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## Article

# 'Bawd, Traitor, Fleming, Thief and Other Horrible Names': Immigration and Nationality-Based Insults in Late Medieval and Early Tudor London

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## AUFSÄTZE

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## ‘Bawd, Traitor, Fleming, Thief and Other Horrible Names’<sup>1</sup>

Immigration and Nationality-Based Insults in Late Medieval and Early Tudor London

**ABSTRACT:** Many people born outside England, defined as aliens, lived in late medieval London. Despite a growing literature on immigration in late medieval England and acceptance that speech was highly significant in premodern societies, studies of native-alien coexistence in London have focused on physical confrontations and have overlooked nationality-based insults. This article analyses these slurs, drawing on the records of English church and equity courts. It argues that there is little evidence supporting the view that late medieval England was characterised by a continuous and generalised anti-alien sentiment. Instead, it concludes that nationality-based insults were time and context-specific and that even the terminology of the abuse was informed by specific political and economic tensions.

**Keywords:** migration, nationality, insults, defamation, London, fifteenth century, sixteenth century

**JEL Codes:** F22, J15, J61, J71, N33, N43

### 1. Introduction

The later Middle Ages has long remained a blind spot in the historiography of migration in Europe, perpetuating the idea that the period was one characterised by immobility and inward-looking isolation. This myth has been debunked over the past few decades, with numerous studies demonstrating that migration was a significant societal phenomenon in various parts of pre-Reformation Europe.<sup>2</sup> A lot of this work has focused on England, where an invaluable body of evidence has allowed historians to study immigrant presence in greater detail than elsewhere. The returns of the so-called alien subsidies, a direct tax imposed on residents born outside the kingdom and collected between 1440 and 1487, revealed that up to 1.5 % of the English population in the mid-fifteenth

1 Earlier versions of this article were presented at the ‘Moments of Exclusion in the Middle Ages’ workshop at the Freie Universität Berlin and at a SHOC seminar at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. The authors want to thank Shannon McSheffrey, Jelle Haemers and the anonymous reviewers for the *Vierteljahrschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte* for their help and advice. Professor McSheffrey also kindly provided access to her databases of London’s Commissary and Consistory Court cases. This article is dedicated to Jim Bolton, in recognition of his pioneering work on the history of immigration in late medieval London.

2 For an early overview, see Cavaciocchi (1994).

century was born abroad, with concentrations of up to 15 % in larger cities.<sup>3</sup> In London and its suburbs, where about one in eight of those recorded in 1440 lived, the subsidy evidence suggests that between 6 and 10 % of the population during the second half of the fifteenth century were first-generation immigrants. Denoted as ‘aliens’, the majority of the newcomers residing in England were said to have come from Scotland, Ireland, France, the Low Countries and the German territories and smaller numbers from Iceland, Scandinavia, the Iberian Peninsula, the Italian cities and the Eastern Mediterranean. In London, the alien subsidy returns highlight particular concentrations of the ‘Dutch’, a term used for immigrants from the Low Countries and the German dominions, and, to a lesser extent, the Italians, the Scots and the French, though it is clear that some groups of aliens had their origins recorded more consistently than others in the capital.<sup>4</sup> Most of the immigrant residents, both men and women, worked in service, but the range of occupations they engaged in was remarkably wide, including many specialised crafts. Immigrant presence in England was often the subject of political discussion during this period, resulting in protectionist legislation that placed restrictions on alien labour but also in so-called denization procedures, which provided immigrants with rights that were usually reserved for native-born people.<sup>5</sup>

One of the more hotly debated aspects of immigrant presence in later medieval England is the relationship between the alien-born and the native population. A crucial point of contention in this respect is the interpretation of the instances of physical confrontation between English-born and immigrant residents recounted in narrative sources and, to a lesser extent, civic records. These sources depict how, at certain times throughout the fourteenth, fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, violent clashes occurred between natives and immigrants, resulting in bloodshed and, more exceptionally, loss of life. Nearly all of these conflicts took place in the city of London or in the neighbouring borough of Southwark, immediately south of the Thames. Various chronicles describe, for example, how during the Peasants’ Revolt in June 1381, about forty Flemings were murdered in the streets of London.<sup>6</sup> In most of the cases of physical violence, English-born people are identified as the perpetrators, aliens as the victims. The source material usually remains silent on the causes of these conflicts, giving rise to two opposing lines of reasoning in the historical literature. On the one hand, historians have adopted a primordialist perspective, assuming that individuals have innate ethnic or

3 The alien subsidy returns are part of the E179 series kept at the UK’s National Archives in Kew. They were first discussed comprehensively in Thrupp (1957). Some of the alien subsidy returns for London and its suburbs from 1440 and 1483–1484 were published in Bolton (1998). All of the surviving alien subsidy evidence was made digitally available in the England’s Immigrants Database (2024) in 2015.

4 When used in a medieval context, we have placed ‘Dutch’ and all related terms such as ‘Dutchman’ or ‘Dutchwoman’ between inverted commas to distinguish from their present-day use, which refers to a more restricted geographic area.

5 For a synthesis of the historiography of immigration in late medieval England, see Ormrod/Lambert/Mackman (2019).

6 Galbraith (1927), p. 145; Hector/Harvey (1982), pp. 6–9; Taylor/Childs/Watkiss (2002), pp. 430 f.; Riley (1868), p. 450.

national identities, which are believed to have formed naturally.<sup>7</sup> These interpretations draw heavily on the London narrative sources and argue that the confrontations presented in them were the most visible manifestations of a continuous, underlying anti-alien sentiment that was present among the English population as a whole or at least large parts of it. Ralph Griffiths, for example, claimed that English society during the fifteenth century was characterised by patriotism and an 'instinctive anti-alien feeling'.<sup>8</sup> Laura Yungblut saw the later medieval attacks against immigrants as the result of a permanent anti-alien sentiment that continued to exist into the more recent English past.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, there are more instrumentalist points of view, in which ethnic and national identities are regarded as instrumental means to achieve particular ends. These accounts typically rely on wider evidence that also includes non-narrative sources which record more mundane interactions between English people and aliens. In these interpretations the violent conflicts are regarded as highly time and place-specific and unrepresentative of the majority of native-alien encounters. Often, the attacks are seen as the work of particular groups, namely the native artisans and traders of London, who were prompted by contextual economic and/or political, rather than identitarian, factors. Paul Strohm, for example, claimed that the murder of a Genoese in the English capital in 1379 was instigated by the city's leading merchants and craftspeople, appalled by plans for large-scale Italian exports of English wool through Southampton.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Bart Lambert and Milan Pajic have stated that London's corporation of native-born weavers and their frustrations with the success of their alien counterparts in the capital were responsible for the massacre of the Flemings in 1381, outlined above.<sup>11</sup>

So far, the historiography of altercations between natives and immigrants in later medieval England has focused exclusively on physical violence. Verbal abuse, by contrast, has been entirely overlooked. This lack of research on the significance of defamation, slurs and insults in the context of immigrant inclusion and exclusion is problematic, considering that medieval societies viewed vicious words to be as damaging as physical aggression.<sup>12</sup> Derogatory speech acts were an effective means to damage someone's *fama*, or the discourse about individuals which continually shaped their reputation, as-signing rank and standing upon them.<sup>13</sup> Reputation was very important for those seeking positive connections with upstanding individuals in their locality so as to obtain employment, credit and loans, and to be trusted enough by others to engage in economic transactions. It was the cornerstone of basically all aspects of medieval public life.<sup>14</sup> Venomous speech could therefore have serious social and economic repercussions, to the

7 For the differences between primordialist and instrumentalist accounts of ethnic conflict, see Kataria (2018).

8 Griffiths (1980), pp. 169–171.

9 Yungblut (1996), pp. 37–40.

10 Strohm (1996).

11 Lambert/Pajic (2016).

12 Bardsley (2003), pp. 154–160; Hall (2006), pp. 124–137.

13 Fenster/Smail (2003b), pp. 3 f.; Gauvard (1993); Lesnick (1991).

14 McIntosh (1998), p. 12; Forrest (2018).

extent that, as Barbara Hanawalt argues, it could act as a ritual of exclusion from a community.<sup>15</sup> The danger it posed led individuals to prosecute defamers in legal proceedings to restore their reputation, and ecclesiastical and later also lay courts severely sanctioned those responsible for malicious talk. This significance of speech in a medieval societal context has led to an abundance of studies on the subject, contrasting sharply with the lack of interest it has received in the historiography of medieval migration.<sup>16</sup>

This article proposes to fill the lacuna on verbal abuse and immigration in England during the later Middle Ages. Over the past fifteen years, a growing body of scholarship has studied discourse, including direct popular speech such as insults and threats, as transcripts reflecting popular opinion about how medieval societies functioned.<sup>17</sup> Tying in with this literature, we will consider what speech acts recorded in court evidence from fifteenth and early sixteenth-century London can tell us about the ways in which coexistence between immigrants and English natives was experienced. We will explore in particular to what extent insights from the study of verbal abuse align with either primordialist or instrumentalist views on native-immigrant relationships based on the analysis of physical violence. Rather than focusing on slurs used by and against immigrants, who are not often identified as such and therefore difficult to trace in medieval court records, the focus here lies on acts of nationality-based insults, that is, malicious speech acts referring to a person's perceived non-English origins.

The phrase 'nationality-based' demands some qualification in an article on late medieval and early Tudor England. We acknowledge the sociological work of Anthony Smith, who detected a transition from ethnicities, which are grounded in common cultural backgrounds, memories and descent, to nationalities, which require a connection, real or imagined, to a specific territory. While this shift took place primarily during the golden age of the nation state in the nineteenth century, Smith recognised that the 'territorialisation of memory' could start off, in some cases, as early as the late medieval period.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, a growing number of medievalists have argued that late medieval England, at least from the fourteenth century onwards, knew a concept of nationality, whose key criterion was place of birth.<sup>19</sup> The alien subsidies and letters of denization, mentioned above, also adopted birthplace as the defining marker of distinction between late medieval England's alien and denizen population and between different groups of immigrants.<sup>20</sup> Admittedly, some documents refer to allegiance as a criterion for categorising aliens, but this, too, has to be seen as resulting from an individual's birth in the territories of a ruler, rather than from a personal bond with the

15 Hanawalt (1998b), pp. 28 f.

16 For a good introduction, including references to further readings, see various chapters in Fenster/Smail (2003a); also see Helmholz (1985) xi–cxi, in particular xi–lxxvi.

17 Most of this work was done by political historians, responding to Watts (2009), pp. 35 f. For a study analysing insults and threats, see Dumolyn/Haemers (2012).

18 Smith (1999); Smith (1996).

19 See, among others, Ruddick (2013), pp. 102, 329; Forde/Johnson/Murray (1995).

20 Lambert/Ormrod (2020).

prince.<sup>21</sup> This article will therefore employ the concept of nationality, understood as the label attributed to an individual as a result of his or her birth in a particular territory, rather than ethnicity.

