closely attached to his dukedom than to the country he governed by right of conquest. Not only was he buried there, but in dividing his possessions at his death he gave Normandy to his eldest son and England to William, his second son. Later the two domains were united again in the hands of Henry I. Upon the accession of Henry II, English possessions in France were still further enlarged. Henry, as count of Anjou, inherited from his father the districts of Anjou and Maine. By his marriage with Eleanor of Aquitaine he came into possession of vast estates in the south, so that when he became king of England he controlled about two-thirds of France, all the western part of the country from the English Channel to the Pyrenees.

Under the circumstances it is not surprising that the attention of the English should often be focused upon affairs in France. Indeed, English kings often spent a great part of their time there. The Conqueror and his sons were in France for about half of their respective reigns. Henry I (1100–1135) was there for a total of more than seventeen out of the thirty-five years of his reign, sometimes for periods of three and four years at a time.¹⁵ Although conditions at home kept Stephen (1135–1154) for the most part in England, Henry II (1154–1189) spent nearly two-thirds of his long reign in France. When we remember that, except for Henry I, no English king until Edward IV (1461–1483) sought a wife in England, it is easy to see how continentally minded English royalty was and how natural a thing would seem the continued use of French at the English court.

What was true of the royal family was equally true of the nobility in general. The English nobility was not so much a nobility of England as an Anglo-French aristocracy. Nearly all the great English landowners had possessions likewise on the continent, frequently contracted continental marriages, and spent much time in France, either in pursuance of their own interests or those of the king. When we remember that on many of the occasions when the king and his nobles crossed the Channel they were engaged in military operations and were accompanied by military forces, that the business of ecclesiastics and merchants constantly took them abroad, we can readily see how this constant going and coming across the narrow seas made

¹⁵ W. Farrer, "An Outline Itinerary of King Henry the First," *Eng. Hist. Rev.*, 34 (1919), 303–82, 505–79.

the continued use of French by those concerned not only natural but inevitable.

87. The Attitude toward English.

There is no reason to think that the preference that the governing class in England showed for French was anything more than a natural result of circumstances. The idea that the newcomers were actively hostile to the English language is without foundation.¹⁶ It is true that English was now an uncultivated tongue, the language of a socially inferior class, and that a bishop like Wulfstan might be subjected to Norman disdain in part, at least, because of his ignorance of that social shibboleth.¹⁷ Henry of Huntington's statement that it was considered a disgrace to be called an Englishman may be set down to rhetorical exaggeration. It is unreasonable to expect a conquered people to feel no resentment or the Norman never to be haughty or overbearing. But there is also plenty of evidence of mutual respect and peaceful cooperation, to say nothing of intermarriage, between the Normans and the English from the beginning. The chronicler Orderic Vitalis, himself the son of a Norman father and an English mother, in spite of the fact that he spent his life from the age of ten in Normandy, always refers to himself as an Englishman.

According to the same chronicler¹⁸ William the Conqueror made an effort himself at the age of forty-three to learn English, that he might understand and render justice in the disputes between his subjects, but his energies were too completely absorbed by his many other activities to enable him to make much progress. There is nothing improbable in the statement. Certainly the assertion of a fourteenth-century writer¹⁹ that the Conqueror considered how he might destroy the "Saxon" tongue in order that English and French might speak the same language seems little less than silly in view of the king's efforts to promote the belief that he was the authentic successor of the Old English kings and in the light of his use of English alongside of Latin, to the exclusion of French, in his charters. His youngest son, Henry I, may have known some English, though we must give up the pretty story of his interpreting the English words in a charter to the monks of Colchester.²⁰ If later kings

¹⁶ On this subject see the excellent discussion in Shelly, *English and French in England*.

¹⁷ Roger of Wendover, ed. H.O.Coxe, II, 52.

¹⁸ Ordericus Vitalis, ed. Prevost, II, 215.

¹⁹ Robert Holkot, on the authority of John Selden, *Eadmeri Monachi Cantuariensis Historiae Novorum siue sui Saeculi Libri VI* (London, 1623), p. 189.

