Scribal Authorship and the Writing of History in Medieval England

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What constitutes sameness and difference has troubled thinkers from Plato to Aquinas to Benjamin, from Hegel to Heidegger to Derrida. Philosophers have challenged the relationship between Idea and Being, argued over how objects exist and how they are perceived, and interrogated the nature of the connections between “an” original and “a” copy. Asking such questions not of archetypes but of specific historical artifacts requires the clear articulation of the constituent terms of the discussion. Before we can ask “What is copying?” it is important to expose the legacy of significant and longstanding opinions about the nature of what is being copied: that is, what are medieval manuscripts? There are culturally prevalent assumptions that have shaped the answer to that question. Many people, if asked to imagine a manuscript, might call to mind a book that recalls the Book of Kells, or the Très Riches Heures of the Duc de Berry, or some other richly illuminated manuscript. Such books, however, do not represent every medieval manuscript any more than art books on a coffee table say anything about the cheap paperbacks stacked on a bedside table. Neither does the

2. Neatly illustrating the slippage, the first result of a Google search (August 2011) for “medieval manuscript” is the Wikipedia entry for “illuminated manuscript.” Similarly, a Google image search for “medieval manuscript” returns pages of results that are almost without exception illuminated leaves or details of illuminations and drawings.
The Medieval Scribe web site meaningfully represent all of the web pages of every site on the Internet. What, then, is a medieval manuscript? The categorical understanding, that all manuscripts are books written by hand, is true, but not in itself particularly interesting in the medieval world, inasmuch as everything was made by hand. More urgently, manuscripts are *sui generis*, historically specific objects made from the skin of sheep or cows, written by particular men and women in specific months of specific years. These contexts have consequences. Copying, too, is not a de-historicized or idealized process, and the transformation by which an original becomes a copy is not generic. Copying takes place within specific historical moments, and as such is shaped by and shapes the particularities of those circumstances. Copying is a motivated act, an act creating a new text that duplicates, replicates, resembles, or recalls an existing text. Scribes have agency, and copying, like all forms of writing, confronts the problematic array of intentionality.

Such basic observations—that not all medieval manuscripts are the same and that copying designates a spectrum of scribally enacted textual transformations—are the starting point of this book. Many medieval scribes did copy their texts, and many medieval manuscripts were illuminated, but the composition and copying of insular history writing do not fit neatly with many broad assumptions about the nature of medieval textual culture. This chapter argues that the work of modern editors has divided the physical writing of scribes and the compositional writing of authors. Such a division sidesteps the challenge of those textual transformations that were intended or motivated (revision, redaction, rewriting, supplementing) rather than those that were unintended or unmotivated (word or line omission, repetition, and other mechanical errors). This division is particularly problematic for texts such as the Anglo-Norman and Middle English prose *Brut* and other works of vernacular history writing. The chapter will then turn to medieval descriptions of scribes and copying, and argue that the strenuously erected division between scribes and authors has its origins as a medieval phenomenon, a response to different models of textuality. As portrayed in medieval poems that touch on writing and copying, the threat to medieval authorship was not only the inescapable issue of scribal textual corruption, but the danger of reasoned interventions—scribal invention and scribal authorship. Finally, the chapter will consider the quirks of one medieval scribe who played with

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different types of copying within a single manuscript. This admittedly marga-

tinal instance of scribal behavior offers an opportunity to interrogate closely

how one scribe negotiated the implications of his own textual performance

and manifested an awareness of the transformations possible in the course of

his work.

I want to begin by considering the texts of the past as they are assembled

in the present. The work of modern editors and the production of critical

editions of medieval texts rely upon a number of arguments, both explicit

and implicit, concerning notions of “original” and “copy,” and what kinds of

transformation may have taken place between those two fraught terms. Edit-
ing privileges authors, and it has inconsistently addressed scribes as histori-

cal actors. Scribal intentionality has largely been erased by the imperatives

of the modern editorial project. Scribes copy texts, but the instability of all three

of those terms poses dilemmas for the editor. Editing, of course, is essen-
tially the systematic attempt to remove as many layers of textual “error” as

possible, whether those errors are introduced by scribes as part of the trans-

mission of texts, or in other circumstances. Modern editors have admitted

the underlying importance of scribes, and accounted for scribal variants on a

spectrum from idiotic to brilliant, from scribes ruining texts to their inspired

reconstruction of lost authorial readings. In all cases, though, the work of the

scribe is ultimately the variously blurry lens through which the work of the

4. Consider one of the few areas in which scribes are assigned agency—the so-called im-

proving scribes, as they are ironically known. See Ralph Hanna, “Producing Manuscripts and