The first part of the article presents the sources that provide us with instances of nationality-based insults taking place in fifteenth and early sixteenth-century London, as well as the methods adopted to analyse them. The next section explores who the perpetrators and victims of this verbal abuse were. In the third part, we delve into the contexts in which malicious speech acts referring to people’s perceived non-English origins took place. The fourth section takes a closer look at the precise terminology of the slurs and insults that were used. In the conclusion, we establish what the instances of nationality-based verbal abuse can tell us about the relationship between later medieval London’s native and immigrant residents and the extent to which the primordialist and instrumentalist interpretations can be upheld.

## 2. Sources and Methods

Studying nationality-based insults in the Middle Ages poses several issues. Like most of the speech between people in the medieval period, most insults would have been fleeting in nature and would not be captured in the historical record.<sup>22</sup> With the ability to cause serious damage to reputation or undermine those in authority, however, words and malicious gossip were very powerful and deemed worthy of recording in certain instances. Occasionally, chronicle writers mention how late medieval people verbally abused or sang derogatory ballads about particular persons or groups. These slurs could refer to nationality and some were uttered in the context of the physical confrontations between denizens and aliens discussed above. Chronicler Edward Hall, for example, describes how, in the days leading up to Evil May Day, a large-scale attack against immigrants in London in 1517, one of the capital’s mercers voiced his discontent with the city’s Italian residents, calling them ‘whoreson Lombards’.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, insults such as these were often recorded too rarely and haphazardly in narrative sources to allow for systematic study. Court records are a more appropriate source for the study of insults: some plaintiffs told narratives of how they had been insulted as part of a strategy to win legal cases, which were then captured by the courts’ scribes. The records of certain courts, however, are more useful for studying nationality-based insults than others. Immigrants, who were likely among the main, though not the only, recipients of nationality-based insults, did not have access to many courts in England. Aliens could usually only make use of the King’s courts if they had taken out letters of denization from the Crown, which granted

21 Ruddick (2013), p. 323; Lambert/Ormrod (2015). Even Susan Reynolds, who thought of kingdoms as political communities held together by regnal solidarities, believed that the connection of those solidarities with ‘reasonably well-defined territories’ was evident. Reynolds (1984), pp. 258 f.

22 Vansina (1985), in particular pp. xvii f.

23 Whibley (1904), p. 157. For a derogatory ballad written about the Genoese merchant John Baptiste Grimaldi and recorded in the *Great Chronicle of London*, see McSheffrey (2022).



the same legal rights as the King's subjects.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in most instances, aliens living in towns and cities could only bring legal cases to urban courts if they had acquired the legal right of becoming a 'freeman' of these urban areas.<sup>25</sup> These urban courts and most royal common law (secular) courts either did not have jurisdiction over defamation or did not give plaintiffs the opportunity to provide general narratives about how respondents had acted against conscience, but instead required them to provide proof of a specific infringement (i. e. theft or debt). Because of this, the surviving records of these courts are unlikely to record instances of nationality-based slurs.<sup>26</sup>

To overcome these issues, we have focused on the records of those courts that were likely to have recorded nationality-based slurs and to which both natives and aliens had access. We have also decided to focus on London. This is partly because most of the debates concerning coexistence between immigrant and native residents focus on the capital. It is also because London boasts the best remaining sources with which to study insults in fifteenth and early-sixteenth century England, in large part because of the high survival rates of the records of its church courts, which had jurisdiction over defamation. By the fifteenth century, English canon law courts deemed defamation to be a malicious speech act that imputed a crime or some form of spiritual or personal 'defect' or wrongdoing that had caused real harm to a person's reputation.<sup>27</sup> These church courts had jurisdiction over all Christian individuals who lived in England, regardless of whether they were freemen, and regardless of whether they were denizens or aliens.

We have analysed nationality-based slurs recorded in the act books of the Bishop of London's Commissary Courts and the deposition books of the Bishop's Consistory Court. They were the courts through which the Bishop of London administered canon law. The Consistory, the Bishop's higher court, had jurisdiction over defamation and spiritual crimes across the diocese of London. It is only the records of witness depositions that survive, and in defamation cases, witness depositions often testified about the malicious words that had been used. We have reviewed the deposition books covering the periods 1467–1475/7, 1486–1497 and 1510–1516. The Commissary Court was the Bishop's lower court and similarly heard cases of spiritual infringements such as defamation, with the court usually initiating proceedings based on rumour. The dealings of the court are summarised in its act books that cover the period 1470–1529, and we have studied defamation cases where nationality-based slurs were recorded.<sup>28</sup>

The King's equity courts in Westminster also heard a lot of cases focusing on London, some of which can also be used to better understand the nature of verbal abuse. The purpose of the equity courts was to provide remedy for petitioners when they could

24 For denization, see Lambert/Ormrod (2015).

25 Lambert (2020), p. 4.

26 For London's law courts, see Tucker (2007). We also studied petitions sent to the King in Parliament. We found one petition (1411) of Gascons complaining that they were being called 'undesirable names' by English people (Given-Wilson (2005), pp. 536 f.), but we have not included it within our analysis because there is no reason to assume it refers specifically to Gascons in London.

27 Helmholz (2004), pp. 565–598, particularly pp. 590–593.

28 Wunderli (1984), pp. 11–13, 33; Ingram, (2017), pp. 173–209.

not obtain justice through other legal fora. We have analysed cases from the Chancery Court. People who petitioned this court needed to demonstrate how an action against them had been unjust – against ‘conscience’ – and demonstrate that other courts could not provide remedy.<sup>29</sup> Although the courts heard cases relating to a variety of locations across England and occasionally abroad, the largest number of cases come from those living in London: out of the circa 7,000 cases heard by the Chancery Court dating between 1417–1532, 9.5 % came from London.<sup>30</sup> The vast majority of the court’s records come from the petitions that plaintiffs and their lawyers sent to begin a suit, and some contain stories of nationality-based insults.<sup>31</sup> By the end of the fifteenth century, the demand for equitable justice had risen so much that the court of Star Chamber – members of the King’s Council, including the Chancellor, sitting judicially – was established.<sup>32</sup> The court also operated on the basis of equity. One of our cases of nationality-based insult is recorded in such a petition to the Star Chamber.<sup>33</sup>

When crafting their petitions to equity courts, plaintiffs and lawyers had the ability to use a variety of narrative techniques to depict their respondents as having acted unjustly. In petitions for the equity courts that refer to nationality-based slurs, the use of insulting language was not the main ‘charge’ against respondents. The main accusations were that they had physically attacked the plaintiff, extorted money from them, stolen their goods, or put forward a false legal suit against them. Nationality-based slurs were included as *afforcements* of these accusations: broader circumstantial evidence that was meant to buttress and strengthen the narrower legal case being pursued and to add further weight to the petitioner’s case that what the respondent had done was unjust and insupportable. Analysing these records, then, presents the opportunity to study nationality-based insults that would not have been included simply to meet certain legal categories. By contrast, London’s church courts did hear cases where the use of insults in itself was sufficient ground to start proceedings.

That insults heard by the church and equity courts could be included to help parties win legal cases does not mean that litigants and their lawyers simply made them up for rhetoric effect. Litigants could not easily fabricate events completely; they were required to bring witnesses to support their case, and having sworn an oath to their narrative being true, they and their witnesses risked committing an offence against God if they perjured themselves.<sup>34</sup> Equity courts did not have jurisdiction over defamation, so there was no requirement for litigants or lawyers to fabricate narratives about insulting words to win a court case. The words of nationality-based insults recorded in the petitions most likely reflected real insults that were part of the verbal altercations that

29 Beattie (2017), p. 7.

30 Haskett (1997), pp. 317–319.

31 Avery (1970), p. 181; Haskett (1983), pp. 22 f.

32 Lehmberg (1961), pp. 189–214; Guy (1984), pp. 1–62; Elton (1958), pp. 12–17.

33 This is the case of Hugh Payne, TNA, STAC 2/21/121.

34 Cavill (2020), pp. 182–209.



surrounded disputes (people do not fight or argue in silence), albeit ones packaged to appeal to a legal forum.<sup>35</sup>

We have analysed the records of the Commissary, Consistory, Chancery, and Star Chamber courts for instances of nationality-based insults. That is the case when it was reported that a derogatory slur using a nationality-based label had been used. We have focused only on the cases in which the names of the victims and perpetrators as well as the alleged defamatory words were recorded, rather than cases where it has been vaguely noted that someone had been 'defamed' and it cannot be determined whether nationality-based insults were used. This is because we wish to analyse the words used, the perpetrators and the victims, and to explore the motivations behind the slurs. To identify nationality-based verbal abuse within the body of the Chancery and Star Chamber petitions, we conducted thorough searches of the catalogue of the UK's National Archives. We have searched this catalogue using nouns and adjectives used in the alien subsidy returns of the fifteenth century to denote nationality (i. e. Scot, Fleming, Lombard, 'Dutch', etc.). Using the same criteria, we have also studied the London Consistory Court deposition books and the 11 act books of the Commissary Court running between 1483–1516 to identify cases of nationality-based insults.

These search criteria have allowed us to identify 23 instances of nationality-based insults, which is not a large sample size. It seems highly unlikely that all instances of nationality-based abuse were brought to the courts' attention: some plaintiffs may not have had the funds to bring a legal case, or plaintiffs and lawyers might have pursued a different strategy to win a case and not have mentioned verbal abuse. Because of this, it is very difficult to say with any certainty whether the small number of cases is indicative of a small number of nationality-based slurs. What is certain is that nationality-based insults constituted a very small proportion of these courts' cases: they number 5 out of 59,033 (0.01 %) of Chancery petitions and court records, 15 out of the c.1,896 (0.8 %) of defamation cases heard by the Commissary Court, and 2 out of the c.374 total number of cases recorded in the Consistory Court deposition books studied (0.5 %).<sup>36</sup>

A small sample size does not mean that our cases are unrepresentative of the role and impact of nationality-based verbal assaults. The narratives were shaped by litigants and legal personnel to fit the requirements of different courts, provide the most persuasive case within specific legal contexts, and achieve a desired outcome.<sup>37</sup> In order to convince the court, the parties responsible for the petitions or depositions used narrative strategies. The utility of these narratives as historical evidence lies in that they were written

35 Helmholtz (1985), pp. xi–cxi, in particular xi–lxxvi, and Helmholtz (2004), p. 590.

36 It is sometimes impossible to separate cases from counter-suits in these records, so these figures and percentages of overall cases are to some extent indicative. The overall number of chancery documents in the C1 series is based on a search of The National Archives' catalogue (dates 1400–1540), the figures of defamation cases heard by the Commissary Court are from Wunderli (1984), pp. 142 f., and the overall number of cases in the existing records of the Consistory Court were provided by Professor Shannon McSheffrey who has reviewed the deposition books of the court and has compiled a personal index of all the cases recorded in these books.

