

A London Expatriate Scribe? John Vale in Portugal

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British Library, Additional MS 48301A is a late fifteenth-century manuscript compilation of copy-letters, London chronicle material, and political texts such as John Fortescue's *Governance of England* and John Lydgate's prose *Serpent of Division*.¹ Thanks to the scholarship of Anne F. Sutton and Livia Visser-Fuchs, we know a good many details about the life and career of its scribe, John Vale, who signs his initials *JV* four times in the manuscript.² Originally from Suffolk, Vale appears to have moved to London by 1463 when he appears in the will of a Bury St. Edmunds merchant as "Thomas Vale's son now dwelling at London with Thomas Cook."³ Cook was a wealthy London draper, whose name appears throughout the letters collected in Vale's book. Vale worked for Cook in legal and secretarial capacities in the ensuing years, earning some trust and respect in local circles; by the late 1470s, contemporary documents styled him "gentleman of London" and often as the rather more genteel "John de Vale."⁴ Upon Cook's death in 1478, Vale continued to act on behalf of Cook's widow Elizabeth in disputes with her son and Thomas's heir, Philip. Elizabeth, who had inherited the estates of her father Philip Malpas, later trusted "John Devale" to be an executor of her estate in an 1484 will and as feoffee of some Malpas lands in Essex.⁵ Vale also appears to have subsequently maintained contacts with Cook's son-in-law, John Forster, a draper himself and inheritor of Malpas properties with his wife Joan *née* Cook. A later, nearly contemporary hand

adds a list of tenants of one such Malpas property at the end of Additional 48301A, suggesting that the book passed from John Vale into the Forster household sometime after 1484.⁶

Apart from this miscellany of his own making, Vale owned at least three other miscellaneous books: an English scientific miscellany (Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.14.52), a religious miscellany in English and Latin (Worcester Cathedral MS F.172), and a verse compilation including works by Chaucer and Lydgate (British Library, Harley MS 2251). All three manuscripts were produced by the bookmaking operation of John Multon, a London stationer.⁷ Multon also bequeathed a psalter to “John de Vale” in his 1475 will.⁸ In London, Vale proved capable of cultivating valued working and social relationships with bookmakers like Multon as well as members of city’s elite mercantile class, like Thomas and Elizabeth Cook and John Forster (himself a client of Multon). So established, John de Vale—draper’s man of affairs, made gentleman of London, scribe, and reader—then disappears from the surviving documentary record by 1485: he left no sign of a will, or a widow, or children, in English sources.⁹ What happened to him?

A Portuguese chancery document provides one possible account of John Vale’s whereabouts later in life. In 1499, Dom Manuel of Portugal grants the status of *vizinho* in the town of Tavira in the Algarve to one “João da Vala, Englishman.”¹⁰ The document refers to this new *vizinho* by his name and nationality three times: “Joham da Vala imgres” twice in the text proper and once in the left margin.¹¹ *Vizinho* literally means “neighbor” in Portuguese, but here conveys a formal municipal standing with legal and commercial advantages. The king certifies João da Vala’s right to “trade, sell, buy [tratar vender comprar]” in the town and his enjoyment of all the honors, privileges, freedoms and customs afforded *vizinhos*, as well as his reciprocal obligations to pay any associated taxes and customs to the proper agents of the Crown there. Grants of *vizinhança* in Tavira like this are not regularly recorded in royal chancery registers; Dom Manuel does, however, extend the status of *vizinho* to one Diogo Pinto, called a “foreign merchant resident in Tavira,” in 1518.¹² It could be that alien merchants like Pinto and Vale required royal certification to be confirmed as *vizinhos*, or sought it out for good measure.

Could João da Vala be John de Vale setting up shop in a coastal town in the Portuguese Algarve? An affirmative case can be made in terms general and particular. Tavira was not so remote from Vale’s London in 1499 as one might guess. The Algarve was a productive agricultural region, and English merchants imported its fruit, wine, and dyes in quantity often via Lisbon and other Iberian ports.¹³ Situated on the gulf of Cádiz, Tavira sat along a trading route routinely plied by English ships. The Middle English sailing directions in John Paston’s book trace a voyage around the Cabo de São Vicente at the southwestern tip of Portugal, past Tavira and then Huelva,

Seville, and Sanlúcar de Barrameda in nearby Andalusia, before reaching the straits of Gibraltar.¹⁴ Trade with Portugal at the time was growing more and more lucrative for London men in particular: Wendy Childs describes a “surge” in Anglo-Portuguese trade in the 1490s, one centered in London rather than in previously active ports like Southampton and Bristol.¹⁵

