Scribal Authorship and the Writing of History in Medieval England

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To write is to create something, to invent something, to bring meaning into being through words in a way that did not exist before. Yet writing is also mechanical—the physical act of putting pencil or pen to paper, tracing letters so impossibly familiar that we tend not to register their shapes or how we execute them. The divide between creation and realization has, if anything, become still more precarious in the digital age. Writing as a process of invention has taken on a different materiality. The physical work of fingers on a keyboard generates words that may never be anything other than pixels on screens. Though the two senses of writing are intimately connected, they remain distinct. The advent of the web has rendered the creation of text such a ubiquitous phenomenon that the currently-preferred term for those who create it, “content creator,” works to accommodate the heterogeneity of multimedia content, but also serves to retain a distinct space for authorship as a primarily textual endeavor. The gap between composition and inscription was, in some ways, narrower in the Middle Ages. Before the advent of printing, few men and women were engaged in the physical work of writing, and still fewer created those texts. The distinction between the two acts would seem to be clear: medieval authors wrote and medieval scribes copied. Scribes, according to this logic, are not authors.

This book rejects the axiomatic division of scribes and authors by assessing the evidence from history writing in later medieval England. Historiography requires a strange form of composition, in which literary invention is
mediated by a reliance upon sources in order to narrate what happened in the past. Such sources were originally oral, but by the end of the twelfth century were more typically textual. History writing, then, relies upon intertextual transfer, upon generations of texts and narratives being copied, altered, and situated in new texts. Copying, of course, is the province of scribes rather than authors, yet history writing, even derived and assembled from previous texts, is authored. This book will explore that doubling, and the ways in which the work of medieval scribes and the work of the authors of history writing mutually inform each other. Beyond the conceptual overlap between copying texts and composing history, medieval English manuscripts preserve historiographical texts that scribes wrote, in both senses of the term. Some scribes are, in fact, authors.

Authorship is a discourse, not merely a function. As such, it was articulated and framed by medieval thinkers and writers even as it is today by an ever-shifting cast of experts and amateurs. A striking reminder of the ways in which the discourses of authorship tend to erase the work of scribes can be seen in an unexecuted drawing found in the midst of an otherwise fully finished historiated initial on f. 2v of London, BL, MS Arundel 74. Arundel 74 was written between c. 1375 and 1406, most likely in East Anglia, for Henry Despenser, bishop of Norwich (d. 1406). The book contains a number of texts by Bede, including the *Historia Ecclesiastica*. Suiting its patron, it is an expensive and richly decorated volume, featuring illuminated foliate borders and large initials in gold, pink, blue, and green. The opening folios present to the reader two historiated initials. The first initial, on the opening folio of the codex, is a large “R” in which Despenser’s arms are embedded, a straightforward assertion of the book’s owner and an indication of the luxury of the leaves that will follow. The second initial is rather more problematic. (See figure 1.) The illuminated initial “N” is itself complete: the pink, blue, and white flourishes of the letter sit on a gold ground, and the decorations spiral off the corners to form the foliate border that fills the outer margin of the folio. The initial has been fully and painstakingly executed by an illuminator, and integrated into the composition of the page and its decorative program.

In contrast to the elaborately decorated page, the center of the initial is unfinished. It contains only a sketch of a man seated at a desk, writing a book. Where the reader should encounter the rich colors of a fully illumi-

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nated scene, instead there are pencil lines on parchment. The lack of color at the center of the initial renders the absence striking. The man sits at an angled writing desk, with wooden supporting slats visible at its side. He faces the parchment on the desk in front of him, and holds a pen in his right hand and a knife in his left. Visually, the scene is a trope, a conventional depiction of an author writing his text. Such drawings of authors accompany other

2. The BL Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts describes it as an “unfinished drawing of a seated man (possibly Bede) writing at the desk holding a quill and a knife, and on the bar border, a quadruped (dragon?),” http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=6441&CollID=58&NStart=26. See also the description in Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People, ed. and trans. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), where the editors suggest the initial “on f. 2 v was intended to contain Bede seated writing, but this was left unfinished and shows only the first pencil sketch” (lviii).