37 Cohen (1992), pp. 89 f.; Strohm (1992), pp. 3 f.

to offer credible accounts, and for the court to find the narratives credible, they would have had to reflect broader social realities and cultural understandings of the time in which they were written.<sup>38</sup> Through close reading and contextualisation drawing on secondary literature and a range of other sources including the alien subsidy returns, other records produced by the royal Chancery and Exchequer, and probate material, we can use them as windows into how and when nationality-based slights were used and how they worked as a form of harassment. That is what we will now do, beginning with the perpetrators and victims of nationality-based insults.

### 3. Perpetrators and Victims

Identifying the perpetrators and victims of nationality-based insults in the court cases themselves is less clear-cut than it may seem, as the cases heard by the London courts could be complex and involve individuals engaged in multiple roles. In 1511x1512, for example, one Elizabeth Paris alias Tysher of the parish of All Saints Staining was summoned to the Commissary Court for calling her co-parishioner Cornelia Johnson 'a drunken whore Fleming'. Soon after Elizabeth's citation, however, the court received a report that Cornelia had defamed Elizabeth in turn, retorting, among other things, 'you would not have taken a Frenchman as your husband if you had been good'.<sup>39</sup> It is also important to stress that, unlike this case, the depositions before the Consistory Court and the petitions to the Chancery Court and the Star Chamber show only one side of the story and were explicitly aimed at depicting the interested party as a victim of wrongdoing. For the purpose of this article, we shall consider anyone who is alleged in the court records to have used damaging words as a perpetrator and anyone said to have been the target of verbal abuse as a victim.

Adopting this approach, we can classify 28 individuals as perpetrators and 29 as victims in the 23 cases of nationality-based insults found in the court records. Most of the cases involve only two parties, confirming the assumption that the disputes covered by our source material were typically of a smaller scale than the confrontations between natives and immigrants recorded in the chronicles and civic records. In four cases, two individuals were accused of nationality-based slurs and in one instance a man and his wife were the victims.<sup>40</sup> The only case that involved more than three parties is that of Hugh Payne who, according to a petition to the Star Chamber in 1509x1542, had threat-

38 Beattie (2006), p. 178. For a similar line of reasoning with regard to early modern and late medieval pardons, where perpetrators seeking mercy often accused victims of having provoked physical violence by verbally insulting them, see Zemon Davis (1990) and Gauvard (1991), pp. 59–109.

39 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS09064/11 f. 47. All quotations from court cases in this article have been translated into modern English.

40 TNA, C1/48/518; C1/45/55.

ened six ‘Dutchmen’ and made nationality-related insults to them in the precinct of St Martin le Grand.<sup>41</sup>

Unambiguous information on the nationalities of the parties is often lacking in the case-related evidence, forcing us to undertake additional biographical research in other source material or to rely on individuals’ personal names, which sometimes are distinct to specific immigrant groups.<sup>42</sup> This suggests that 24 of the 28 perpetrators were likely English, three were ‘Dutch’, and one was either French or married to a Frenchman. Among the victims, thirteen were ‘Dutch’, one was either a ‘Dutchwoman’ or married to a ‘Dutchman’, one was French, one was either a Frenchwoman or married to a Frenchman, one was an Englishwoman married to a ‘Dutchman’, and one came from the Italian city of Lucca. In 11 cases, the nationality of the victims was a subject of contention: in nine of these cases there was discussion whether the aggrieved party was English or Scottish, in two cases whether he or she was English or Welsh. In 1512, for example, Christopher Wastell appeared in the Consistory Court, claiming that the ‘Dutch’ brothers Thomas and Salman Dowff had hurled anti-Scottish insults at him, while he claimed to be English. Two of Wastell’s witnesses, one of whom was a ‘Dutchman’ himself, subsequently stated that, to their knowledge, Wastell was a ‘true Englishman’.<sup>43</sup> Our figures already make clear that nationality-based abuse cannot be considered merely as a function of unidirectional English hostility against an undifferentiated immigrant community: in multiple cases the victims were likely to be English, and in at least three cases the perpetrators were immigrants themselves. One case seemingly involved ‘Dutch’ and French aliens but no English individuals. The information on the nationalities of the non-English parties named in the cases can be said to be roughly in line with the evidence on alien presence in late medieval London, which shows that the ‘Dutch’ were the most numerous immigrant group in the capital, followed by some margin by the Italians, the Scots and the French.<sup>44</sup>

Similarly, occupations of the parties are mentioned in only a minority of the cases. When they are, however, the perpetrators are nearly always linked to London’s artisanal and mercantile economies. Among those accused of nationality-based insults are two tailors and one member of the city’s Merchant Tailor Company, a skinner, a former leather-seller and a shipman. All these individuals were English and were said to be residents of either the city of London or the borough of Southwark, just south of the Thames. They were usually involved in verbal altercations with ‘Dutch’ or Italian immigrants, two of whom were merchants, one the servant of a beer-brewer, one a taverner and one the

41 TNA, STAC 2/21/121. Petitions to the Chancery and Star Chamber are mostly not dated, but references to specific Chancellors or contextual information provided in the narrative often allow us to situate them within wider date ranges.

42 McClure (2020). One example is that of Derick Vanhove, a victim in the case of Hugh Payne mentioned above, whose surname is distinctively ‘Dutch’. TNA, STAC 2/21/121. The additional source material used for further biographical research is discussed in the Sources and Methods section above.

43 TLA, DL/C/206, f. 112–119 r.

44 Bolton (1998), pp. 28 f., where the ‘Dutch’ are labelled as ‘Germans’. The numbers of Welsh residents in London are impossible to gauge as they were excluded from the scope of the alien subsidies.

wife of a goldsmith. We said earlier that the proponents of the instrumentalist view have identified many of the perpetrators of the physical confrontations as members of the London livery companies. They identified native tailors, skimmers and goldsmiths as perpetrators and the victims as craftspeople and merchants from the Low Countries and Italy working in the English capital.<sup>45</sup> It seems, then, that the economic profiles of the parties engaged in cases of nationality-based insults partially overlapped with those of the protagonists of the physical clashes between native-born and immigrants. To what extent the causes of the verbal conflicts involving artisans and merchants were similar to those of the physical clashes shall be explored in the Contexts section of this article.

One group that figures prominently in the cases of nationality-based insults but is hardly ever identified as perpetrators or victims in the descriptions of physical hostility is women.<sup>46</sup> They account for 10 of the 26 perpetrators and eight of the thirty victims of verbal abuse identified in the source material. Two of the female victims also had links to London's artisanal and commercial environments addressed above. Barbara van Delft, for example, insulted by the English tailor Thomas Grevis in 1490x1491, was the wife of 'Dutch' goldsmith John van Delft.<sup>47</sup> In most cases of female involvement, however, no such connections could be found. How can we explain the stronger visibility of women in cases of nationality-based slurs compared to physical attacks? Two factors seem at play here. First, it was shown that many of the physical assaults against immigrants, certainly the larger-scale ones, were linked by the proponents of the instrumentalist perspective to London's livery companies: in their views, frustrations that had fomented within these guilds may have led individual members or, more exceptionally, a larger cross-section of these groups to resort to violence. Even though women were sometimes allowed to participate in guild-supervised professional activities or in ceremonial functions in some of London's companies, they were barred from full membership and the social capital fostered by it in all of these associations.<sup>48</sup> Women may, therefore, also have been excluded from part of the commotion surrounding immigrants' economic activities in the city and the more or less organised violence it could result in.

Second, we must take into account the nature of our source material. Sandy Bardsley has argued that defamation, also a type of crime that many cases of nationality-based insults were associated with, was increasingly constructed as a typically female offence in post-Black Death England. She claimed that while men were more numerous among the defendants of defamation cases in earlier periods, they were outnumbered by women after defamation became a prerogative of the English church courts from the late

45 See the introduction and the references in footnotes 9, 10 and 11.

46 An exception is Hall's description of Evil May Day in 1517, which refers to women being arrested for their involvement in the attacks against aliens and insulting them. Waddell (2021), pp. 722 f.

47 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/004. John's will was proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury in 1504, naming Barbara as his late wife. TNA, PROB 11/14/50. The other case of a female victim who had connections to the city's artisanal and commercial milieu is that of Oliver Bowthin and his English wife Eleanor, who worked together as taverners in Southwark. TNA, C1/45/55.

48 Bennett (2006), pp. 99 f.

fourteenth century.<sup>49</sup> Others, including Martin Ingram who drew partly on the London Commissary and Consistory Court records used in this article, stated that men and women were accused of being defamers in equal measure in late fifteenth and early sixteenth-century England.<sup>50</sup> Still, even if women made up about half of the accused in defamation suits, this proportion was far higher than the female share in the prosecutions for most other types of crime, physical violence included.<sup>51</sup> Women were thus either involved in or prosecuted for defamation more frequently than they were involved in or prosecuted for physical criminal behaviour. It is likely that this will have affected our evidence on nationality-based insults. It may be no coincidence in this respect that all of the cases describing women as perpetrators or victims in our sample came from the English church courts and not from the equity courts.

Evidence suggests that some of the victims of nationality-based insults were well-established in their English communities. In his petition to the chancery, the 'Dutch' taverner Oliver Bowthin mentioned that, even though he had moved from Bruges to Southwark quite recently, he had sworn allegiance to the King of England like 'a true liege' and was married to an Englishwoman. Having been the target of nationality-based threats and harassment by two Englishmen, he could count on the help of his neighbours to escape them.<sup>52</sup> Other victims presented witnesses to support their cases within the courts, bearing testimony of their social connections.<sup>53</sup> We should bear in mind that it may have been advantageous for victims of nationality-based verbal abuse to stress their integration in England and in their local communities in their petitions or depositions. Despite this, other evidence does indicate that victims were settled and embedded within social networks. Bartholomew Deux, a merchant from Guelders involved in international trade between London and the Low Countries, was confronted with a false action of debt and nationality-based insults in 1471 or 1472.<sup>54</sup> The alien subsidy returns demonstrate how Deux had been a householder resident in the English capital since at least 1468.<sup>55</sup> He took out letters of denization in 1473, claiming rights that immigrants were usually excluded from and that would have been beneficial to him above all

49 Bardsley (2006), pp. 69–89.

50 Ingram (2017), p. 73.

51 Only 10 % of all indictments in a large five-county survey of fourteenth-century English gaol delivery records, covering larceny, burglary, arson, theft, counterfeiting, treason, homicide and rape, involved women. Hanawalt (1998a), p. 7. In London, women made up 7 % of the suspects in homicide cases recorded in fourteenth-century coroner rolls. Hanawalt (1976), p. 305. Of the total number of trespass actions before the Court of Common Pleas in London in the fifteenth century, only 19 % involved a female litigant. Unfortunately, no specific data on female defendants is available for this court. Stevens (2018), p. 48. For a similar pattern in late medieval Germany, see Toch (1993), p. 320.