Editions,” in *Crux and Controversy in Middle English Textual Criticism*, ed. Alistair J. Minnis and


by Derek Pearsall at the University of California, Los Angeles, on May 17, 1991, notes: “For one

cannot distinguish ‘intelligent, meddling, and improving scribes’ without some knowledge of

their archetypes” (125). See also *Amys and Amylion*, ed. Françoise Le Saux (Exeter: University of

Exeter Press, 1993): “The additional stanzas in the manuscript, which are unattested elsewhere

and are generally very trite, could be due to an ‘improving’ scribe” (17). See also Takako Kato,

“Corrected Mistakes in the Winchester Manuscript,” in *Re-viewing Le Morte Darthur*, ed. K. S.

Whetter and Raluca Radulescu (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2005), 9–26, where she notes:

“Then Scribe A of Winchester realised there was no verb in this sentence, and he decided to im-

prove it. What he did not understand was that the phrase . . . was part of this sentence”; and then

concludes: “Both the scribes often attempted to correct the mistakes in their exemplar” (19, 24).

5. The literature on the practice of editing, and on the editing of medieval manuscripts

in particular, is vast. In addition to D. C. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction* (New


Guide to Editing Middle English*, ed. Vincent McCarren and Douglas Moffat (Ann Arbor: Univer-

sity of Michigan, 1998), 25–60; D. C. Greetham, *Theories of the Text* (Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 1999); Jerome McGann, *A Critique of Modern Textual Criticism* (Chicago: University of

Chicago Press, 1983); Tim Machan, *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts* (Charlottesville:

University Press of Virginia, 1994), particularly chap. 1; and G. Thomas Tanselle, “Textual Insta-

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The author can, and must, be seen. The last twenty years have seen an enormous amount of intellectual energy spent on vigorous discussions about the goals, processes, products, and theories of editing, although neither the number nor the variety of editions of medieval texts have grown as appreciably as the number of volumes about editing. In the wake of Greg’s *The Calculus of Variants* (1927), its transformation in Cerquiglini’s *Éloge de la variante*, and the 1990 New Philology issue of *Speculum*, “variant” has become the preferred term to describe multiple possible readings of a text found in multiple manuscripts (and represented in the textual apparatus of a critical edition), in place of the more polarizing aspects of previous terminology (“good” and “bad” readings), which ultimately resolved to a reductive binary of error and accuracy that echoes the divide between scribe and author.6

The choice of one term of this oppositional binary, whether understood as good readings against bad, right readings against wrong, textual accuracy versus textual error, the authorial versus the scribal, the intended versus the recorded, or even the choice between two otherwise unjudgeable variants, is in some form or another the logic underlying all schools of editing—from the Kane-Donaldson edition of the B-text of *Piers Plowman* to the single-manuscript editions published by Heidelberg University as the Middle English Texts series, such as O’Farrell-Tate’s edition of the version of the *Short English Metrical Chronicle* found in London, BL, MS Royal 12.c.xii (a text that will be discussed at length in Chapters 3 and 4).7 The two poles, Bedier’s “truth of the manuscript” and Lachmann’s “truth of the author,” are a false dichotomy.8 Skilled scribes undoubtedly made mistakes and introduced error into their texts. Yet even the most incompetent of scribes were members of an educated and literate cultural minority. Scribes were capable of improving texts, and their actions need not be enclosed in the scare-quotes too often used to denigrate active scribal engagement with a text.9

9. Although quite general, for a broad description of scribes’ abilities and education, see
There are a number of assumptions underlying editorial practice for medieval texts, and this chapter will interrogate some ideas central to editing such texts:

- Scribes intended, and attempted, to reproduce an exemplar through duplicative or replicative copying.\(^\text{10}\)
- Exemplars always existed. Although some editions identify scribes switching between multiple exemplars during various stints of copying, there is nonetheless a consistent presumption that there is a text being copied, rather than composed or assembled.
- The scribal is always distinct from the authorial. Revision and alteration can be distinguished from composition.