Vale’s residence in Tavira by 1499 accords with what details we know of his biography.¹⁶ We can only estimate his age at the time. He was “dwelling at London with Thomas Cook” by 1463, though we do not know under what terms he entered Cook’s service or at what age. He may have been quite a young man, living with Cook to learn the trade at fourteen or so, and yet to make a name for himself (he was still “Thomas Valys son” in the will). Thus, in 1499, he was fifty years old at the youngest when he won the privileges of *vizinhança* in Tavira and set up well in the Algarve for a comfortable late career. There he could act as a factor for his English contacts: buying and selling goods on their behalf under favorable terms, or assuring safe receipt and dispatch of cargoes.¹⁷ For adventurous Englishmen of Vale’s position and skills, a stint abroad was a means of advancement in a mercantile career. It provided training in the craft, and opportunity to strengthen relationships with foreign brokers, one’s clients back home, and other upwardly mobile Englishmen resident there. Vale may have already spent time in Iberia as a young man on behalf of Cook and the drapers, and sensed opportunity in a return in the late 1480s and 1490s. As for his means to make such a move, we know he came into some substantial seed money for his own investment in 1478, when Thomas Cook left him the sum of £50 in gratitude for his service. Cook also left Vale an annuity of four marks out of the profits of a London property. Elizabeth Cook granted him life interest in a shop on Bridge Street in London—prime retailing space—in her own will of 1484.¹⁸ Vale had done quite well for himself then, and had both the acumen and the assets to make a move thereafter. If he had partners in his venture, they could shoulder a share of the costs incurred in sending a trusted and able man to act as their factor in the Algarve, a region of growing importance to London merchants. The newly-won privileges of a *vizinho* in 1499 in this export-rich region would have only improved Vale’s position.

The most compelling case for John Vale’s identity as the Englishman João da Vala in Tavira is founded on the many and particularly deep connections of the Drapers’ Company with Portugal and Spain. Wendy Childs positively identifies more drapers trading with Spain than members of any other London company throughout the fifteenth century.¹⁹ The draper and London mayor Bartholomew James seems to have been born in Portugal to an English father.²⁰ Other London drapers sailed the Iberian run, visiting Portugal and Andalusia to prosecute commercial interests. Wendy Childs finds John Bownde based in Andalusia for a time, traveling to Huelva,

Seville, and Sanlúcar.²¹ George Bulstrode unsuccessfully courted a widow with sumptuous gifts he had bought in Andalusia in the 1480s; William Folkys had been “to Lisbon in his youth.”²² Thomas Howell, made a freeman of the company in 1506, spent twenty-six years shuttling between London and Seville, leading Childs to wonder if he simply preferred Andalusian life (a snowbird Londoner ahead of his time).²³ The gulf of Cádiz bustled with London drapers and their agents, with whom Vale might trade, cooperate, or entertain at Tavira to his advantage.

One draper stands out in the company for his Portuguese connections. Edward Brampton was born Duarte Brandão in Lisbon, a Jew and illegitimate son of a blacksmith’s wife.²⁴ He moved to London in 1468, where he converted, with Edward IV standing as godfather. A man of many talents and Yorkist sympathies, Brampton was made a freeman of the draper’s company in 1477, as Vale was managing Cook’s affairs. Business was very good, good enough that Brampton could soon advance the Treasury a tidy sum of £700 for its debt to Spanish merchants in exchange for exemption from the wool custom on exports through Straits of Gibraltar.²⁵ England proved less hospitable to Brampton after the Yorkist defeat at Bosworth in 1485, and he returned to Portugal soon after. Back home, Brampton was renaturalized by successive favorable kings, and crucially, he set himself up in international trade as Duarte Brandão again. In 1487 he sold off extensive local holdings to buy exemption from customs on charcoal, wood, linen, and other commodities in Lisbon.²⁶ The careers of John Vale and Edward Brampton coincided at the London drapers’ hall in the late 1470s through the early 1480s, and again when they moved from England to Portugal in the following decades just as Anglo-Iberian trade surged through London. In Tavira and Lisbon, João da Vala and Duarte Brandão could each capitalize upon their past English acquaintance. Vale could look to Brandão for credit and connections in a new country; Brandão had in Vale a dependable and enterprising agent posted in the Algarve, with intimate knowledge of Anglo-Iberian trade and, perhaps more importantly, the traders engaged in it.