52 Southwark was an area with high concentrations of 'Dutch' immigrants, so the neighbours referred to may have been either English or alien, or both. TNA, C1/45/55. Bowthin swore his oath before the Mayor of London. It is not clear to what extent this should be seen as part of the denization procedure, by which many other immigrants in England switched allegiance. Bowthin's oath was never enacted on the chancery rolls, whereas most denization grants were. On denization, see Lambert/Ormrod (2015).

53 See, for example, the case of Christopher Wastell, discussed above, in which five witnesses were heard. TLA, C/206, f. 112–119 r.

54 TNA, C1/46/452. For his business transactions with the Low Countries, see Smit (1928), pp. 1057, 1281.

55 TNA, E 179/144/70; E 179/144/67 (where he is recorded as Bartholomew Doys).

in case of a longer-term stay.<sup>56</sup> The alien subsidies also show that the Hollander John van Delft, the husband of Barbara van Delft who was the victim of a nationality-based slur in 1490x1491, was already living in London's Candlewick Street ward in 1483.<sup>57</sup> Barbara was not mentioned in the alien subsidy return, which does not mean that she would not have lived with John at the time of the tax collection: alien wives of immigrant men were not assessed for the alien subsidies themselves and were, therefore, only recorded in the tax rolls haphazardly.<sup>58</sup> John's will, proved in 1504, indicates that the couple must have been well-connected, holding ties with both natives and immigrants.<sup>59</sup> Admittedly, less well-documented individuals in our sample may have been shorter-term residents with more limited social capital. Yet being the victim of nationality-based insult cannot automatically be seen as a token of blanket exclusion from English society. Some individuals seem to have had problematic encounters with the specific perpetrators of the insults while maintaining harmonious relationships with many others in their English community.

We already said that the overall numbers of nationality-related cases heard by our courts are low, which seems hard to reconcile with the primordialist view that the relationship between the native and immigrant population was characterised by permanent anti-alien sentiment. How representative were the cases of nationality-based insults of the daily encounters of the victims and perpetrators in late medieval and early sixteenth-century London? In most cases the source material does not allow us to reconstruct the parties' life trajectories. There are some exceptions, however. Humphrey Gentil had to endure derogatory comments about his Italian origins when being falsely accused of robbery in 1473x1475.<sup>60</sup> Originating from Lucca, Gentil was a banker and a merchant in precious cloth. The alien subsidy returns show him residing in London from 1457 until 1468, but he was certainly active in the city for a much longer period, possibly even until the early sixteenth century.<sup>61</sup> Throughout the 1470s, 1480s and 1490s, he conducted numerous transactions of silks and dealings in bonds and obligations with members of the English nobility and gentry and, more occasionally, with the royal household.<sup>62</sup> While he was involved in several court proceedings, these cases were always strictly business-related. No sources suggesting that he encountered any personal hostility survive other than the petition documenting the 1473x1475 confrontation.

The perpetrator in the case of nationality-based slurs against Bartholomew Deux, mentioned above, was Roger Dawson, an English member of London's Merchant Tai-

56 Maxwell-Lyte (1900), p. 374. The privileges obtained through the denization process included the right to own real estate, to bring cases before the king's courts and, at least until the end of the fifteenth century, to pay taxes as a native Englishman. Lambert/Ormrod (2015).

57 TNA, E 179/242/25, m. 10 v.

58 On immigrant women in the alien subsidy returns, see Lambert (2019).

59 TNA, PROB 11/14/50.

60 TNA, C 1/48/518. A Chancery petition dated 1515–1518 mentions an heir of Humphrey Gentil. TNA, C 1/413/56.

61 TNA, E 179/144/67, E 179/144/68, E 179/144/72, E 179/144/74.

62 H. C. Maxwell-Lyte (1963), pp. 67, 82, 111, 124, 182, 378, 383; Botfield (1841), pp. 413 f., 465 f.



lor Company.<sup>63</sup> Evidence documents Dawson's business transactions with his former servant who had him imprisoned for debts.<sup>64</sup> Probably during the same years, a Venetian merchant sued him for arrears in a venture selling cloth in Sicily. Remarkably, the Venetian complained that he could not recover his money because his opponent had put forward a false action of debt against him, something Bartholomew Deux claimed Dawson also did in his case.<sup>65</sup> Yet none of these other proceedings that Roger Dawson was involved in make any mention of nationality-related verbal abuse. Another well-documented perpetrator is Hugh Payne, who threatened and insulted six 'Dutchmen' in 1509x1542.<sup>66</sup> Originally a leather-seller, Payne was the Constable of St Martin le Grand, a liberty surrounded by the city of London but falling outside its jurisdiction, between 1503 and 1543. In this capacity, he was responsible for law enforcement in the precinct, including the operation of its prison, and for its financial administration. Shannon McSheffrey describes how Payne acquired a reputation for his tyrannical behaviour among the liberty's inhabitants and cites another case in which a 'Dutch' artisan accused him of having abused his power.<sup>67</sup> Before we interpret this instance as part of a broader pattern implying anti-alien behaviour, however, we should take into account that Payne served for about four decades in a liberty that was home, during this period, to several hundreds of 'Dutch' residents. Significantly, neither the case discussed by McSheffrey nor any other cases suggest that Payne targeted individuals because of their nationality or made remarks about their origins as he did towards the six 'Dutchmen'.

There are no indications, then, to conclude that nationality-based slurs were a regular occurrence in the lives of both the victims and the perpetrators.<sup>68</sup> We should be cautious, however, and factor in the limitations of the documents: there may have been nationality-based insults that never reached the attention of the courts. Still the question remains, in that case, why these instances would not have been documented and those in our sample were. In order to unravel this, it is important to look at the context of our cases.

#### 4. Contexts

Understanding the context of the cases is essential to understand why nationality-based insults happened and whether they were reflective of constant anti-alien feeling, as held by the proponents of the primordialist view, or whether they could be explained by

63 TNA, C 1/46/452.

64 TNA, C 1/31/413.

65 TNA, C 1/45/111.

66 TNA, STAC 2/21/121.

67 McSheffrey (2013), pp. 554–556.

68 A petition which was presented in Parliament by the Gascons in 1411 and which was not directly linked to London did speak about 'many injuries and evils [done and said] to them day by day'. Given-Wilson (2005), pp. 536 f. We should, however, take into account the rhetorical purposes of the petitioning process: claiming that a specific legal status for Gascons in England would be beneficial to all of the realm, the petitioners had every reason to depict the harm done to them as more substantial than it actually was.

other economic or political factors, as propagated by the instrumentalist view. Locality seems to have played an important role in many of the cases. In 11 of the 23 instances of slurs analysed, the perpetrators of the slurs are recorded as having lived in the same parish or were recorded as neighbours of the victims.<sup>69</sup> In the remaining instances, no additional details that can connect the perpetrators and victims are recorded. Some of these insults, then, were the result of disputes between people who lived and worked alongside one another that had escalated to such an extent that they had reached the attention of legal fora. This is the most likely explanation for many of the disputes and defamatory words hurled between neighbours that the Commissary Court heard.<sup>70</sup> Locality was also an important factor in three of the cases that explicitly record nationality-based slurs in taverns or beer houses.<sup>71</sup> Linked to alcohol and newcomers unknown within local communities, literary sources depicted these venues as being associated with disorder, physical violence and ill-governed speech. Many of London's courts also heard cases of disorder that had begun in taverns, beer houses and inns.<sup>72</sup> Our cases highlight that nationality-based insults were one form of disruptive behaviour that happened in these drinking establishments.

Locality, however, does not explain why the insults included nationality-based labels. The occupations of some of the victims and perpetrators suggest that some of our cases were linked to economic hostility between certain alien and native occupational groups. For instance, Humphrey Gentil (1473x1475) had complained to the Chancellor that his English respondents had called him a 'false Lombard', threatened him, and accused him of being a thief.<sup>73</sup> This petition can be placed within the wider context of economic antagonism between London's mercantile elite and Italian merchants in the late fifteenth century. Italians in London – often labelled by English people as 'Lombards' even if they were not from Lombardy – were engaged in selling high-end luxury goods and in financial services. Throughout the fifteenth century, members of London's mercantile guilds, frustrated at the financial success of Italians and their near dominance of the export of English cloth to the Mediterranean, often accused them of depriving the country of its wealth by selling goods at inflated prices and buying English goods below market prices. Favours granted to them by the Crown such as licences to engage in the wool trade faced strong resistance from London's mercantile elites.<sup>74</sup> Between 1467 and 1475 – around the time Gentil wrote his petition – the Crown granted such licences to Italian merchants to ship wool, cloth, tin and lead from London without paying custom

69 Either they were named as co-parishioners or living in the same region in the source, or they were recorded as 'common defamers of their neighbours, particularly against [the defendant(s)]'.

70 For example: TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, 13; TLA DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/011, 54; TLA DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/005, 129 v.

71 TNA, C 1/45/55; TNA, C 1/45/55; and, TLA, DL/C/ 206, f. 112v, 115v, 116v, 118v, 119r.

72 Martin (2001), pp. 62 f. and Hanawalt (1999), pp. 204–217, in particular pp. 211–214. See also Schäfer (2016), pp. 25–56, in particular pp. 36 f., 40, who argues that taverns in medieval Germany were likely environments for insults because of their role as both public and private places.

73 TNA, C 1/48/518.

74 Bolton (1986), pp. 12–20; Bradley (2012), pp. xii–xiv, xlii–xlix; Strohm (1996), pp. 1–23; Waddell (2021), pp. 727–729.

rates and by-passing the staple port of Calais, which was controlled by London merchants. Italians were also allowed to import the same goods without paying customs.<sup>75</sup> Humphrey's attackers might have targeted him because of these special privileges as he explicitly states that he was on his way 'to the king's house' when he was accosted.<sup>76</sup> As a resident Italian merchant engaged in luxury trade, in lending money, and having strong links to the Crown, it seems probable that he was insulted because of native merchants' resentment of his economic activities.

Similarly, some instances of insults against the 'Dutch' can be viewed against the backdrop of the anxieties of native artisans about the economic competition that they posed. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, there was a structural change in the economy of the Low Countries toward the production of high-quality finished products.<sup>77</sup> In England, the Black Death caused a reduction in population and increase in real wages and higher purchasing power that in turn led to high demand for consumer goods.<sup>78</sup> Many artisans from the Low Countries and German territories were drawn to London to take advantage of this economic opportunity and offered stiff competition to English artisans, particularly in the luxury trades. These enterprises were likely to stir frustration among the members of London's livery companies, mercantile and craft guilds that tried to control trade, training, and quality standards in the city.<sup>79</sup> London's mercantile companies had to strike a difficult balance between acknowledging the demand for the skills and labour of alien craftsmen on the one hand, yet on the other to respond to the concerns of those in their organisations who were worried about the competition that these aliens posed.<sup>80</sup> As noted in the introduction, supporters of the instrumentalist view of physical clashes between English people and aliens have argued that they were often instigated by members of London's livery companies who resented the economic competition of certain alien groups. In our cases, some of the perpetrators of verbal attacks plied trades that were threatened by 'Dutch' artisans, such as Rauf Sudyll – a tailor who insulted Thomas Qwkkesley – and Thomas Grevis, also a tailor who defamed the wife of John van Delft as a 'Flemish whore'.<sup>81</sup> It is likely that economic anxiety acted as a backdrop to disputes that led to nationality-based slurs against 'Dutch' artisans.