3. See Kathleen Scott, "Representations of Scribal Activity in English Manuscripts, c. 1400–
manuscripts of Bede’s texts, such as that found in the late-twelfth-century full-page miniature of a scribe at work in London, BL, MS Yates Thompson 26. Nor were author portraits uncommon in the late fourteenth century, as seen in a Parisian manuscript, now London, BL, MS Yates Thompson 21. There, the poet Jean de Meun sits at a writing desk with a pen in one hand and a knife in the other, literally writing in the miniature book before him the opening lines of the Roman de la Rose, “maintes gens dient que en songes.” The unexecuted initial in Arundel 74, then, seems at least in conception to be fairly conventional: it most likely was meant to depict Bede writing the text that follows. As such, the portrait serves to authorize the work, linking the venerated and venerable Saint Bede to the text of the Historia Ecclesiastica that follows. Something, however, had gone wrong even before the team of Norwich illuminators went to paint the decorations into Arundel 74.

Bede’s Historia was an extremely popular text, widely copied and very familiar to the writers and readers of English history. The main text of the Historia famously begins “Britannia Oceani insula, cui quondam Albion nomen fuit [Britain, once called Albion, is an island of the ocean].” In Arundel 74, however, the scribe has made a mess of things. Instead of the well-known beginning of the text, he has written the incoherent “Nocciam insula cui quondam Albion nomen fuit,” or perhaps the still incorrect but slightly more meaningful “[i]n occiani insula.” (Refer to Plate 1.) In a series of errors, the scribe has somehow omitted “Britannia” entirely, muddled “oceani” into the meaningless “nocciam” or “occiani,” and then carried on copying Bede’s text
as if the nonsensical mess was unproblematic.\textsuperscript{9} Worse, the scribe not only left space for the illuminated initial, but must have written an “n” in the margin or in the space reserved for the initial, in order to cue the illuminators when the folio came to them for decoration. The illuminators duly followed the cue, painting the blue and pink “N” that survives.

Not all scribes, of course, were incompetent. A second hand has gone through and corrected the text of Arundel 74. At the top of the second column of f. 2\textsuperscript{v}, the correcting hand, working in a different shade of ink, has inserted a caret in the topmost line and added text above the top line that was omitted by the book’s main hand.\textsuperscript{10} The corrector was extremely attentive to detail: in the rubric just above the initial “N,” the first scribe concluded the preface to the \textit{Historia} by writing “Expliciunt apitla.” A tiny “c” has been written before the “a,” and a small tick added adjacent to the “1” may be an attempt to correct the word to read, as it should do, “capitula.”\textsuperscript{11} This same correcting hand has also done what little he could do with the mess left by the incorrectly cued “N” and the nonsense “nocciam” or “n occiani.” Just to the left of the illuminated initial, nestled amidst the foliage of the frame, there is a caret in the text-ink used by the correcting scribe. In the leftmost margin of the folio, a second caret points up to the word “Britannia,” marking it for insertion. The correction must have taken place after the illuminated “N” and the bar border were decorated, as there otherwise would have been the opportunity to correct the text before the application of gold leaf and expensive pigments. The attempt to correct the text is admirable, but despite his use of a larger display script for the correction, the plain brown ink cannot compete with the pink, blue, and gold of the large historiated initial.

But what of the unexecuted portrait of the author? The most likely explanation is that somebody noticed the scribe’s terrible mistake even before the correcting hand rather hopelessly inserted the marginal “Britannia.” That is, at some point after the initial scribe made a hash of the first few words of the text and mistakenly cued the illuminators with an “n,” after the initial was painted and the borders executed, and after the sketch to fill the initial was made, but before the artist painted the scene laid out by the pencil sketch,

\textsuperscript{9} Note the description of this manuscript as “very carelessly written” in \textit{Bodae Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum: Venerabilis Baedae opera historica}, ed. C. Plummer (Oxford, 1896), 1: cxxvii.