It is important to consider the vocabulary used to discuss these ideas, particularly as the language of morality is endemic to the language of copying, perhaps precisely because of the predominantly religious nature of the texts, readers, and writers around which medieval literacy and book production were centered. The \(OED\) definition of “scribal” as an adjective offers as its earliest attestations two mid-nineteenth-century uses. Both are pointedly negative formulations. The 1857 usage, from \(Fraser's\ Magazine\), refers to “scribal corruption.” The 1868 usage, from Richard Morris’s edition of Old English homilies, discusses “scribal blunders.”\(^\text{11}\) The indictment of scribes, and their reputation as incompetent, is built into the English language at a basic level. Indeed, one of the first recorded uses of “scriveyn” in Middle English deploys the trope of the cheating scribe, discussed below, in which scribes are condemned for their avarice: “Ase dop þise scriueyns / þet sseweþ guode lettre / ate ginnynge. and efterward / makeþ wycked.”\(^\text{12}\) This early Middle English condemnation of scribes is taken from the \(Ayenbite\ of \Inwit\), found in London, BL, MS Arundel 57, one of the few known holograph manuscripts of a Middle English text. Dan Michel, acting as his own scribe, made mechanical errors while copying his own text. Presumably he did not thereby render his own text “wycked” in doing so. Neither the language of

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\(^\text{10}\) Duplicative and replicative copying are discussed below, pp. 37–44.

\(^\text{11}\) \(OED\), “scribal, adj.”

\(^\text{12}\) Dan Michel’s \(Ayenbite\ of \Inwit\), ed. Richard Morris, EETS OS 23 (London, 1866), 44, and Dan Michel’s \(Ayenbite\ of \Inwit\ or \Remorse\ of \Conscience\, ed. Pamela Gradon, EETS OS 278 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
morality nor that of scientific empiricism suit the literary activity at the heart of medieval texts.

The core of Cerquiglini’s argument in Éloge de la variante is his insistence upon manuscripts as the proper locus of scholarly attention, and the value intrinsic to their variations. He begins by drawing attention to “le manuscrit . . . l’objet tout neuf des analyses [The manuscript . . . now the latest object of analysis].”  

Reclaiming both the margins of medieval manuscripts and the manuscripts that had themselves become marginal, the thoroughly post-Structuralist New Philology (and New Historicism) challenged the New Criticism and its reliance upon texts that, in turn, were edited with an eye to the “old” discipline of philology. Yet, the radical call to variance, to reexamine manuscripts as the foundation for progress in the study of medieval literature, had a curious conservatism about it. Its rejection of the linguistic and the philological is accompanied by a (silent) reliance upon the codicological and the paleographical training required for the kind of manuscript scholarship called for by Cerquiglini. The “codicological imperative,” as Keith Busby terms it, found early articulation in work broadly contemporary with Cerquiglini’s Éloge, marking the general turn to manuscript studies as a broader reflex of the contemporary critical stance. The thoroughly destabilized “text” of New Critical attentions was replaced with the variance (or Zumthor’s mouvance) of the new philological/codicological, but the medieval manuscript is just as fickle and elusive a foundation as the text had proven to be. Underlying the simple generalized singular of “le manuscrit” is an unspoken smoothing over of the plurality of individual variant readings at the expense of the radical heterogeneity of medieval manuscripts, of the ways in which the inherent uniqueness of these artifacts in fact works against generalization. As perplexingly, it privileges difference and the variant over what manuscripts do have in common with each other. It is precisely this reductive generalization of manuscripts


15. Busby, Codex, 1: 2. Thus, for example, see the work of John Dagenais, The Ethics of Reading in Manuscript Culture: Glossing the Libro de buen amor (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); and Sylvia Huot, From Song to Book: The Poetics of Writing in Old French Lyric and Lyrical Narrative Poetry (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987).

16. Note Hanna’s rejoinder: “For to create his infinitely generating texte, Cerquiglini must presuppose the simultaneous social ubiquity of all textual forms, whatever their temporal or spatial disparities” (“Producing Manuscripts and Editions,” 121).
that most profoundly troubles the editorial project dismissed by Cerquiglini: editorial theory typically seeks approaches that apply to all manuscripts, regardless of time period, country of origin, language, or the genre of a text. This decontextualization, however, has consequences.