If economic resentment held by some natives against alien economic rivals acted as a fertile context for nationality-based insults, then international political events certainly acted as catalysts. 'Dutch' immigrants were vulnerable to insults at specific times in the fifteenth century when relationships between England and Burgundy deteriorated, as demonstrated by the Chancery petition of the 'Dutchman' Oliver Bowthin, a taverner

75 For such licences granted to 'Italians' between 1467 and 1475 see H. C. Maxwell-Lyte (1907), pp. 11, 32, 160, 168, 213, 239, 273, 421, 445, 481, and 547.

76 TNA, C 1/48/518.

77 Van Der Wee (1975), pp. 212–215.

78 Kowaleski (2006), 238–259.

79 Ormrod/Lambert/Mackman (2019), pp. 30–37, 141 f.

80 Davies (2019), pp. 119–148.

81 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/004 and TNA, C 1/48/207.

who lived in Southwark, and his English wife Eleanor (1439). They complained that one William Hough – a skinner and bailiff of Southwark – had victimised and physically attacked Oliver for a prolonged period. He joined William atte Ende, a hackneyman, to attack Oliver and then use nationality-based slurs against him. We will analyse the language they used in the later Terminology section of this article.<sup>82</sup> This petition explicitly mentioned that a truce had been recently made between England and Flanders, meaning the petition can be dated as having been written soon after the peace between England and Flanders on 28<sup>th</sup> September 1439, which ended a period of conflict that seriously damaged Anglo-Burgundian relations.<sup>83</sup> At the Treaty of Arras in 1435, Philip the Good of Burgundy had deserted his English alliance in favour of one with France. In doing so, Philip had revoked his support to Henry VI's claim to the French throne and recognised Charles VII as King of France, and Philip even besieged the English port of Calais in 1436.<sup>84</sup>

Other 'Dutch' businesses in London and Southwark were also affected by the strong anti-Burgundian feeling following the Duke's change of allegiance: there were calls for 'Dutch' taverns to be closed for fear that they were associated with spies and the King's enemies, and there was increased criticism and suspicion of 'Dutch' brothels.<sup>85</sup> Oliver and Eleanor's petition is highly likely to have been connected to this context of Anglo-Burgundian tension. It might be that as the bailiff of Southwark, responsible for law and order in the borough, William Hough shared the concerns about 'Dutch' brothels and their clientele; after all, Oliver and Eleanor owned a tavern in Southwark, a place infamous for its stews.<sup>86</sup> Hough was a skinner, so he may also have held frustrations against the economic activities of 'Dutch' immigrants and used the political context to act on them. Nor can simple greed be ruled out, considering that Hough and atte Ende had arrested Oliver and demanded payment for his release. Regardless of the root cause of the dispute, what is notable is that they took advantage of Anglo-Burgundian tension by utilising Oliver's nationality to insult him.

Anglo-Burgundian hostility also played a crucial role in the narrative Copyn Pylgrym provided to the chancellor. Copyn was a 'Dutch' servant of a beer brewer in Wapping, a suburb of the city. He petitioned the chancellor between 1470 and 1471, complaining of having been attacked by Robert Marston, a shipman. Copyn stated that Marston arrived at his master's beer house at twelve o'clock at night and had tried to break in. When Copyn resisted, Marston called him 'a stinking Fleming and other shameful language'.<sup>87</sup> This should be viewed in the context of the tumultuous events of September

82 TNA, C 1/45/55.

83 Based on the title of the Chancellor the petition was sent to, the petition was written between 1433–1443. The reference to the truce between England and Flanders allows us to date the petition to 1439. For this truce, see Scattergood (2010), p. 184.

84 Thielemans (1966), pp. 65–107.

85 Ormrod/Lambert/Mackman (2019), pp. 173 f., 243.

86 Even though most of the brothels were located in the Bishop of Winchester's Clink manor, where the bailiff would not have had jurisdiction. Carlin (1996), pp. 32–43.

87 TNA, C 1/45/124. This petition must probably be dated after September/October 1470, when the riots took place. It is also unlikely that Copyn petitioned the Chancellor before Edward IV had been reinstated

and October 1470, in which the Earl of Warwick had deposed the Yorkist king Edward IV, who had in turn fled to Flanders, the territory of his brother-in-law Charles the Bold of Burgundy. This exacerbated pre-existing animosity between Warwick and Charles the Bold: Warwick had been conducting piratical raids against the Duke's shipping and was considered his enemy.<sup>88</sup>

The *Great Chronicle of London* tells us that immediately after the King fled, Warwick's supporters in Kent teamed up with shipmen and came into Saint Katharine's precinct of London, Southwark and Redcliff to rob beer houses. One of Warwick's retainers released their supporters from Marshalsea gaol, who then went about attacking beer houses and 'spared no Flemings that they came across'.<sup>89</sup> These areas around London held high concentrations of 'Dutch' aliens and beer houses.<sup>90</sup> In victimising the 'Dutch' in London's suburbs, the rioters may have targeted Charles the Bold's subjects to harass Warwick's political rival, settle personal grievances, to achieve material gain or a combination of these motives. As beer houses were producing beer – a distinctly 'Dutch' product that was predominantly brewed by 'Dutch' immigrants – they were representative of 'Dutch' culture and were perfect targets for this attack. It is within this context that we should view Copyn's petition. His assailant Robert Marston may be identified as one of the shipmen referred to by the *Great Chronicle* who had joined the attack and – drawing upon the political context – used nationality-based language to insult Copyn.

Bartholomew Deux's petition to the Chancellor similarly depicts how the turmoil caused by the King's abdication to Burgundy made 'Dutch' immigrants vulnerable to harassment. Deux told the chancellor that sometime after the Earl of Warwick had taken the throne (between 3 October 1470 to 11 April 1471) he tried to board a ship from London to the Low Countries, but he was captured by Warwick's supporters. Having escaped these captors, Bartholomew fled to Westminster sanctuary, an ecclesiastical precinct where those accused of crimes could claim the protection of the Church. After leaving sanctuary following Edward IV's reinstatement in 1471, Bartholomew returned to his room only to find that his landlord Roger Dawson had trashed his room and stolen his goods. To prevent Bartholomew from suing him, Dawson allegedly put forward false legal actions and harassed him, justifying his actions because Bartholomew was a subject of 'the Duke of Burgundy and was a Fleming, saying that because of this he was allowed to cut his [Bartholomew's] throat or stab a dagger through his heart'.<sup>91</sup> The petition depicts Dawson as justifying his harassment of Bartholomew by claiming that he was a subject of the Duke of Burgundy at a time of tense anti-Burgundian feeling. As with the case of Oliver Bowthin, the reason why Dawson wished to victimise his tenant is unclear. We noted earlier that Dawson had a history of trading with aliens and seems to have had no previous history of nationality-based slurs. Dawson was a member of the

in March 1471, which would have given him a far better chance of receiving sympathy for having been attacked by Warwick's supporters.

88 Gillingham (1981), pp. 180–186.

89 Thomas/Thornley (1938), p. 212.

90 Mercer (2002), pp. 143–152.

91 TNA, C 1/46/452.

Merchant Tailors' Company and may have taken advantage of the political context to deal with a 'Dutch' competitor, he may have been a sympathiser of the Earl of Warwick, or he may have simply used this context as an opportunity to take Bartholomew's goods. In any case, Bartholomew and his lawyer thought it credible that Dawson had taken advantage of the tension between England and Burgundy to use a nationality-based insult.

England's antagonistic relationship with Scotland in the early sixteenth century played a similar role in encouraging anti-Scottish slurs. Throughout the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, England and Scotland were either at war with one another or maintaining a tenuous peace, and even then, there were intermittent skirmishes in the border region.<sup>92</sup> In 1502, the two countries had signed a Treaty of Perpetual Peace, but by 1508, there were rumours that James IV of Scotland would break the six-year long agreement with England and ally with France. Two Scottish ambassadors were subsequently imprisoned in London. In 1509, Henry VIII adopted an increasingly anti-Scottish foreign policy, in large part because the Scottish King – James IV – had a strong claim to the English throne.<sup>93</sup> This uneasy relationship seems to have resulted in increased distrust towards Scots in London. Before this time, we have found little evidence of anti-Scottish slurs in the records of the Commissary and Consistory Courts. Yet, between 1508 and 1509, there was a spike of five cases in the Commissary Court records in which people used anti-Scottish insults, where people allegedly defamed others as 'whoreson Scots' or 'false Scots'.<sup>94</sup>

The same link between deteriorating relations with Scotland and a spike in Scottish cases in the London courts can be observed in 1512–1513. Between 1511 and 1512, Anglo-Scottish relations worsened; England joined an alliance against France in 1511, and in July 1512 Scotland renewed its entente with the French. This eventually led to a Scottish force invading the north of England in 1513 to support their ally, only to be defeated at the Battle of Flodden.<sup>95</sup> Within this context, a second cluster of four Scottish cases can be found in our source base.<sup>96</sup> In 1512, the Commissary Court heard a case between John Andrew and Robert Gray, in which Andrew had allegedly used anti-Scottish slurs against Gray.<sup>97</sup> In the same year, Christopher Wastell, a servant of the keeper of Croydon park named Baldwyn, brought forward a suit against Thomas and Salman Dowff to the Consistory Court on the grounds that they had uttered anti-Scottish slurs against him.<sup>98</sup> In the north of England people would have been ever conscious of Anglo-Scottish conflict due to frequent border raids conducted by English and Scottish forces. In these

92 Neville (1996), pp. 419–437.

93 Dunlop (1994), pp. 138–161 and Godwin (2013).

94 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, 13 r.; TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, 32 r.; TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, f. 56v.; TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, f. 88.; and TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, f. 71 r.

95 Dunlop (1994), pp. 138–161 and Godwin (2013).

96 TLA, DL/C/206, f. 112–119 r; TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/011, 54 r; and TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/011, f. 137.

97 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/011, f. 137.