\textsuperscript{10} The correcting scribe has remedied the omission of an entire clause, “quibus efficitur ut circuitus eius quadrages octies,” MS Arundel 74, f. 2\textsuperscript{v}.

\textsuperscript{11} MS Arundel 74, f. 2\textsuperscript{v}.
somebody actually read the text and recognized its incoherence. Conventionally, author portraits link image to text in order to present that which follows as authorial, and therefore authorized. To complete the portrait of Bede in Arundel 74 would be to magnify precisely how unreliable the text is, and to undo the work of that visual assertion. Were the portrait complete, the crafted presence of the author would be undone by the flawed work of the scribe. Medieval authors went to great lengths to maintain the pretense that medieval scribes were invisible, their labors transparent. Arundel 74 offers an unusual reversal of that convention, leaving the material traces of an author effaced, in effect, by a scribe.

Scribes did much more than copy the exemplars before them. Literate, they were themselves the primary audience for medieval literature, and its primary authors. Medieval authors must have been trained as scribes, and it is likely not much of an overstatement to suggest that nearly all authors were scribes. Not all scribes were authors, and my intention is not to attempt to inscribe any fixed line between the two activities. However authorship is defined, scribes are too often considered to be the purely mechanical means through which textual transmission was accomplished. Moreover, scribes tend to be excluded from the discourses of audience of medieval books. Marginalia attest to scribes reading texts, but are surely a poor and extremely partial indicator of what scribes did read. The copying of a text is not itself usually held to be evidence for a scribe reading his exemplar, yet as Arundel 74 shows, some scribes read the texts they were responsible for copying or correcting. Inasmuch as scribes are implicated in the transmission of medieval texts, they are excluded both from composition and reception. Scribes are underconsidered as the learned audience of medieval texts. Traditional source and analogue study concerns itself with what authors might have read, attempting to detect textual evidence and even distant echoes in order to map the connections between medieval texts. Yet those connections were not necessarily made by authors.

Such intertextuality is particularly dense in the case of medieval history writing. Medieval insular historiography in Latin, Anglo-Norman, and Mid-


dle English is not without its literary merits. At the same time, however, the
majority of these texts are not poetic performances for the ages. This does
not make these texts any less literary, of course, but it opens up a space in
which the pressures to delineate or to articulate the authorial do not always
exclude the scribal. Indeed, the lines between work and text, between origi-
nal and variant, or merely between varied-from and varied-to, become much
less stable when the stabilizing anchor of an author is removed. Scribes
wrote texts, and the rich uncertainty of that activity is the central concern of
this book. Their creation may be the product of composition, emendation,
compilation, and various nontransparent forms of copying. It is the work of
scribes, and the intentions that motivate that work, that constitute scribal
authorship.

Many of the texts considered in this book are formed by what I call
“derivative textuality.” Discussed at length in Chapter 2, derivative texts are
the product of a particular and elaborate methodology, in which composi-
tion cannot be neatly or trivially divided from quotation and translation.
Derivative texts are complex tissues of quotation and translations, assembled
into a narratively continuous and textually coherent whole. It is important to
stress that such texts need not be the product of scribal authorship. Named
authors, such as the historians Henry of Huntingdon and Robert Mannyng,
wrote derivative texts. So, too, Matthew Paris carefully restructured the work
of his predecessor at St Albans, copying, expanding, omitting, revising, and
commenting upon the Flores Historiarum to shape what would become Mat-
thew’s Chronica Majora. Derivative texts are the sites of extensive textual
transformation. The authors of derivative texts use the words of others in
order to create a new textual whole, using old sources in the service of a new
textual agenda. Derivative textuality was a particularly common composi-
tional method for vernacular historiography in the later thirteenth and early
fourteenth centuries. These texts, neither compilations nor translations, but
rather assemblages, do not fit neatly with conventional definitions of com-
position and creation. They resonate more strongly with the copy-and-paste
or post-and-comment dialogic textualities of the digital world. Derivative
textuality and vernacular historiography fit poorly with theories of medieval
authorship that have largely been shaped by Latin theological texts or the
great vernacular poetry of the late fourteenth century.