Our conceptions of scribes did not spring, fully formed, out of the contemporary critical projects of paleography and codicology. As long as there have been written texts, there have been scribes to do the writing, from Cicero’s scribes to transcribers-for-hire on the web. The divide maintained between author and scribe is not new, and the frustration of authors with their scribes is both historical and conventional. Authors must, at some level, trust scribes to copy their texts. Mistakes might be made, but expectations dictate that scribes for the most part would not encode texts into private alphabets or made-up languages. Yet the implied contract of textual replication was not always honored. Malicious, or more commonly, ignorant transformations tend to dominate discussions of the work of scribes. But medieval scribes were also in a position to emend and correct the texts they copied, and to save authors from their own errors. Moving away from a strict divide between scribes and authors, this chapter considers the problematic doubled role for scribes as incompetent copyists and competent correctors. Script itself is understood as a rhetorical performance, subject to the pressures of both history and content.

If scribes are to copy texts, the texts they copy must be stable. This is a precarious assumption for many medieval texts (particularly for medieval history writing), but its roots can be found in a text with much invested in a singular monovocality—the Bible. The self-authenticating and self-preserving devices of sacred discourse are exceptional, however. The assertion of textual fixity, and thus the danger posed by incompetent scribes, finds early expression in the Bible—both in a textual sense, as in Deuteronomy 4:2, “Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall ye diminish ought from it,” and more broadly, as in Exodus 25:40, “And look that thou make them after their pattern [Vulgate: exemplar], which was shewed thee in the mount” and Revelations 1:3, “Blessed is he that readeth, and they that hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things which are written therein.” It is fairly clear what is at stake in claiming unmediated transmission for sacred texts. The transmission of composed texts, rather than the functionally authorless Bible, makes different demands upon scribes, and

17. See Harry Y. Gamble, Books and Readers in the Early Church: A History of Early Christian Texts (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995). Gamble interprets these verses as concerned with “the use of the text as a text—not only its reading and hearing, but also its copying and transmission” (105).
more obviously varies widely across genres. Scripture offers divine textual authority, and thus circularly affirms its own claims to unmediated transmission. Most medieval texts, however, participate in textual traditions—they share a discursive range, including visual and textual conventions and a corpus of antecedents. Variation may stretch the boundaries of recognizable discourse, but it need not be framed in moral or ethical terms.

Exodus 25:40 forms the core of the exemplum of the cheating scribe, found in both the collection of preaching literature known as *Fasciculus morum* and in the *Moralitates* written by the Dominican friar Thomas Waleys (fl. 1318–1349).\(^{18}\) The *Fasciculus* warns of the cheating scribe:

> Set adverte: Videmus enim quod aliquando datur scriptori exemplar, ut illa que in illo continentur in aliud volumen seu pergamenum transferat nichil addendo vel minuendo—quia ut communiter scriptores non sunt scioli ad libros corrigendos, addendo vel minuendo nisi errant. Et tamen his non obstantibus scriptor falsus quando conducitur secundum numerum linearum aut punctorum que sunt in exemplari, adhuc tamen aliquando transiliit, quia sperat quod sua falsitas non statim deprehendetur. Set postquam sibi fuerit satisfactum, non curat tunc nisi parum, quamvis eius falsitas denudetur. Unde contingit frequenter quod talis scriptor non est dignus mercede, set pocius dignus pena, quia pergamenum omnino est perditum in quo scripsit.

[But notice: We see that sometimes an exemplar is given to a scribe so that he may transfer its contents into another volume or piece of parchment, without adding or subtracting anything—for scribes are usually not sufficiently learned to correct books by adding or subtracting anything without making mistakes. And yet, in spite of this, a faulty scribe, when he is guided by the number of lines or points in his exemplar, still sometimes skips material; he hopes that his fault will not be detected, and once he has been paid, he cares but little if his fault is found out. Thus it happens often that such a scribe is not worth his pay but rather deserves punishment, for the parchment on which he has written is completely wasted.\(^{19}\)]


The primary emphasis here is not the specifics of scribal practice, but rather the deceitful behavior of scribes. The story serves as a broad moral caution—it is an admonition against cheating and engaging in maliciously inferior workmanship to those in the audience, not a warning to scribes. Yet the exemplum reveals something important about medieval understandings of appropriate and inappropriate scribal practices. Beyond ruined parchment, there are two contradictory but fundamental ideas about the work of scribes. The exemplum enjoins a particular type of copying, in which the copyist is expected to transfer an exemplar’s contents “nichil addendo vel minuendo [without adding or subtracting anything].” At the same time, the text implies that a scribe who is sufficiently learned might choose to engage in “corrigendo [correcting]” books precisely by adding or subtracting materials. This tension, in which the ideal scribe transmits his text unmodified, yet is poised to correct a text by adding or subtracting appropriately, is the unresolved contradiction at the center of scribal practice. The exemplum praises a kind of faithful copying as a virtue, but if the source text is faulty, fidelity instead leads to continued textual corruption.