²⁰ The story was considered authentic by so critical a student as J.Horace Round ("Henry I as an English Scholar," *Academy*, Sept. 13, 1884, p. 168), but the charter was proved by J.Armitage Robinson to be a forgery. Cf. C.W.David, "The Claim of King Henry I to Be Called Learned," *Anniversary Essays in the Medieval History by Students of Charles Homer Haskins* (Boston, 1929), pp. 45-56.

for a time seem to have been ignorant of the language,²¹ their lack of acquaintance with it is not to be attributed to any fixed purpose. In the period with which we are at the moment concerned—the period up to 1200—the attitude of the king and the upper classes toward the English language may be characterized as one of simple indifference. They did not cultivate English—which is not the same as saying that they had no acquaintance with it—because their activities in England did not necessitate it and their constant concern with continental affairs made French for them much more useful.

88. *French Literature at the English Court.*

How completely French was the English court at this time is clearly shown by the literature produced for royal and noble patronage. In an age that had few of our modern means of entertainment, literature played a much more important part in the lives of the leisured class. And it is interesting to find a considerable body of French literature being produced in England from the beginning of the twelfth century, addressed to English patrons and directed toward meeting their special tastes and interests. We do not know much about the literary conditions at the court of the Conqueror himself, although his recognition of learning is to be seen in many of his appointments to high ecclesiastical positions. His daughter Adela was a patron of poets, and his son Henry I, whether or not he deserved the title Beauclerc that contemporaries gave him,²² was at least married successively to two queens who were generous in their support of poets. His court was the center of much literary activity²³ Matilda, his first wife, was especially partial to foreign poets.²⁴ For Adelaide of Louvain, his second wife, David related the achievements of her husband, the king, in French verse. The work is lost, but we know of it from the statement of a contemporary poet, Geoffrey Gaimar, who boasted that he knew more tales than David ever knew or than Adelaide had in books. Likewise for Adelaide, Philippe de Thaun wrote his *Bestiary*, a poem describing rather fancifully the nature of various animals and adding to each description a moral still more fanciful. Gaimar wrote his *History of the English*, likewise in French verse, for Lady Custance “li Gentil,” who also paid him a mark of silver for a copy of David’s poem, which she kept in her chamber. At the same time Samson de Nanteuil devoted

²¹ We do not know whether William Rufus and Stephen knew English. Henry II understood it, although he apparently did not speak it (see § 91). Richard I was thoroughly French; his whole stay in England amounted to only a few months. He probably knew no English. Concerning John’s knowledge of English we have no evidence. As Freeman remarks (*Norman Conquest*, II, 129), the royal family at this time is frequently the least English in England and is not to be used as a norm for judging the diffusion of the two languages.

²² The question is decided in the negative by David, “The Claim of King Henry I.”

²³ For a fuller treatment of the subject, see an excellent study by K.J.Holzknrecht, *Literary Patronage in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, 1923), chap. 12.

²⁴ William of Malmesbury, *Gesta Regum Anglorum*, II, 494 (Rolls Series).

11,000 lines of verse to be *Proverbs of Solomon* for Lady Adelaide de Condé, wife of a Lincolnshire baron. In the reign of Henry II Wace wrote his celebrated *Roman de Brut* and presented it to the queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine. It is a legendary history of Britain, in which the exploits of King Arthur occupy a prominent place, and was certain to interest a royal family anxious to know something about the history of the country over which it had come to rule. Later Wace undertook in his *Roman de Rou* to write a similar account of the dukes of Normandy. Works of devotion and edification, saints' lives, allegories, chronicles, and romances of Horn, Havelok, Tristan, and other heroes poured forth in the course of the twelfth century. It is indicative of the firm roots that French culture had taken on English soil that so important a body of literature in the French language could be written in or for England, much of it under the direct patronage of the court.