14. Thus, the “fondamentalement mouvante” of medieval texts according to Paul Zumthor,
15. See Marjorie Perloff, Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century (Chi-
cago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
1984). See, further, Chapter 2 below.
Some scribes read the texts they copied, and they also read texts that do not survive in their hand. In order to be effective, history writing requires a certain degree of authority. In turn, the genre’s innate reliance upon texts that have come before requires the writers of history to make critical assessments of those texts. Such judgments were not solely the province of the named authors of history writing, however. On f. 37v of London, BL, MS Royal 20.a.xi, a fourteenth-century scribe of the thirteenth-century Chronicle of Piers Langtoft complains that the text he has just finished copying is rather a disappointment:

Le liuere Mestre Wace . counte plus parfait.
E dit tut la lettre . qe peres trop salit.
Peres par tut lessa . Meint bone respit.
Qe bon fust a lire . e auer la delit.
Mestre Wace dit tut . la lettre qil troua.
Trufles a verite . tretut complia.
Lun liuere e lautre . qi bien regardera.
Jeo di qe Mestre Wace . plus ouertement parla.

[The story in the book of Master Wace is more perfect, and relates all the details that Piers skips over too often. Piers has held back many lines that are pleasant and beneficial to read. Master Wace relates every letter which he has found written, the trifles and the truth are all complete. Of the one book and the other, well compared, I say that Master Wace speaks more openly.]

The anonymous scribe here offers a stark but not inaccurate assessment of the relative merits of Wace’s translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia regum Britanniae and of Piers Langtoft’s redaction and translation of Geoffrey’s text a century later. The scribe of Royal 20.a.xi reduces Langtoft from a named author and translator of Geoffrey to, essentially, a poor scribe of Wace’s Roman de Brut.

The scribe of Royal 20.a.xi has read three different versions of insular history in two languages: the text he is copying (Langtoft’s Chronicle), the text translated by the text of his exemplar (Geoffrey of Monmouth’s Historia

17. MS Royal 20.a.xi, f. 37v; translation mine. For a description of the manuscript, see Édition critique et commentée de Pierre de Langtoft, Le règne d’Édouard Ier, ed. J. C. Thiolier (Paris: Centre d’Études Littéraires et Iconographiques du Moyen Âge, 1989), 41–45. See also the closely connected verses in Princeton, Princeton University Library, MS Taylor 12 and Cambridge, Sidney Sussex College, MS 43.
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regum Britanniae), and a third work of historiography (Wace’s Roman de Brut). He expresses an opinion about the merit of individual texts, and he perceives the writing of history as the site of intentionality: Langtoft “skips over” lines where Wace “relates” his source text more thoroughly. These are informed criticisms, and they indicate the scribe’s larger sense of responsibility to the historical record, and to the decisions required to translate and copy texts. His concerns become the occasion for authorship. The scribe composed rhymed verses, no less, for an audience who might seek out other texts or produce new manuscripts on the basis of those verses.

The language used by the scribe of Royal 20.a.xi also reveals him to be reading his exemplar closely, not merely copying it, and responding to the tone of his source text. The scribe redeploy the words of Langtoft at the end of the first part of his Chronicle, which occur on the recto of the same folio:

Pieres de langetoft . troue ne plus par dit .
Qil nad complie . e mis en cest escrit .
Les troefles ad lesse . a verite se prist .
Nul autre trouera . home qe le list .
Si noun li latiners . en son latin mentist .