Vale might have taken Multon’s psalter with him to Portugal, but his four miscellanies have lingered on the shelves of English libraries. These he may have given away to friends and associates, or sold. The miscellany in his own hand, Additional MS 48301A, passed to the Forsters. Trinity MS R.14.52, his practical-scientific miscellany, has a later signature from a “Ri[?] Roos” on folio 271v.²⁷ One Robert Roos began an apprenticeship with the drapers in 1488; a number of Rooses were mercers.²⁸ There is an ownership inscription on the same page, “Iste liber constat Johannes Bampton.” Two John Bampton were mercers, earning their freedom in 1474 and 1480. Harley MS 2251, a manuscript apparently copied from a Shirley exemplar, landed in the hands of “Nycolas Skyner” for a time, who signs the top margin

of folio 9r. One Nicholas Skynner left a will in 1508 donating a “stondyng maser”—a standing bowl—to the merchant haberdashers’ hall in Farringdon and a small sum to “Seint Austins,” presumably the parish church of St. Augustine by St. Paul.²⁹ Harley MS 2251 then passed to the antiquarian John Stowe.³⁰ The whereabouts of Vale’s religious miscellany, Worcester Cathedral Library MS F.172, are a mystery prior to its donation in the early eighteenth century.³¹ On the whole, Vale’s books changed hands among readers affiliated with the City’s prestigious livery companies the drapers, mercers, and haberdashers, tracing out a network of literary exchange that mapped onto and across those of mercantile activity.³²

If the *vizinho* of Tavira and the English scribe of Additional MS 48301A were one and the same man, then the life of João da Vala *olim* John Vale followed a course from childhood in Suffolk, through adulthood among the merchants of London, to resettlement in the Algarve. In Tavira, John Vale closed the fifteenth century like no other Lydgate scribe or reader of Chaucer whom we know of. The arc of this life, then, invites us to recalibrate our operative sense of the horizons of those Middle English scribes and readers who shared his metropolitan milieu.

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NOTES

1. On this manuscript and its context, see Margaret Kekewich, et al., *The Politics of Fifteenth-Century England: John Vale’s Book* (Stroud: Alan Sutton Publishing Limited for Richard III and Yorkist History Trust, 1995).
2. He signs “per me JV” in the margins of folios 94r and 119v, and “by me JV” at the end of two letters, both on folio 187v.
3. For those details see Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, “The Provenance of the Manuscript: The Lives and Archive of Sir Thomas Cook and His Man of Affairs, John Vale,” *Politics of Fifteenth-Century England*, 73–126; 103.
4. He is referred to as a ‘gentleman of London’ in two chancery documents: Kew, National Archives, C1/54/131 and 66/400; cited in Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, “Provenance,” 106.
5. Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, “Provenance,” 99.

6. The list of tenants of Porter's Fee in Dagenham is on folio 188v of the manuscript. Porter's Fee passed from John Cook to his sister Joan Forster. The Forsters sold it to Avery Cornburgh in 1488; the Cornburghs sold it to one William Hussey in 1495. *Ibid.*, 103.
7. On Vale's books, see *ibid.*, 108–109. All three MSS are in the hand of a single scribe; Sutton and Visser-Fuchs strongly suggest that the scribe, known as the Hammond scribe, may very well have been Multon himself. Linne R. Mooney raises the possibility that John Vale, John Shirley, and the Hammond scribe were members of a common class of household clerks that enjoyed remarkable access to many and various copy-texts with which to compile books in "John Shirley's Heirs," *Yearbook of English Studies* 33 (2003): 182–198, 190. For an inventory of the Hammond scribe's output, see Mooney, "More Manuscripts Written by a Chaucer Scribe." *The Chaucer Review* 30, no. 4 (1996): 401–407, and "A New Manuscript by the Hammond Scribe Discovered by Jeremy Griffiths," in *The English Medieval Book: Studies in Memory of Jeremy Griffiths*, ed. A. S. G. Edwards, Vincent Gillespie, and Ralph Hanna (London: The British Library, 2000), 113–123.
8. Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, "Provenance," 108.
9. As Sutton and Visser-Fuchs observe, "No personal details about Vale have been discovered after the end of 1484... If Vale left a will it has not survived, and if he left a widow and children they have not been identified" (in "Provenance," 107).
10. Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, Chancelaria de D. Manuel I, liv. 16, folio 16v.
11. By Portuguese chancery convention, Englishmen named John and Portuguese named João tend to be 'Joham' on paper. When authorizing an Englishman named John Redy to carry arms in 1462, Portuguese scribes styled him "Joham Redy ingres"; John Collin [?], granted the same right in 1450, is "Joham Collim ingres." Arquivo Nacional Torre do Tombo, Chancelaria de D. Afonso V, liv. 9, folio 54v; *ibid.*, liv. 11, folio 40r.
12. Chancelaria de D. Manuel I, liv. 44, folio 7v.
13. There is evidence for direct English trade links with Tavira specifically (such as a record of a shipload of fruit and wine arriving from Tavira in 1443) and with the Algarve more generally. On the 1443 shipment, see Wendy R. Childs, *Trade and Shipping in the Medieval West: Portugal, Castile, and England*, *Textes et Études du Moyen Âge* 70 (Porto: Fédération internationale des instituts d'études médiévales, 2013), 133. The *Christopher* of Bristol returned from an unnamed port in Algarve on December 11, 1480, laden almost entirely with dried fruit customarily enjoyed for Christmas, and three bags of "grain": probably *kermes vermilio*, a dye used to make luxury woolens; see E. M. Carus-Wilson,