89. *Fusion of the Two Peoples.*

As we look back over any considerable stretch of history we are likely to experience in the perspective a foreshortening that makes a period of 150 years seem relatively small, and we fail to realize that changes that seem sudden are in reality quite a natural in the course of a lifetime or a succession of generations. In the years following the Norman Conquest the sting of defeat and the hardships incident to so great a political and social disturbance were gradually forgotten. People accepted the new order as something accomplished; they accepted it as a fact and adjusted themselves to it. The experience of our own time shows how quickly national antagonisms and the bitterness of war can be allayed, and what a decade or two in the twentieth century can accomplish in this respect must be allowed to have been possible also in the eleventh. The fusion of Normans and English was rapid, but not more rapid than national interest and the intercourse of everyday life would normally bring about. The distinction between French and English that appears among the Domesday jurors²⁵ or a document of 1100 addressed by Henry I "to all his faithful people, both French and English, in Hertfordshire" does not long survive. When a distinction is made it soon comes to be between the English, meaning all people of England, and the French, meaning the inhabitants of Franch. This early fusion of French and English in England is quite clear from a variety of evidences. It is evident in the marriage of Normans to English women, as when Robert d'Oily further enriched himself by marrying Eadgyth, the daughter of a great English landowner, or when the parents of Orderic Vitalis, already mentioned, were united.²⁶ It is evident from the way in which the English gave their support to

²⁵ Round, *Feudal England*, pp. 120–21.

²⁶ Matthew Paris speaks of the Conqueror as promoting marriages between the Normans and the English. Cf. *Gesta Abbatum*, I, 44 (Rolls Series).

their rulers and Norman prelates, as when William II and Henry I drove off foreign invaders with armies made up almost wholly of English troops or when, Anselm and Becket found their staunchest supporters among the English.²⁷ It is evident in many other ways. Between 1072 and 1079 Wulfstan brought about some sort of spiritual federation between the monks of Worcester and six other English monasteries—Evesham, Chertsey, Bath, Pershore, Winchcombe, and Gloucester—in which we find “the heads of these great monasteries, some Norman, some English,...binding themselves together without respect of birth or birthplace, in the closest spiritual fellowship.”²⁸ Norman nobles identified themselves with their new country by founding monasteries on their estates and chose burial for themselves and their families in their adopted land rather than in Normandy.²⁹ In the towns the associations incident to trade are spoken of by Orderic Vitalis as another factor in bringing about a union between the two peoples.³⁰ Everywhere there are signs of convergence. The fusion seems to have gone forward rapidly in the reign of Henry I, and by the end of the twelfth century an English jurist was able to write: “Now that the English and Normans have been dwelling together, marrying and giving in marriage, the two nations have become so mixed that it is scarcely possible to-day, speaking of free men, to tell who is English, who of Norman race.”³¹ Only the events of the next century, the loss of Normandy, and the growing antagonism toward France were necessary to complete the union, psychological as well as physical, of all the inhabitants of England.

90. *The Diffusion of French and English.*

The difficult question of the extent to which English and French were used in England after the Norman Conquest is not easily answered. The evidence on which we can base a conclusion is scattered, must be carefully appraised, and is not always easy to harmonize. From time to time writers of the period tell us that such a one spoke both French and English or that he was ignorant of one or the other language. At times incidents in the chronicles enable us to draw a pretty safe inference. Books and treatises, such as the *Ancrene Riwe* and the various thirteenth-century works on husbandry, when we know the individuals for whom they were written, or the social class, at least, to which they belong, shed some light on the problem. From the thirteenth century on, something can be gleaned from the proceedings of the courts, where the language in

²⁷ Hardy, *Catalogue of Materials*, II, xxiv.

²⁸ Freeman, *Norman Conquest*, IV, 382–87.

²⁹ Shelly, *English and French in England*, p. 42.

³⁰ Freeman, IV, chap. VII.

³¹ *Dialogus de Scaccario* (1177). Stubbs, *Select Charters* (4th ed., 1881), p. 168. The *Dialogus de Scaccario* is edited and translated by Charles Johnson (London, 1950).

which a man testifies is occasionally noted. The appearance of manuals from about 1250 for the teaching of French is significant. In the fourteenth century poets and writers often preface their works with an explanation of the language employed and incidentally indulge from time to time in valuable observations of a more general linguistic nature. In the fifteenth century the evidence becomes fairly abundant—letters public and private, the acts and records of towns, guilds, and the central government, and a variety of incidental allusion. From all of this accumulated testimony the situation can be easily enough stated in general terms, as, indeed, has already been done (§ 85): French was the language of the court and the upper classes, English the speech of the mass of the people. Can we, however, define the position of the two languages more specifically? The question to be asked is really twofold: (1) When and how generally did the upper class learn English? (2) How far down in the social scale was a knowledge of French at all general?