The scribe, faulted both for changing the text of his exemplar and for being insufficiently learned to correct the text of his exemplar by adding or subtracting something, also bears a degree of intellectual responsibility for the texts passing through his hands. Of the two versions of the cheating scribe exemplum, the earlier version in the *Fasciculus*, but not the later version in Waleys’s *Moralitates*, contains additional opprobrium against “faulty” and “false” scribes:

Set timeo quod multi sunt falsi scriptores, quibus merces promittitur si bene scribant, set tamen credunt decipere, unde mirabiliter transiliunt. Nam forte satis bene sribunt primam lineam istius exemplaris, que est de Deo vero, et transiliunt secundam, que est de periurio. Scribunt enim forte lineam de furto et omittunt aliam, scilicet de adulterio.

[But I fear that many are faulty scribes, to whom a reward is promised if they copy well, but they still try to cheat and skip in the most breathtaking]
way. For perhaps they write out the first line of their exemplar quite well, the one about the true God, but then they skip the second, about committing perjury. They write perhaps the line about theft, but omit the next one, about adultery.]²⁰

In copying, the work of scribes has moral implications for themselves and for their audiences. Scribes are a conduit for texts, but also an end-point in the process. If one scribe cheats for material gain, unconcerned about skipped lines as long as he receives payment, another scribe threatens to skip morally inconvenient lines—on adultery, on perjury. The exemplum exposes the disturbing plurality of writing: the act of copying is not wholly distinct from the act of composing. Textual transmission is not separate from textual invention. The exemplum confronts medieval scribes as having responsibilities, and thus agency. It assumes that copyists responded to the terms of their source text, and to the other personal, religious, political, and economic pressures of their work. The changes scribes make may be moral or immoral, but for those changes that were unintended, there might also be intended and motivated changes.

In eleventh-century additions to a tenth-century copy of Gregory’s Homilies found in Switzerland, Einsiedeln, Stiftsbibliothek MS 160, a reader notes of the manuscript before him that “iste liber per incuriam ignari scriptoris ita est uiciatus quod a nullo bene potest legi vel intelligi [This book is so ruined through the carelessness of an ignorant writer that it cannot be properly read or understood by anyone].”²¹ Later in the manuscript, the same hand laments “Iste liber uitio scriptoris tantum deprauatus est ut nec corrigi a quoquam ualeat [This book is so wrecked by the fault of the scribe that it may not be corrected by anyone].”²² The marginalia progress from evincing dissatisfaction with the scribe’s corruption of the text as a disservice to those who seek to “legi vel intellegi [read or understand]” the manuscript, to the idea that texts should be corrected or improved by readers. This particular text may resist such correction, but the eleventh-century scribal reader is keenly aware of the book’s flaws, and the possibility that a scribal reader might fix them.

²⁰. Fasciculus Morum, 184–85. See also Siegfried Wenzel, Verses in Sermons: Fasciculus Morum and Its Middle English Poems (Cambridge: Medieval Academy, 1978). Wenzel dates the composition of the Fasciculus to the late thirteenth century, so the mid-fourteenth-century Dominican Thomas Waleys was likely borrowing from the earlier Franciscan Fasciculus.


Other manuscripts preserve the words of scribes expressing similar dissatisfactions with faulty texts. A scribe of the late-eleventh- or early-twelfth-century London, BL, MS Royal 15.c.xi laments, “Exemplar mendum tandem me compulsit ipsum / Cunctantem nimium Plautum exemplarier istum. / Ne graphicus mendis proprias idiota repertis / Adderet, et liber hic falso patre falsior esset [In the end, the exemplar compelled me, exceedingly hesitant though I was, to make that Plautus an example of faults. May not an idiot transcriber add his own slips to the faults which have been found, and this book/child be falser than its false father].”