98 TLA, DL/C/ 206, f. 112v, 115v, 116v, 118v, 119 r. Baldwyn is mentioned in the witness deposition of Adrian Palles (f. 116v) with no other names.



contexts, it was relatively common for people to label their personal and business rivals as Scots as a means to claim that they were not of the community, even if they were of English birth.<sup>99</sup> Our London evidence, however, indicates that these insults primarily happened within the capital at times of very tense Anglo-Scottish diplomatic tension or large-scale warfare. This is presumably because Londoners were more concerned with the serious escalations during Anglo-Scottish disputes and the perceived threat to the kingdom than they were of the perennial border skirmishes in the north of England.

Our analysis of these cases indicates that instances of nationality-based insults were informed by particular economic or political contexts, rather than a continuous anti-alien sentiment. The connections between the insults and wider contexts are not simply our interpretation. Although many of the litigants, lawyers, and scribes involved in the creation of our sources would have known about the wider diplomatic and political contexts in which the stories were told, some still chose to mention them explicitly. Oliver and Eleanor Bowthin explicitly told the Chancellor that their respondents' actions were unjust considering the recent truce between England and Burgundy (1439), but to dissociate themselves from the Burgundian Duke, they also stressed that Oliver had sworn allegiance to the King and that Eleanor was an Englishwoman.<sup>100</sup> Thomas Qwkkesley told the chancellor that he and his companions were servants of the Duke of Burgundy, which he and his lawyer clearly thought important to his narrative.<sup>101</sup> Bartholomew Deux explicitly stated that his respondent had victimised him with slurs and threats of physical violence because he was a subject of 'the Duke of Burgundy'.<sup>102</sup> Both Bartholomew's petition to the chancellor and that of Copyn Pylgrym deliberately placed their narratives of victimisation against the backdrop of Edward IV's abdication to Burgundy.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, in a case brought to the Commissary Court in 1512, Thomas Leche emphasised that his respondent had falsely labelled him as a Scot, which 'had caused him great damage since the war against the kingdom of Scotland began'.<sup>104</sup>

One interpretation of these cases could be that litigants and lawyers thought that it was only during times of political tension that nationality-based insults were potent enough to meet the requirement in canon law that insulting words needed to have caused serious damage to the victim's reputation. It should be noted, however, that most but not all (15 out of 23) cases appear to have been connected to political events. Eight cases cannot be clearly linked to such events, including a case brought before the commissary court where Joan Symond called David Halywell a 'bawd, knave and Welsh whoreson' (1508x1509), or that Alice Peterson had called her neighbour Stephen Westell a 'false knave and Fleming' (1512x1513).<sup>105</sup> This interpretation is also unconvincing considering that the six equity court cases with nationality-based insults were not defamation cases;

99 Neville (1996), pp. 433 f.; Forrest (2018), p. 80.

100 TNA, C 1/45/55.

101 TNA, C 1/48/207.

102 TNA, C 1/46/452.

103 TNA, C 1/46/452 and TNA, C 1/45/124.

104 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/011, f. 132.

105 See for example: TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, f. 48 r; TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/011, f. 117v.

there was no requirement for plaintiffs to prove that they had suffered significant reputational damage. However, just as cases brought to the canon law courts, these cases also point to a strong connection between nationality-based insults and wider political contexts. As noted, the petitions to equity courts mentioned nationality-based slurs as *afforcements* – that is, additional detail to highlight how unjustly the respondent had acted – but they were not the main charge against the defendant. Indeed, Humphrey Gentil's main accusation against his respondents was that they had threatened to murder him if he did not give them money and only then used vicious words. Copyn Pylgrym complained that his respondent had shouted insults whilst trying to break into his master's beer house and then had put forward a false legal action; Bartholomew Deux's landlord did so as an attempt of intimidation in order to avoid a legal case after he had stolen his goods.<sup>106</sup>

The concentration of cases of nationality-based insults in particular periods is therefore not the result of what parties thought met the threshold of defamation, but more likely reflects an important pattern. Nationality-based insults could be brought to court outside of periods of political or economic upheaval, but only rarely so, and it certainly happened more commonly at times of political or economic flashpoints. The power of and sensitivity to nationality-based slurs, then, was highly contingent and context-specific. During particular tensions, parts of London's population became more conscious of the presence and actions of certain alien groups, and this could lead to a spike in the number of verbal attacks reported in our source material. Some of these spikes coincide with the larger-scale physical confrontations between immigrant and denizen groups discussed in narrative sources, suggesting that the same political and economic grievances could result in both physical and verbal nationality-based abuse. We identified a cluster of nationality-related insults in our court cases in the years following 1435, for example, when chronicles report that 'Dutchmen' in London were also attacked physically. This was not a universal pattern, however: we did not observe an increase in nationality-based slurs, for instance, at the time of the attack on the Hanseatic Steelyard in 1493 or Evil May Day in 1517, two other episodes of anti-alien violence in London well known from the narrative sources.<sup>107</sup> This does not automatically mean that nationality-related insults were less common during these years: perpetrators of verbal abuse may have escaped legal proceedings in the general upheaval caused by these confrontations or may have been prosecuted by other means than the courts that we studied.

## 5. Terminology

What nationality-related terms were deemed insulting and what do they tell us about the relationship between the English-born population and the various groups of immi-

106 TNA, C 1/48/518 (Humphrey Gentil); TNA, C 1/45/124 (Copyn Pylgrim); TNA, C 1/46/452 (Bartholomew Deux).

107 For these instances, see Ormrod/Lambert/Mackman (2019), pp. 247 f.

grants living in the realm? It is worth highlighting that in none of our cases legal action was taken because individuals were called 'alien' or any equivalent term denoting undifferentiated non-English origins.<sup>108</sup> It seems then, that nationality-based slurs were not informed by a binary opposition between England's native and immigrant residents. Instead, the individuals in our sample were considered victims of verbal abuse because they had been associated with particular non-English nationalities. These associations were considered detrimental to the victim's interests, which required redress in court.

In some cases, the use of a nationality label itself was judged sufficient ground for legal proceedings or was included as an *afforcement*, strengthening other complaints. A notable example is the term 'Fleming', which, in its original meaning, referred to people originating from the County of Flanders or, by extension, from the whole of the Low Countries.<sup>109</sup> In his petition to the Chancery, for instance, Bartholomew Deux found it necessary to state that Roger Dawson had called him 'a Fleming' when trying to intimidate him.<sup>110</sup> As a justification for one of his companions hitting Ralph Sudyll, Thomas Qwykkesley argued that Sudyll called people in his group 'Flemings with other seditious words', even placing the use of the nationality label on the same footing as treasonable speech, which was known as one of the most severe crimes in late medieval England.<sup>111</sup> It is significant that all seven cases in which 'Fleming' was regarded as an insult date from after the middle of the 1430s, with the petition of Oliver Bowthin in 1439 as the earliest example.<sup>112</sup> We explained earlier how the Treaty of Arras and Philip the Good's about-face in 1435 led to particular hostility towards people from the county of Flanders. The majority of the Burgundian army besieging the English garrison of Calais in 1436 was made up of urban militias from Flanders, not from any of the other principalities of the Burgundian Low Countries. The county of Holland even tried to negotiate a separate peace with England, dissociating itself from its Flemish southern neighbours. All of this resulted in people from Flanders becoming the target of specific popular hostility and mockery in the political literature of the time.<sup>113</sup> The events of the 1430s also seem to have provoked a shift in the meaning of the term 'Fleming', from a

<sup>108</sup> For these equivalents, and the subtle differences in their meaning, see Ormrod/Lambert/Mackman (2019), pp. 7–9. The petition presented by the Gascons in Parliament in 1411, mentioned in footnotes 25 and 67, does refer to them being called 'aliens'. Given-Wilson (2005), pp. 536f. In this context, however, 'alien' should be interpreted as a distinct legal category with highly specific implications and not as a blanket insult showing disdain for non-English origins. The explicit aim of the 1411 petition was for Gascons to be granted denizen rights, in particular the right to own and inherit real property, without becoming proper English subjects. Ormrod/Lambert/Mackman (2019), p. 17. Alien status denoted the opposite of denizen status, used for those who were denied these rights. The Gascon petition thus confirms the point that speech about immigrant presence was informed by particular contemporary political debates, rather than indiscriminate antagonism.

<sup>109</sup> See the quotations from the pre-1436 period for the term 'Fleming' in Middle English Dictionary (2024d).

<sup>110</sup> TNA, C1/45/55.

<sup>111</sup> TNA, C 1/48/207. On treasonable speech in later medieval England, see Bellamy (1970) and Cressy (2010), pp. 39–60.

<sup>112</sup> TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/004, DL/C/B/043/MS09064/011, f. 47; TNA, C1/45/55, C 1/45/124, C 1/46/452, C 1/48/207, STAC 2/21/121.

<sup>113</sup> Thielemans (1966), pp. 65–148. This may even have prompted some Flemish residents in England to identify as coming from other principalities in the Low Countries. Lambert/Ormrod (2020), pp. 311–313.

seemingly neutral geographical indicator to an outspokenly derogatory epithet, fit for untrustworthy individuals who posed a threat to English interests. This is also how it was used in the majority of our cases, even if the victims did not originate from Flanders: 'Fleming' Bartholomew Deux, for example, came from Guelders, which, at the time of his petition (1471x1472), was not even part of the Burgundian Low Countries.<sup>114</sup> The negative connotations associated with the term appear to have endured after the 1430s, possibly fuelled by new Anglo-Flemish political confrontations. There is a cluster of cases in which 'Fleming' was considered a slur, for example, around 1470, when the Warwick supporters took issue with Edward IV finding refuge in Flanders and the *Great Chronicle of London* mentions them chasing 'Flemings' in response.<sup>115</sup>

The contrast with the term 'Dutchman', which was used in England to denote people from the Low Countries and the German territories, is striking. Whereas none of the victims in our sample ever presented themselves as 'Flemings', several described themselves as 'Dutchmen'. While partly referring to the same geographical area, 'Dutchman' appears to have remained devoid of the offensive connotations that 'Fleming' came to carry from the 1430s onwards. A similar pattern appeared in London wills and chancery petitions from the fifteenth century after 1436 that did not include nationality-based insults, where testators and petitioners identified as 'Dutchman' or 'Dutchwoman', but not as 'Fleming'.<sup>116</sup> Tellingly, Oliver Bowthin, who came from Bruges in Flanders, presented himself as 'Dutchman' in his 1439 petition, while voicing indignation about being called 'a Fleming'.<sup>117</sup> One term clearly had become loaded as a result of the political context of the 1430s, while the other had not.

Another example of a nationality label independently used as an insult is 'Scot'. In 1512, for instance, Thomas Leche had to appear before the Commissary Court for nothing more than calling Thomas Melmerby 'a Scot'.<sup>118</sup> Also in 1512, John Andrew brought a case against Robert Gray, who was accused of having claimed that John had 'a brother in Scotland and was a Scot himself'.<sup>119</sup> As with 'Fleming', this seemingly innocuous demonym became charged with additional meaning in specific political contexts. We explained in the previous section that the cases of Leche and Andrew took place at times of heightened suspicion towards residents from Scotland, provoked by a French-Scottish rapprochement and fears of a Scottish invasion of northern England. In such circumstances, being associated with Scotland alone was enough for someone's reputation to be damaged, providing sufficient ground for a defamation suit. Cases such as these typically came before the church courts, where the victims' main aim was to restore

114 TNA, C 1/46/452.

115 Three of the seven cases involving the use of 'Fleming' as an insult date from these years: TNA, C 1/45/124, C 1/46/452, C 1/48/207. For the *Great Chronicle of London* reference: Thomas/Thornley (1938), p. 212.