91. Knowledge of English among the Upper Class.

We have already remarked that the use of French was not confined to persons of foreign extraction, but that all those who were brought into association with the governing class soon acquired a command of it. It was a mark of social distinction. On the other hand, the fact that English was the language of the greater part of the population made it altogether likely that many of the upper class would acquire some familiarity with it. Such appears to have been the case, at least by the twelfth century. The evidence comes mostly from the reign of Henry II.³² The most striking instance is that reported (c. 1175) by William of Canterbury in his life of Becket. On one occasion Helewisia de Morville, wife of a man of Norman descent and mother of one of Becket's murderers, invoked the aid of her husband in an emergency by crying out, "Huge de Moreville, ware, ware, ware, Lithulf heth his swerd adrage!"³³ Clearly her husband, whatever language he spoke, understood English. Henry II himself seems to have understood English, though he did not speak it. According to a story twice told by Giraldus Cambrensis³⁴ he was once addressed by a Welshman in English. Understanding the remark, "the king, in French, desired Philip de Mercros, who held the reins of his horse, to ask the rustic if he had dreamt this." When the knight explained the king's question in English, the peasant replied in the same language he had used before, ad-

³² Some of William the Conqueror's English writs were addressed to Normans. But this hardly implies that they understood English any more than the king himself did. It is doubtful whether the recipients in many cases could have read the writ themselves in any language.

³³ *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, I, 128 (Rolls Series).

³⁴ *Itinerary through Wales*, Bk. I, chap. 6; *Conquest of Ireland*, Bk. I, chap. 40.

dressing himself to the king, not the interpreter. That the king's knowledge of English did not extend to an ability to speak the language is in harmony with the testimony of Walter Map, who credits him with "having a knowledge of all the languages which are spoken from the Bay of Biscay to the Jordan, but making use only of Latin and French."³⁵ His wife, however, Eleanor of Aquitaine, always required an interpreter when people spoke English.³⁶ The three young women of aristocratic family for whom the *Ancrene Riwle*, or *Rule for Anchoresses*, was probably written about 1200 were advised to do their reading in either French or English, and the original language of the *Rule* itself was almost certainly English.

That English survived for a considerable time in some monasteries is evident from the fact that at Peterborough the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was continued until 1154. Among churchmen the ability to speak English was apparently fairly common. Gilbert Foliot, bishop of London, a man of Norman descent, was, according to Walter Map,³⁷ very fluent in Latin, French, and English. Hugh of Nonant, bishop of Coventry, a native of Normandy, must have known English, since he criticizes a fellow bishop for his ignorance of it,³⁸ while Giraldus Cambrensis, bishop-elect of St. Davids, had such a knowledge of English that he could read and comment upon the language of Alfred and compare the dialects of northern and southern England.³⁹ At the same date Abbot Samson, head of the great abbey of Bury St. Edmunds, is thus described by Jocelyn de Brakelond: "He was an eloquent man, speaking both French and Latin, but rather careful of the good sense of that which he had to say than of the style of his words. He could read books written in English very well, and was wont to preach to the people in English, but in the dialect of Norfolk where he was born and bred."

From these instances we must not make the mistake of thinking such a knowledge of English universal among people of this station. Others could be cited in which bishops and abbots were unable to preach in anything but Latin or French.⁴⁰ St. Hugh, bishop of Lincoln in the time of Henry II, did not un-

³⁵ *De Nugis Curialium*, V, vi (trans. Tupper and Ogle).

³⁶ Richard of Devizes, in *Chronicles of the Reigns of Stephen, Henry II, and Richard I*, III, 431 (Rolls Series).

³⁷ *De Nugis*, I, xii. However, his fluency in three languages may have been mentioned because it was unusual.

³⁸ Cf. Freeman, *Norman Conquest*, V, 831.

