CHAPTER 5

Vernacular Religious Literature

... at least in the mother tongue.

The bishops’ constitutions and treatises previously covered frequently enjoin clergy to teach their parishioners the Creed and Articles of Faith in their parishioners’ “mother tongue” or “native language.” Since three languages—Latin, English, and the dialect of Old French known as Anglo-Norman—existed alongside each other in thirteenth-century England, the first question to ask is: What was this mother tongue? What languages did the people use in their everyday activities? As late as 1963, Mary Dominica Legge, the reigning scholar of Anglo-Norman literature, could claim that by the late twelfth century, in England, “most people, down to the very poorest, were bilingual” in French and English. More recent work, especially that by William Rothwell, Ian Short, and Michael Richter, has shown that in thirteenth-century England, the native tongue of most English people was English, as it had been since the days before the Conquest.

People in thirteenth-century England understood Anglo-Norman to be something of a vernacular, but a vernacular that was used by those in the higher social ranks: the great magnates, the knightly class, and the members of the incipient gentry and upwardly mobile amongst the free. It served as a language of power and a “language of culture,” a social marker for those in the upper classes and those seeking entry into those classes. Up to at least the

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1 See above, pp. 51–2.
middle of the thirteenth century, the language was still acquired early and in the home by the members of at least some social classes. Around 1230 or 1240, Walter of Bibbesworth wrote the *Tretiz*, a guide to improve one's French, for Denise of Munchesi, the wife of Warin of Munchesi, a magnate whom Matthew Paris had regarded as “the strongest pillar of the kingdom.” Walter assumes that his patron will use his *Tretiz* to teach French to her children as part of a general education in the household rather than in a classroom environment. The *Tretiz* is structured so that the teaching and learning take place in French, although there are helpful Middle English glosses. In the social environment of the aristocracy, even those whose native language was English would have acquired their French almost from the cradle; the English aristocracy lacked the modern distinction of “native” and learned languages contiguous with nation states. Amongst the greater magnates, marriages to spouses from across the Channel continually brought in new French speakers, so that throughout the thirteenth century, there were at least a few people in England who spoke French as natives.

Nevertheless, by the beginning of the thirteenth century, French was a language that needed to be consciously learned or at least improved even by many

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7 Rothwell, “Teaching of French,” 37. Haas, in “Mother Tongue,” 146–7, notes that the opening sections of the *Tretiz* concentrate on those aspects of life centered around the home and the child before the work moves on to subjects like husbandry and household management. The playfulness of the text also indicates that Walter had children in mind when writing it. Jambeck, “The *Tretiz*,” 168–71 notes aspects of the *Tretiz* that indicate that it is especially meant for teaching children to acquire the French language by immersion rather than classroom-style pedagogy.

8 Haas, “Mother Tongue,” 141.