[Piers Langtoft finds no more said than he has compiled and set in this writing. He has left the trifles and held to the truth. Nothing else is to be found, if a man reads it, unless the translator has lied in his Latin.] 18

The scribal verses of Royal 20.a.xi turn Langtoft’s own vocabulary (“trufles,” “verite,” “trova,” “complia”) against his text. Indeed, the scribal verses make clear that Langtoft’s claim to textual completeness is conventional, a literary trope rather than a description of Langtoft’s methods of writing historiography. 19 The scribe’s composition may be little more than light pastiche of Langtoft’s lines, but his concerns about historiographical accuracy and textual genealogy are not mere trifles.

Langtoft’s Chronicle was assessed unfavorably a second time in the early fourteenth century, by an author perpetuating the scribal verses of Royal


20.a.xi. The Gilbertine historian Robert Mannyng, writing c. 1338, is somewhat unusual in naming himself and in claiming authorship for two texts. The intertextuality of history writing is neatly encapsulated by Mannyng’s *Chronicle*: assembled through derivative textuality, the text chiefly translates and adapts two Anglo-Norman sources: Wace’s *Roman de Brut* and Langtoft’s *Chronicle*. Mannyng also assembles his text from additional materials, including newly written sections, sections from Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *Historia regum* and Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, and sources both identified and not. Mannyng’s *Chronicle* is a typical product of derivative textuality, a tissue of translation, adaptation, and transposition of texts both acknowledged and unacknowledged, framed by original contributions and designed to create a coherent whole. Early in the first part of his *Chronicle*, Mannyng addresses the source texts he employed to construct his history:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þes Inglis dedes ȝe may here} \\
\text{as Pers telles alle þe manere.} \\
\text{One mayster Wace þe ffrankes telles} \\
\text{þe Brute, alle þat þe Latyn spelles} \\
\text{fro Eneas tille Cadwaladre.} \\
\text{Þis mayster Wace þer leues he,} \\
\text{and ryght as mayster Wace says,} \\
\text{I telle myn Inglis þe same ways,} \\
\text{ffor mayster Wace þe Latyn alle rymes} \\
\text{þat Pers ouerhippis many tymes.} \\
\text{Mayster Wace þe Brute alle redes,} \\
& \text{Pers tellis alle þe Inglis dedes.}
\end{align*}
\]


21. Thus Sullens: “We can see in the preliminary passages where he was probably translating from Latin prose (e.g., in Part I, lines 201–438 where many lines have only three stresses)” (Mannyng, *Chronicle*, 63).

22. Mannyng, *Chronicle*, I.55–66. “Overhippis” translates “salit” (from “saillir,” “to jump up”). The fairly rare Middle English “overhippis” also appears in one of the Middle English “songs” found as part of Langtoft’s *Chronicle*. 
These lines, comparing the histories of Wace, Langtoft, and the Latin text of Geoffrey’s *Historia regum*, are familiar from the verses in Royal 20.a.xi. They again demonstrate a remarkable sense of textual awareness. Mannyng here articulates a rhetorical responsibility to read and assess multiple texts in order to assemble his derivative composition. Mannyng includes among those texts Wace’s *Roman de Brut*, Langtoft’s *Chronicle*, and Geoffrey’s *Historia regum*, but also the scribal verses of Royal 20.a.xi. He translates the verses (“ouerhippis” for “salit”) and, more importantly, he took the scribe’s advice: Mannyng uses Wace’s text as his primary source for the first British section of his *Chronicle*, and turns to Langtoft’s only for the “English deeds” that take place after Wace’s history has ended.

