

## **Report for the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature 2014**

### *Treason, Identity, and Political Subjecthood in England ca. 1380-1450*

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#### **Aims of this PhD research**

The allegation of treason is perhaps the most powerful way a state can define what constitutes a loyal political subject and, by contrast, what identifies those it excludes from the privileges of subjecthood. In my doctoral research, I am conducting close readings of the records generated by English treason trials ca. 1380-1450 to investigate the ways the relationship between the late medieval English 'nation state' and its subjects was being discursively and linguistically constructed, challenged, and renegotiated. I consider the ways trial records reflected and helped to constitute a growing alignment between political identity and an ethnicised national identity and loyalty marked by English as a common tongue. I also examine the uses of vernacular and Latinate concepts such as 'crown', 'realm', 'nation', and 'subject' in discourses of treason. In addition, I explore the complex relationships between gender, political agency, and oral and written speech acts in an aural and multilingual political culture. In particular, I'm interested in resistant constructions of loyal English subjecthood that were being articulated through emerging vernacular concepts of the 'true man' and 'true commons'.

Recent research on language use in sources such as petitions and the rolls of parliament suggests that although English government remained multilingual, from the late fourteenth century the English language was seen as increasingly authoritative, especially in contexts involving issues of proof and 'truth'. My research on legal records brings a new type of source under examination from this perspective. I apply literary and historical approaches to analyse in depth what the texts generated by the investigation and prosecution of treason say and how and why they say it (rhetoric, narrative structures, terminology etc.), but also to investigate the role played by language choice itself (Latin, Anglo-French, English) in constituting relations of power.

#### **Research trip**

I am grateful to the Society for providing funding support to enable me to visit The National Archives, Kew to systematically investigate records from treason cases 1400-1422. These comprised King's Bench indictment and plea roll records held in The National Archives' KB 9 and KB 27 series as well as confessions and related material preserved in the records of the Exchequer and Chancery. Most of this material has not been catalogued at a case-by-case level or digitized, so in addition to transcribing records onsite I used this opportunity to take ca. 500 high quality digital photographs for future analysis, transcription and translation.

#### **Some initial findings**

An initial assessment of these sources generated a number of preliminary findings. Firstly, I was able to see the way the documents were physically structured and the relationships between

their Latin, French and English components. This showed that the official discourse of Latin charges and dictated French language witness testimonies or coerced confessions bracketed the direct first-person English words of alleged traitors preserved in the form of letters or bills. Positioned in this way, the rhetoric and authoritative language of the Latin and French components worked together to bolster often much flimsier first person evidence in English from the accused, evidence which generally took the form of circulated letters or public bills. Secondly, I noted that while English is rarely used in the King's Bench and Exchequer records for this period when it does appear it is often in cases involving treason, wherein the discovery and performance of 'truth' is critical. In addition, I noted that English language first person confessions appeared to draw on the increasingly authoritative nature of English as a language of 'proof' to enable accused traitors to resist, evade, or mitigate charges of treason.

While in the UK, I also presented at the IMC Leeds 2014 conference in a panel session on 'Trial, Execution and Exile in 14<sup>th</sup> Century England', organised by the Society for Fourteenth Century Studies. I was able to incorporate some of the preliminary findings discussed above into my paper and received valuable feedback and suggestions from some of the leading scholars working on vernacularity and authority in the records of parliament and the Chancery. To date, this scholarship has focused primarily on petitions but my legal evidence from records of treason trials was seen to offer a promising source for expanding this enquiry.

### **Present and future plans**

The research conducted during this trip will form the basis for two chapters of my PhD thesis, which I expect to submit for examination in 2016. In the shorter term, I am working on two chapters for edited books to be published in 2015-16, which will provide rhetorical and linguistic analysis of a portion of this record evidence. The first chapter is destined for *Urban Cultures and Ideologies in Europe c.1100-1500* (Brepols). It will examine a cluster of treason cases from 1409-1417 against a wider background of vernacular literacy, public bill campaigns, and popular political dissent in early fifteenth-century London. Records in these cases include the formal Latin indictments, witness testimony and dictated confessions recorded in French, and English-language bills the accused were circulating in London and environs. The second chapter will be submitted to the next edition of the *Fourteenth Century England* series (Boydell & Brewer), derived from the Society for Fourteenth Century Studies sessions at IMC Leeds 2014. This chapter uses several cases bracketing the deposition of Richard II to investigate the relationship between a general cultural trend towards considering men's spoken words as material acts and the common law development of a legal precedent of 'treason by words'. It also considers how the increasingly authoritative nature of written English in official contexts could enable accused traitors to mount a defence by claiming a vernacular political identity as a 'trewe man'.

I would like to extend my gratitude to the Society for this travel bursary and I look forward to acknowledging the Society's support in future presentations and publications related to this research.