The scribe of Royal 15.c.xi is confronted by almost irreconcilable imperatives: while seeking to copy accurately, he also desires to improve an obviously faulty text. The scribe’s injunction not to make matters worse to those who follow him presumes scribal incompetence or carelessness. It also, however, assumes that his colleagues possess the competence to recognize and the desire to prevent additional errors from further corrupting the text.

Ælfric’s well-known words on copying make clear his sense of what can be at stake in the accurate copying of texts:

Nu bydde ic 7 halsige on godes naman gif hwa þas boc awritan wylle þæt he hi geornlice gerihte be ðære bysene. þy læs þæt he ðurh gymelease writers geleahhtode beon; Mycel yfel deð se ðæt leas writ. buton he hit gerihte. swylyce he gebringe þa sódan lare to leasum gedwylde. for ði sceal gehwa gerihtlæcan þæt þæt he ær to woge gebigde gif he on godes dome unscyldig beon wile.

[Now I pray and entreat in God’s name, that if anyone wishes to copy this book, he earnestly correct it by the exemplar, lest we be blamed because of careless scribes. He who writes falsely does great evil unless he corrects it, so that he brings the true teaching to false heresy; therefore, each one should put right what he previously distorted with error if he wishes to be blameless at God’s judgment.]

If intelligent scribes do not correct their texts, Ælfric suggests, the texts may cease to be strictly orthodox. This, then, is the most alarming threat of the incompetent or careless scribe: that they are responsible for propagating error, and those errors become the reader’s errors, and orthodoxy becomes

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The nature of the text being copied affects the implications of scribal mistakes or interventions. Not all medieval texts are homiletic, or even necessarily religious. The implications of scribal mistakes or interventions are shaped by the ways in which a book anticipates its own reception. Such circumscribed expectations can be seen in the *Philobiblon* of Richard de Bury, the bishop of Durham, civil servant, and one-time interlocutor with Petrarch. The *Philobiblon*, dated by a textual explicit to January 1345, outlines a very particular set of expectations for what it envisions as proper textual production and consumption. Richard de Bury is discussing Latin theological and liturgical texts and books, and his comments should be carefully understood within those broadly generic terms. The *Philobiblon* ventriloquizes the books for which it claims to speak, leveling the complaints of books against several groups—against “clericos iam promotos [clerks lately promoted],” and against other ecclesiastics, including members of fixed religious orders and mendicants. The books repeat the now-familiar trope of the incompetent scribe, lamenting of the clerks who write them, “Heu! Quam falsis scriptoribus nos exarandos committitis [Alas, how do ye commit us to blundering scribes to be copied].” Again, the assumption of a single, truthful text is evident. Speaking from the upper echelons of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in England, Richard de Bury perpetuates his textual expectations,

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26. Carruthers argues the *Philobiblon* suggests that “having a good memory is virtually as good as having the book itself, and better than having an untrustworthy written copy of it.” Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 200. Carruthers’s foundational work on nonwritten means of textual recollection and engagement here takes place within the religiously grounded frames of morality and orthodoxy that are not the primary focus of this chapter.

27. *Philobiblon*, vol. 1. Thus, books speak “contra religiosos possessionatos [against religious possessors]” and “contra religiosos mendicantes [against religious mendicants].”

28. *Philobiblon*, vol. 1, 41; vol. 2, 44.
derived from a particular social and religious moment, for the copying of
particular types of books.

Moving away from the inevitable errors introduced by scribes, Richard de Bury also writes of the possibilities of scribal correction and textual improvement:

De istis ad statum pontificalem assumpti, nonnullos habuimus de duobus
ordinibus, Praedicatorum [videlicet] et Minorum, nostris assistentes lateri-
bus, nostraeque familiae commensales, viros utique tam moribus insignitos
quam litteris: qui diversorum voluminum correctionibus, expositionibus,
tabulationibus, ac compilationibus, indefessis studiis [incumbebant].