116 Ravenhill (2019), pp. 154 f. Some late-fourteenth century testators described themselves as coming from Flanders: TLA, DL/C/B/004/MS 09171/001, f. 89 and DL/C/B/004/MS 09171/001, f. 218v.

117 TNA, C1/45/55.

118 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/011, f. 132.

119 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/011, f. 137.

their good fame, ideally by making the perpetrators ask for a public pardon.<sup>120</sup> In some examples, the intention of the perpetrator may have been to convince the local community that the victim came from Scotland and to connect him or her with the negative connotations that this carried, even if the latter had no Scottish roots whatsoever. We mentioned earlier that after being involved in a brawl in which derogatory comments were made about his attributed Scottish origins, Christopher Wastell brought several witnesses to court who testified that he was an Englishman born and bred.<sup>121</sup> The difficulty in distinguishing between Scottish and English residents, certainly if someone came from the Anglo-Scottish borderlands, must have made this a particularly potent tool to harass rivals.<sup>122</sup>

In most of our cases, however, national labels were used in conjunction with other slurs. John Gate, for example, was summoned to court in 1492x1493 for saying to Hector de Laven that he was a 'strong French whoreson'.<sup>123</sup> In 1508x1509, Joan Symond had to explain why she had called her neighbour David Hallywell 'a bawdy knave and Welsh whoreson'.<sup>124</sup> In 1512, Alice Peterson was alleged to have described Stephen Westell as a 'false knave and Fleming'.<sup>125</sup> Many of these words were common insults and were not exclusive to nationality-based verbal abuse. They included a wide range of slurs that were used frequently in a variety of contexts to call into question women's sexuality and men's masculinity.<sup>126</sup> 'Whoreson', for example, which occurs in our court depositions in combination with Scottish, Welsh and French national labels, was a term that was used widely in late medieval and early Tudor England to attack a man's reputation by discrediting the sexual honour of the women attached to him.<sup>127</sup> Use of these words alone, that is, devoid of a link with nationality, was reason enough for victims or authorities to start legal proceedings. Yet some of the terms in our cases had particular resonance when combined with national labels.

Many people in later medieval England will have been called 'false', regardless of their nationality.<sup>128</sup> There was more to the allegations of falseness that Humphrey Gentil had to swallow in 1473x1475, however. Even though his petition claimed that his

120 Helmholtz (1971), pp. 267 f.

121 TLA, C/206, f. 112–119r. See also the licences of birth that people in the north of England tried to obtain from local magnates to prove that they were English, discussed in Neville (1996). For two London cases of individuals mistaken for Scots having to prove their birthplace that did not involve verbal abuse, see TNA, C 1/61/483–485; C 1/136/66. The first of these cases, which can be dated to the 1480–1482 period, explicitly places the incident in the context of Anglo-Scottish warfare, supporting our earlier point that the threat of a military invasion or diplomatic setbacks could result in heightened sensitivity concerning Scottish presence in the capital city.

122 English distrust towards Scots during these years may also have been exploited by other immigrants. In 1475x1477 or 1480x1482, Cornelius Dryant, who was likely 'Dutch', appeared in court for calling John Johnson 'a Scot and a thief'. TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/003, f. 272.

123 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/005, f. 129v.

124 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, f. 48r.

125 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/011, f. 117v.

126 On the gender-specific nature of medieval insults, see Dean (2004), pp. 217–231.

127 Middle English Dictionary (2024a); Gowing (1996), pp. 63 f.

128 Honesty was considered as a principal asset, above all for men, in premodern societies. Cressy (2010), p. 24.

assailants Russel and Oxon flung 'many great threats and menaces' at him, only two insults were worth specifying: that he was a 'false Lombard' and 'a thief', intent on robbing Nicholas' house. That exactly those two slurs were highlighted was no coincidence. We explained in the Contexts section that the Luccese banker was assaulted at a time when part of London's mercantile elite suspected Italian financiers of defrauding their English counterparts and depriving the kingdom of its wealth. The *Libelle of Englyshe Polycye* (1436), a political poem which, according to most authors, was written at least in part for London's native merchants in a period when these rumours reached fever pitch, portrayed 'Lombards' as 'feigned friends'. It argues that they pretended to be sympathetic to the realm, yet in reality cared only for their own profit.<sup>129</sup> A similar sentiment was expressed in an inquiry held by the Mayor of London after a 1457 riot against two Italian merchants in the capital, in which one troublemaker was said to have joined because 'Lombards' were 'false extortioners'.<sup>130</sup> It is, therefore, hard to dismiss the terminology of the insults against Gentil as random or interchangeable. Humphrey being framed as one of those purportedly treacherous Italian bankers, in addition to being accused of robbing an Englishman, can only have tapped into these preconceived ideas cherished by a specific part of the London population, lending the slur additional potency.

Similarly, insults such as 'whore' and other terms related to sex work were common slurs within the sexually derogatory vocabulary, intended to question women's honour and integrity and destroy their reputation.<sup>131</sup> Yet, being called 'Flemish whore and harlot', 'Dutch whore' or 'drunken whore Fleming', as happened to Barbara van Delft, Alice Fantell and Cornelia Johnson respectively, must have been especially damaging.<sup>132</sup> The alien subsidies and other late medieval and early Tudor evidence suggest that immigrants from the Low Countries had a notable presence in the prostitution business in London and other English cities, as sex workers as well as brothel keepers.<sup>133</sup> Many sources of the period – in both lay and ecclesiastical contexts – portray this 'Dutch' involvement in sex work as morally reprehensible and dangerous. A royal proclamation issued in 1393, for example, which banished prostitutes from specific places in London and Southwark, specifically targeted 'Flemish women, who profess and follow such a shameful and dolorous life'.<sup>134</sup> In 1437, a group of people presenting themselves as the 'honest dwellers' of Southwark petitioned the King in Parliament, complaining about the security threat posed by hostels and taverns that were operated by 'certain aliens

129 Warner (1926), pp. 32 f. On the mercantile audience (and authorship) of the *Libelle*, see Holmes (1961), Meale (1995) and Scattergood (2001). Sobiecki (2019), pp. 101–126, places the text in a bureaucratic context rather than a commercial one and identifies the author as government cleric Richard Caudray. Yet as secretary to John Holland, high admiral of England, Caudray would also have had privileged insights into the frustrations of English overseas traders.

130 Sharpe (1911), p. 390.

131 Gowing (1996), pp. 63 f. This was not limited to the English-speaking world: for Germany, see Toch (1993), p. 320; for Italy, see Lesnick (1991), p. 76 and Dean (2004), p. 219.

132 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/004; DL/C/206, 457v–459; DL/C/B/043/MS09064/11, 47.

133 Karras (1982), pp. 56 f.; Lambert (2019), pp. 556 f.; Lambert/Ravenhill (2023), pp. 168–170.

134 Riley (1868), p. 535.



called Flemings' and about the 'stew houses and houses of bordel' set up illegally in the borough's high streets, where 'many women [have] been ravished and brought to evil living'.<sup>135</sup> Associating women with prostitution and 'Dutch' origins must have capitalised on these sentiments, making the insults additionally destructive.<sup>136</sup> William Hinton, who appeared in London's consistory court in 1512x1514, was even more explicit. When he had to justify why he had become engaged to his master's daughter after having impregnated Alice Fantell, Hinton contrasted the promiscuity which he believed came with his bed partner's 'Dutch' background with the supposed chastity of native women. According to Fantell, he asked her what she had expected: 'That I would forsake this English maid and marry you, a Dutch whore? No.'<sup>137</sup>

Over the past forty years, a growing body of scholarship has demonstrated that common people in late medieval Europe were both politically aware and active.<sup>138</sup> Dumolyn and Haemers have shown how popular speech in the context of revolts, including insults, can serve as windows into these political perspectives that often remain out of focus in the elite-oriented majority of sources.<sup>139</sup> The same can be done with the epithets adopted in our examples of nationality-based slurs to uncover popular views on international political and military developments and the presence of immigrants in the realm. In this respect, our court cases may provide valuable insights into the political ideas of non-elite women, whose views are notoriously difficult to grasp and who also remain invisible in the evidence of physical confrontations between native and alien residents in England.<sup>140</sup> An interesting context is that of the Anglo-Scottish political tensions at the beginning of the sixteenth century. According to the court depositions, two people were independently labelled 'false Scots' in London in 1508–1509. One was said to be a 'false whoreson Scot', the other a 'false churl, false Scot and a rank Scot'. The perpetrators in both instances were women, as was the victim in one of the two cases.<sup>141</sup> While there is no apparent connection between the victims' alleged falseness and the direct issues that led to the verbal abuse, which were typically mundane altercations between co-parishioners that got out of hand, the slurs may have been informed by the perpetrators' feelings concerning the political context of the time. Earlier we described how Scottish ambassadors during these years were suspected in England of pretending to adhere to the Anglo-Scottish treaties while forging new alliances with the French and planning invasions of the English north. The cluster of insults in which people were branded as 'false Scots' in the same years suggest that the concerns about Scottish perfidiousness

135 TNA, SC8/27/1309. 'Ravished' here refers to the act of carrying off a woman by force, especially for the purpose of rape. *Middle English Dictionary* (2024c).

136 The only instances in our sample in which 'whore' was used as an insult without a reference to 'Dutch' or Flemish origins were two cases involving Scottish women. TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, 32r; DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, f. 56v.

137 TLA, DL/C/206, 457v–459. 'Maid' during this period could denote a maidservant, an unmarried, usually young woman or a virgin. *Middle English Dictionary* (2024b).

138 For late medieval England, see Ormrod (1995) and Watts (2004), pp. 159–180.

139 Dumolyn/Haemers (2012).

140 For a rare reconstruction of medieval women's political insights, see Haemers/Delameillieure (2017).

141 TLA, DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, f. 71r; DL/C/B/043/MS 09064/010, f. 88.

did not remain restricted to the courtly and diplomatic circles in Westminster but were also shared by at least part of London's non-elite residents, including its female population, and could be extended to anyone of (perceived) Scottish origins in the city.