- The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Middle Ages* (Bristol: Bristol Record Society, 1967), 232.
14. On these instructions in British Library, Lansdowne MS 285, see Geoffrey A. Lester, "The Earliest English Sailing Directions," in *Popular and Practical Science of Medieval England*, ed. Lister A. Matheson (East Lansing: Colleagues Press, 1994), 331–368. These directions are lines 185–218. The text does not mention Tavira by name but describes a route by its coast.
 15. Childs, *Trade and Shipping in the Medieval West*, 125.
 16. There are indeed other contemporaneous John [de] Vales in records (a Gloucestershire fuller, clerks of Cambridge and Bristol), but most can be easily disqualified as the 1499 resident of Tavira, and none are so qualified as Cook's factotum, as I argue here.
 17. On English factors and merchants in Iberia, see Childs, *Anglo-Castilian Trade in the Later Middle Ages* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1978), 184–187; *Trade and Shipping*, 119–120; Gordon Connell-Smith, *The Forerunners of Drake* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1954), 18–24.
 18. Sutton and Visser-Fuchs, "Provenance," 106–107.
 19. Childs acknowledges that this reckoning of the companies' relative engagement in Iberian trade is based on a "sample too small and incomplete for firm conclusion," yet maintains that it "seems clear enough that the drapers were the group most concerned with Spanish trade" (*Anglo-Castilian Trade*, 211).
 20. Childs, *Trade and Shipping*, 206–207.
 21. Childs, *Anglo-Castilian Trade*, 184 and 186.
 22. On Bulstrode's extravagant courtship, see Sylvia L. Thrupp, *The Merchant Class of Medieval London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 106–107, and Childs, *ibid.*, 186.
 23. On Thomas Howell, see Childs, *ibid.*, 185, and G. Connell-Smith, "The Ledger of Thomas Howell," *The Economic History Review*, New Series, 3:3 (1951): 363–370, 365 and 370, and Heather Dalton, "Negotiating Fortune: English Merchants in Early Sixteenth-Century Seville," in *Bridging the Early Modern Atlantic World: People, Products, and Practices on the Move*, ed. Caroline A. Williams (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 57–74.
 24. For Brampton's life, see Rosemary Horrox, "Brampton, Sir Edward [Duarte Brandão] (c. 1440–1508), soldier and merchant," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/37218>. See also Cecil Roth, "Sir Edward Brampton, alias Duarte Brandão: Governor of Guernsey, 1482–1485," *Report and Transactions of La Société Guernesiaise* 16, part II (1956): 160–170.

25. Roth, *ibid.*, 164. Other occupations, however, often drew his attentions away from that business. He captained a Portuguese carvel against the Scots in 1481, and served from afar as governor of Guernsey from 1482 to 1485.
26. *Ibid.*, 167.
27. Mooney, "More Manuscripts," 404.
28. For this information I rely upon the *Records of London's Livery Companies Online* (londonroll.org). Literary interests had a precedent in the Roos family: Thomas Roos, a mercer, listed a number of books in his possession in an 1433 will. See Kathleen L. Scott, "Past Ownership: Evidence of Book Ownership by English Merchants in the Middle Ages," in *Makers and Users of Medieval Books: Essays in Honour of A.S.G. Edwards*, ed. Carol M. Meale and Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2014), 150–177, 172.
29. Kew, National Archives, PROB 11/16/541.
30. Mooney, "More Manuscripts," 404. One Nicholas Skynner of Multon is named in a 1499 Suffolk conveyance recorded in British Library, Stowe Ch 248. He appears in a prosperous and learned milieu—alongside with other men of East Anglian merchant families such as the Heyghams and the Dourants, and Cambridge clerks John Puregold and William Peper.
31. R. M. Thomson with Michael Gullick, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Medieval Manuscripts in Worcester Cathedral Library* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 114–116.
32. For Vale's place in these London textual networks, see Julia Boffey, "London Books and London Readers," in *Cultural Reformations*, ed. James Simpson and Brian Cummings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 420–437; 426–428; Sheila Lindenbaum, "London texts and literate practice," in the *Cambridge History of Medieval Literature*, ed. David Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 284–309, 303.

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