³⁹ *Descr. of Wales*, Bk. I, chap. 6.

⁴⁰ For example, Jofrid, abbot of Croyland, if we can trust the fourteenth-century continuation of Pseudo-Ingulph. The abbot of Durham who visited St. Godric (died 1170) needed an interpreter because Godric spoke English. Cf. *Libellus de Vita et Miracula S. Godrici*, p. 352 (*Surtees Soc.*, xx).

derstand English but required an interpreter.⁴¹ One of the most notorious cases of a man who did not know English and who was not only an important ecclesiastic but also one of the chief men of the kingdom is that of William Longchamp, bishop of Ely and chancellor of England in the reign of Richard I. The incident is alluded to in a number of chroniclers, of his seeking to escape from England in 1191, disguised as a woman and carrying under his arm some cloth as if for sale. When approached at Dover by a possible purchaser, who asked how much he would let her have an ell for, he was unable to reply because he was utterly unacquainted with the English language.⁴² It is true that both of these men were foreigners, one a Burgundian, the other a Norman, and the fact of their not knowing English is set down by contemporaries as something worth noting. Among those of lower rank, whose position brought them into contact with both the upper and the lower class—stewards and bailiffs, for example—or men like the knight of Glamorgan, whom we have seen acting as Henry's interpreter, the ability to speak English as well as French must have been quite general. And among children whose parents spoke different languages a knowledge of English is to be assumed even from the days of the Conqueror if we may consider the case of Orderic Vitalis as representative. His father was Norman and his mother (presumably) English. He was taught Latin by an English priest and at the age of ten was sent to St. Evroult in Normandy. There he says "like Joseph in Egypt, I heard a language which I did not know."

The conclusion that seems to be justified by the somewhat scanty facts we have to go on in this period is that a knowledge of English was not uncommon at the end of the twelfth century among those who habitually used French; that among churchmen and men of education it was even to be expected; and that among those whose activities brought them into contact with both upper and lower classes the ability to speak both languages was quite general.

92. Knowledge of French among the Middle Class.

If by the end of the twelfth century a knowledge of English was not unusual among members of the highest class, it seems equally clear that a knowledge of French was often found somewhat further down in the social scale. Among the knightly class French seems to have been cultivated even when the mother tongue was English. In the reign of Henry II a knight in England got a man from Normandy to

⁴¹ *Magna Vita*, ed. Dimick, pp. 157, 268 (Rolls Series).

⁴² One of the fullest accounts is in Roger of Hoveden, III, 141–47 (Rolls Series).

teach his son French.⁴³ That an ability to speak French was expected among this class may be inferred from an incident in one of the chroniclers describing a long-drawn-out suit (1191) between the abbey of Croyland and the prior of Spalding. Four supposed knights were called to testify that they had made a view of the abbot. They were neither knights nor holders of a knight's fee, and the abbot testified that they had never come to make a view of him. The chronicler adds that "the third one of them did not so much as know how to speak French."⁴⁴ Next to the knights the inhabitants of towns probably contained the largest number of those among the middle class who knew French. In many towns, especially in important trading centers, men with Norman names were the most prominent burgesses and probably constituted a majority of the merchant class.⁴⁵ The likelihood that stewards and bailiffs on manors spoke both languages has already been mentioned. In fact, a knowledge of French may sometimes have extended to the free tenants. At any rate Jocelyn de Brakelond relates that the Abbot Samson conferred a manor upon a man bound to the soil "because he was a good farmer and didn't know how to speak French." William Rothwell has discussed the complex situation in medieval England as a result of the presence of three languages—Latin, French, and English—and has noted the greater likelihood of French in regions nearer London: "Latin and French would be found primarily in those places where the business of government was transacted and would be used by men for whom they constituted a professional qualification, not a vernacular."⁴⁶ It has sometimes been urged that because preaching to the people was often done in French, such a fact argues for an understanding of the language. But we are more than once told in connection with such notices that the people, although they did not understand what was said, were profoundly moved.⁴⁷ It would be a mistake to consider that a knowledge of French was anything but exceptional among the common people as a whole. The observation of a writer at the end of the thirteenth century,

⁴³ *Materials for the History of Thomas Becket*, I, 347; Freeman, V, 891.