Mannyng’s own text was not free from the opinions of scribes. An attentive and well-read scribe asserted his own, independent knowledge in a fifteenth-century manuscript of Mannyng’s *Chronicle*, London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 131. The *Chronicle*, describing its indebtedness to Bede’s *Historia*, notes: “þis word of Saynt Bede I toke, / þe fifte capitle of þe boke; / þorgh þat capitle, I wist.” In Lambeth Palace Library MS 131, however, the scribe has pedantically corrected the citation of his source, “þyse wordes of seint Bede y tok / þe fifte chaptire of þe secounde bok. / þorow þat pat chaptire al y wyst.” The Lambeth scribe’s emendation has implications beyond the remarkable chapter-and-verse knowledge of Bede’s *Historia*. The scribe is working in the great tradition of history writing in medieval England. His recollection of Bede’s text shows the presence of the texts of the past, the way in which even widely separated historiographical narratives take place with a certain historical simultaneity. In this space, the scribes of insular historiography read the texts they copied, formed and articulated judgments about those texts, corrected errors and omissions, and responded to the agendas of the writers of history. Sometimes, that response was to write new histories.

Medieval holograph manuscripts written by named authors, and identifiable as such, may be comparatively rare, but it is unsurprising to find authors acting as their own scribes. Unsurprising, that is, because these authors appear in precisely the contexts in which we would expect to find them; the religious orders and secular *milieux* where books were copied were also where books were composed. Manuscripts surviving in the hands of their authors include works by Dunstan, Ælfric, Eadmer, Orm, Symeon of Dur-
ham, John of Worcester, Thomas Aquinas, William of Malmesbury, Richard of Devizes, Matthew Paris, Ranulf Higden, Dan Michel of Northgate, the anonymous author of *Sir Ferumbras*, William Herebert, John Capgrave, and Thomas Hoccleve. In a list that includes several historiographers, consider the work of Ranulf Higden, whose hand survives in a copy of his *Polychronicon*, San Marino, Huntington Library, MS HM 132. Higden uses an elaborate system of visual symbols (a barbell with a caret beneath it, and a variety of circles and lines in various configurations) to mark for insertion layers of revisions, additions, and emendations. The manuscript preserves not only Higden’s fair copy of his own text, fully rubricated and supplied with diagrams and maps, but also at least two subsequent sets of revisions, added at different times. The manuscript does not somehow exist outside of medieval textual culture—Higden’s fair copy was also a foul copy, the site of his working through the text to emend, supplement, and revise it. Moreover, both before and after those revisions HM 132 would serve as an exemplar for copies of the *Polychronicon*. Each author named above was a reader and a writer, a composer and a copyist. HM 132 was, before it was an exemplar, merely a copy. These authorial scribes point to still other holograph manuscripts, to the work of scribal authors, unrecognized as authorial because copying is understood as precluding intentionality or originality.

Addressing scribal intentionality risks becoming entangled in the long debates over the intentions of authors. Yet it is only by asking fundamental questions about the work of scribes that scribal authorship as found in medieval history writing can be fully elucidated. Scribes tend to be anonymous. Pure fantasy might wish the work of scribes copying the poetry of Chaucer or Gower to be invisible. But their work is not invisible, or there would be


27. Thus, for example, see MS HM 132, f. 10r, f. 11r, or f. 16r for just a few of the many symbols Higden uses. Consider the comparable sequence of use in Matthew Paris’s holograph manuscript of part of the *Chronica Majora*, London, BL, MS Royal 14.c.vii.

28. As Higden adds the acrostic that contains his name to HM 132, and the additions and emendations in the book are incorporated in later manuscripts of the *Polychronicon*, it seems inescapable that the codex should be read as “the autograph *qua* exemplar.” Beadle, “English Autograph Writings,” 264.

no poetry by Chaucer or Gower. Slowly, the names and identities of some scribes have been uncovered and reconstructed. Though scribes are thereby more firmly embedded in the material and cultural economies of medieval England, there remains a basic issue: writing is always intended. Whether that writing is composition or copying, medieval manuscripts did not come into being by accident. In manuscripts, insular history writing is itself historical, copied and authored, by hand, by scribes.