The most powerful instances of nationality-based insults adopted terminology that evoked associations with a variety of political and/or economic contexts. According to his 1439 petition, Oliver Bowthin was called 'bawd, traitor, Fleming, thief and other horrible names'.<sup>142</sup> 'Fleming' and 'traitor' must be viewed in relation to the hostility towards residents from Flanders following Philip the Good's abandonment of the Anglo-Burgundian alliance and his siege of Calais in 1436, addressed above. At the same time of the petition, terms denoting falseness and betrayal were also used abundantly to characterise the Duke of Burgundy and his Flemish subjects in a number of narrative and political sources. The unknown author of a fifteenth-century Middle English continuation of the *Brut* chronicle calls the Duke 'a false forsworn man' when writing about the aftermath of Calais.<sup>143</sup> An anonymous poem that was popular in the capital city in the second half of the 1430s and is now known as *Scorn of the Duke of Burgundy* accuses Philip the Good of falseness no fewer than twelve times.<sup>144</sup> Both in 1436 and 1437, the royal Chancery described Flemings as 'the King's traitors and rebels from Flanders', indicating that they were not only linked to their prince's personal dishonesty but were also blamed for rejecting Henry VI's suzerainty claims over Flanders.<sup>145</sup> Whereas the exact relationship between the insults and the narrative accounts and government records is impossible to determine, it seems clear that the terminology of deceit adopted in the Bowthin slur reflected a sentiment that circulated more widely in London. Multiple Flemish immigrants in the city may have borne the brunt of these suspicions, but the aforementioned petition sent to the King in Parliament in 1437 suggests that taverns in the borough of Southwark of the kind that Oliver operated received particular scrutiny. According to the petitioners, clandestine meetings were held at these premises by Flemings and other 'adversaries to our sovereign lord the King', to the great prejudice of the monarch and his subjects.<sup>146</sup>

'Bawd', another component of the insult, was used in fifteenth-century Middle English to refer to individuals who facilitated illicit sexual relationships.<sup>147</sup> The term thus linked Oliver and the tavern he and his wife ran to the 'Dutch' brothel business in Southwark which, as has been explained above, had been a cause of animosity for decades and, according to the same 1437 petition, was also subject to insinuations of illicit activities at the time of the Bowthin case. The final abusive term launched by Hough and atte

<sup>142</sup> TNA, C 1/45/55.

<sup>143</sup> Marx (2003), p. 60.

<sup>144</sup> Robbins (1959), pp. 86–89.

<sup>145</sup> Maxwell-Lyte (1907), pp. 21, 86. The County of Flanders was a fief dependent on the French Crown. Before 1435, Philip the Good supported Henry VI's claim to the French throne, thereby also acknowledging his overlordship over Flanders. This was undone by the Treaty of Arras, in which Philip recognised Charles VII as king of France. Thielemans (1966), pp. 49–56.

<sup>146</sup> TNA, SC 8/27/1309.

<sup>147</sup> Oxford English Dictionary (2024); Karras (1982), p. 74.

Ende was ‘thief’. In addition, Bowthin claimed that his two assailants had accused him of ‘receipt of thieves’. This terminology almost appears to have been borrowed directly from the 1437 petition, in which ‘Dutch’ brothels were alleged to harbour ‘thieves, robbers (...) and other mislivers’, or at least to have been inspired by feelings that were very similar to those reflected in the petition.<sup>148</sup> Connecting the victim to political deception, unlicensed prostitution and the sheltering of criminal elements, the insults that Oliver Bowthin was confronted with thus played on just about every concern or frustration that part of the London and Southwark population may have had concerning the ‘Dutch’ community in the capital during those eventful years, likely to damning effect.

We can conclude that the terminology of our cases, too, supports the argument that nationality-based slurs were mainly provoked by discrete economic, political or military contexts. None of the words used in our source material suggests that immigrants were perceived as having essentialised, unalterable differences permanently setting them apart from the native English population. Otherwise neutral geographical indicators such as ‘Fleming’ or ‘Scot’ became loaded with negative connotations only as a result of particular political developments such as the breakdown of the Anglo-Burgundian alliance or the threat of a Scottish invasion. Commonly used terms related to falseness and illicit sexual activities took on additional meaning when used in combination with national labels only because of the problems created by the Italian predominance in overseas trade or the strong ‘Dutch’ connection with prostitution. Admittedly, some nationality-based insults manifested themselves over prolonged periods of time. ‘Fleming’ continued to be used in a derogatory way after the 1430s, albeit primarily during flash-points of political tension, and women were called ‘Dutch whore’ or any other sexually deprecating term referring to Low Countries origins well into the sixteenth century.<sup>149</sup> Yet the problems that provoked some of these insults were not immediately solved either. The ‘Dutch’ community in London remained inextricably connected to sex work and was subject to international political volatility throughout the late medieval and early Tudor periods. Similarly, being Scottish in the English capital meant having to live with the fallout of periodic Anglo-Scottish warfare during the entire fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In particular contexts, the implications of these developments raised questions, doubts and fears about the presence of aliens of specific nationalities among part of the London population which impacted their verbal interactions with others. The terminology of nationality-based insults, then, was above all informed by the challenges posed by the daily coexistence with a sizeable immigrant community in the English capital, especially at times of economic competition, political instability and military conquest.

<sup>148</sup> TNA, SC 8/27/1309.

<sup>149</sup> For an example of an insult linked to Flemish sexual activity that was used in the 1530s, see Briggs/McClure (2021).

## 6. Conclusion

The purpose of this article has been to explore what instances of nationality-based insults can tell us about the relationship between London's native and immigrant population during the later Middle Ages and the early Tudor period. Despite the crucial role attributed to speech in late medieval and early modern societies and the vast historiographical interest that physical confrontations between aliens and denizens have received, verbal abuse has largely been ignored in debates about the coexistence of England's native and immigrant inhabitants. The source material that allows us to fill this lacuna has a certain bias, as our court records may only record a fraction of the nationality-based insults that would have been used in late medieval London, and references to these slurs were often narrative devices aimed to win legal cases. That said, our corpus of cases can be considered representative of the wider realities of alien-native interactions.

Surveying the individuals involved in nationality-based slurs, the contexts in which insults were traded and the terms that were used in the abuse, our analysis provides little evidence of continuous and generalised anti-alien feeling held by a substantial part of the English population, as argued by the proponents of the primordialist interpretation. When surveying the identified offenders uttering slurs, it is clear that many belonged to a similar demographic as those who, according to the instrumentalist view, played a prominent part in the physical attacks. In both cases, London citizens or apprentices that were part of the city's mercantile and artisanal guilds appear among the perpetrators and resident Italian and 'Dutch' men practising artisanal or mercantile trades among the victims, suggesting that here, too, native frustrations over allegedly unfair immigrant competition were part of the problem. However, the records documenting verbal abuse reveal the involvement of a broader cross-section of society in incidents that suggest hostility towards aliens than the sources chronicling physical attacks. Women, for example, are recorded far more frequently as both perpetrators and victims of nationality-based insults than as participants in the physical altercations, either because they were excluded from the guild-based world that figures so prominently in the narrative accounts of anti-alien violence or because they were overrepresented in the judicial source material recording speech-related crimes. Our court records also broaden the perspective on the range of national groups that were involved in anti-alien hostility. While there is hardly any evidence of physical aggression or riots against Scottish, French or Welsh residents in London during this period, our study highlights that these three groups were occasionally subject to nationality-based verbal abuse.<sup>150</sup> Perhaps most importantly, our analysis shows that English residents of the capital also had to endure nationality-related insults and that the perpetrators of the slurs included

<sup>150</sup> The only recorded examples of physical aggression against Frenchmen in London are the murder of a Breton spy in 1429 and the assault on John Meautys and the French wool workers he was supposedly sheltering during Evil May Day in 1517. As far as is known, there were no physical attacks against Scots or Welshmen in the capital during this period. Ormrod/Lambert/Mackman (2019), p. 249.

immigrants, debunking the overly simplistic assumption that these insults were merely a function of binary opposition between natives and aliens.

In the small number of cases where we can collect biographical details about the litigants, nationality-based verbal abuse appears to have been exceptional in, rather than representative of these individuals' life-trajectories in London. If insults relating to people's perceived nationalities were recorded to have occurred, they were so primarily in distinct political contexts, which also explains the clustering of our examples in time. The 'Dutch' were most vulnerable to nationality-based slurs between 1435 and 1439, when Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy, abandoned his alliance with England at the Treaty of Arras (1435) and besieged the English at Calais (1436), and in the early 1470s, during the struggle between the Earl of Warwick and Edward IV, who was supported by Charles the Bold of Burgundy. The Scots and French were most prone to verbal attacks – or at least people were more likely to be accused of being Scottish or French – in the years leading up to the Battle of Flodden (1513), when the Scottish and French royal governments were suspected of disregarding treaties and backstabbing the English. Within these contexts of English interests being threatened by foreign political manoeuvres, frustrations over economic competition or disputes with banal causes like pub-fights and neighbourhood quarrels could escalate into verbal altercations that became linked to nationality, whether they involved immigrants or not.

That the use and impact of these insults were contingent and dependent on particular contexts is also highlighted by the language of the slurs. Perpetrators were not sued in court for calling victims 'alien' or any other term implying essentialised and permanent differences between the immigrant and denizen parts of the population. The use of national labels in their own right did carry derogatory connotations, yet this was time and place-specific. While 'Fleming' was a seemingly neutral indicator used to designate people from Flanders or the Low Countries in the fourteenth century, it became a heavily loaded, deprecating term associated with betrayal and deceit following the Anglo-Burgundian fall out in 1435. Whereas being called 'Scot' was a reason to take legal action to seek redress via a defamation suit in the north of England through most of the late medieval period, it only seems to have led to court proceedings in London at times of large-scale, open warfare or the fear of the breaking of an Anglo-Scottish treaty. By combining national labels with particular nouns or adjectives such as 'whore' or 'false', perpetrators drew upon the negative sentiment surrounding certain immigrant groups that existed in particular contexts with specific English groups. Similarities in terminology suggest that some nationality-based insults may have been informed by textual sources such as petitions or royal letters patent, or vice versa.

Nationality-based insults in late medieval and early Tudor London, then, cannot be said to be indicative of a constant and wide-spread anti-alien sentiment. Instead, our analysis reveals a much more sophisticated involvement with immigrant presence. While many sources of the period, including some of our court cases, provide evidence of harmonious relationships between England's native-born and alien inhabitants, international political developments or immigrant predominance in certain trades could

raise questions about English interactions with the newcomers in their midst.<sup>151</sup> The cases that we studied demonstrate that debates about these challenges were not restricted to the halls of Westminster but occupied ordinary Londoners, both male and female, and impacted upon their daily speech acts. Whether perpetrators voiced their personal concerns or tried to capitalise on feelings among the wider public, these speech acts were directly informed by particular aspects of these specific discussions, often suggesting a strong popular awareness of the situation. Even if they were the most negative manifestations of this engagement, the nationality-based slurs in our analysis should be seen as immediate responses to the complexities of native-immigrant coexistence in late medieval and early Tudor London, rather than as a sign of blanket English opposition to alien presence and activities in the capital.

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