⁴⁴ Continuation of Pseudo-Ingulph, trans. H.T.Riley, p. 286. The continuation in which this incident occurs is not to be confused with the fourteenth-century forgery but is a genuine work of considerable value (Gross).

⁴⁵ At Southampton at the time of the Domesday survey the number of those who settled in the borough "after King William came into England" was sixty-five French born and thirty-one English born. The figures represent men and many of them doubtless had families. Cf. J.S.Davies, *A History of Southampton* (Southampton, UK, 1883), pp. 26–28.

⁴⁶ "Language and Government in Medieval England," *Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur*, 93 (1983), 259.

⁴⁷ As, for example, by Giraldus Cambrensis, *Itinerary through Wales*, Bk. I, chap. 11. A similar instance, equally specific though less trustworthy, is in the continuation of Pseudo-Ingulph attributed to Peter of Blois (trans. Riley, p. 238).

Lewede men cune Ffrench non,
Among an hondryd vnneþis on⁴⁸

was probably true at all times in the Middle Ages.⁴⁹

Recent insights from sociolinguistics into the structures of pidgin and creole language have led some linguists to ask whether Middle English was a creole. Much of the ensuing controversy hinges on the definitions that are given to *pidgin* and *creole* (for a related problem see § 250.8). A pidgin is a simplified language used for communication between speakers of different languages, typically (during the past five centuries) for trading purposes between speakers of a European language such as Portuguese, Spanish, French, or English and speakers of an African or Asian language. If the simplified language is then learned as a first language by a new generation of speakers and its structures and vocabulary are expanded to serve the needs of its community of speakers, it is known as a creole. The linguistic situation in England during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had certain external parallels with that in the present-day Caribbean or the South Pacific, where languages are regularly in contact, and pidgins and creoles develop. However, to call Middle English a creole stretches the word beyond its usefulness. Manfred Görlach reviews the evidence, finds a lack of “any texts that could justify the assumption that there was a stable pidgin or creole English in use in thirteenth-century French households,” and concludes: “The English-speaking majority among the population of some ninety percent did not unlearn their English after the advent of French, nor did they intentionally modify its structures on the French pattern—as Renaissance writers modelled their English on Latin. Influence of French on inflections and, by and large, on syntactical structures cannot be proved, but appears unlikely from what we know about bilingualism in Middle English times.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ *The Romance of Richard the Lion-hearted*, ed. Brunner, lines 23–24:

Common men know no French.
Among a hundred scarcely one.

⁴⁹ Vising, in his *Anglo-Norman Language and Literature*, pp. 15–18, and in his other contributions mentioned in the bibliography to this chapter, cites a number of passages from poets who explain why they are writing in French as evidence for “the complete dominance of the Anglo-Norman language during the second half of the twelfth and most of the thirteenth century in nearly all conditions of life, and of its penetration even into the lower strata of society.” But the point in every case is that their work is “translaté hors de latin en franceys a l’aprise de lay gent” and is intended for those “ke de clergie ne ount apris,” that is, who know no Latin. Even in the one instance in which the poet included in his appeal “Li grant e li mendre,” his words need apply only to those less than “the great” who can understand his work in French, “Q’ en franceis le poent entendre.”

⁵⁰ Manfred Görlach, “Middle English—a Creole?” in *Linguistics across Historical and Geographical Boundaries*, ed. D.Kastovsky and A.Szwedek (2 vols., Berlin, 1986), I, 337, 338.

Thus in the period preceding the loss of Normandy in 1204 there were some who spoke only French and many more who spoke only English. There was likewise a considerable number who were genuinely bilingual as well as many who had some understanding of both languages while speaking only one. That the latter class—those who were completely or to some extent bilingual—should have been fairly numerous need cause no surprise. Among people accustomed to learn more through the ear than through the eye, learning a second language presents no great problem. The ability to speak one or more languages besides one's native tongue is largely a matter of opportunity, as can be seen in a number of European countries today. In this connection we may again recall the situation of Belgium, where the majority of the people can get along in either Flemish or French, regardless of which of the two languages they habitually use.

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