[When we reached the episcopal state we had some of these men from both
orders, namely, the Preachers and the Minors, as a support to our sides and
table companions in our household; men as distinguished in morals as in
letters, and they with unwearied zeal applied themselves to the correcting,
expounding, collating, and compiling of the various volumes.]29

Indeed, the text actively encourages its readers to correct books, rather than
copy them, as the title of the twelfth chapter of the Philobiblon indicates
neatly: “Quare libros grammaticales tanta diligentia curavimus renovare
[why we have taken such diligent care to amend the books of grammar].”30
Yet, books of grammar, like books of religion, admit of reasonable author-
ity and textual fixity. The doubled and contradictory trope of scribes as at
once the locus of textual error, and also the means by which error can be
remedied, persists throughout the Middle Ages. The Christian economy of
virtue extends to the creation of schemata that render existing books more
readily usable, and to the correction and collation of texts and other textual
interventions. But the scope of its applicability has slipped from some types
of books to all books.

One legacy of the trope of scribal incompetence is that negative depic-
tions of scribes have subordinated the positive performances of scribes.
Scribes, after all, corrected texts, recognized source texts as corrupt or erro-
neous, and offered critical and intelligent readings of their exemplars. There
is evidence scribes took the responsibilities of the inherently transformative
nature of their work very seriously. The scribe of MS Royal 15.c.xi com-
plained about the quality of his exemplar and imagined subsequent (idiotic)
transcribers. Though rather caustic in his contempt, he demonstrates not

only intelligent engagement with his exemplar, but a more detailed knowledge of the text he is copying as found in other, presumably better manuscripts. Such a small-seeming point has enormous implications, pointing to a practical experience of textual plurality that accommodates multiple “good” texts that nonetheless differ. A similar instance of a scribe seeking a better exemplar is found in Winchester College MS 11, a fifteenth-century copy of an early-thirteenth-century sermon: “And, treweli, me þinkþ þat I haue deseruid ryȝt good rewarde of you, for I haue writen your booke bi a trewe copi. For your book þat ye sende for a copy is þe most defectyuest copy þat ony man may write by, and þat is schame for you þat ye let it not be correctid.”31 As if responding indignantly to the exemplum of the cheating scribe, the scribe of Winchester College MS 11 lays claim to added virtue (and higher pay) for having sought out a better exemplar than the execrable exemplar his employer had initially sent. Rather than ignorantly adding errors to texts as he copied, the Winchester scribe records his distinct awareness of the variations in quality across multiple manuscripts of a single text, and indeed, the existence of such texts some two hundred years after the delivery and recording of a sermon.

It should be stressed that most medieval scribes were very good at copying texts, when they were actually copying texts. The assumption that scribes were copying from exemplars is deeply embedded in our understanding of scribal practices. Yet, in reconsidering how scribes understood texts as existing apart from particular exemplars, it becomes clear that in some types of text “contamination,” as stemmatic editors term it, was endemic.32 Thus, as the scribe of London, BL, MS Egerton 650 notes in a colophon to a copy of the Middle English prose Brut:

Here is no more of the sege of Rone [sic] and þat is be cause we wanted þe trewe copy þerof bot who so euer owys þis boke may wryte it outh in þe henderend of þis boke or in þe forþer end of it whene he gettes þe trew copy

31. Quoted in Helen L. Spencer, *English Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 10, from Winchester College, MS 11, f. 174'. Spencer notes: “It may be assumed that not only scribes but all medieval readers were of necessity textual critics, but they none the less exhibit very varying degrees of ability” (11). Note, too, the scribe’s complaint that the patron of Winchester College, MS 11 would not permit correction. The devious way in which the scribe has improved his text by improving his exemplar might suggest the commercial book trade was not without disagreements more closely resembling those embedded in the relationships of patronage.

when it is wryttn wryte in þeis iij voyde lyns where it may be foundyn.³³

The rather hopeful three ruled lines that follow the colophon remained blank until a reference was provided to the 1548 edition of Edward Hall’s Chronicles.³⁴ The Middle English prose Brut and its antecedent, the Anglo-Norman prose Brut, are exceptional texts. Both were extremely popular—they survive in hundreds of manuscripts and preserve differences that are difficult to make sense of using existing terminology: “versions,” “redactions,” and even “groups” all pose different biases and privilege different metaphors of spatially- or temporally-determined connectedness. The scribe of Egerton 650 not only reveals his desire for a better exemplar, and his knowledge that more exemplars existed, but for something more significant for texts such as the prose Brut. The majority of medieval texts were not fetishized in the same way that religious texts or the works of canonized poets were. The prose Brut demonstrates an overwhelming textual complexity, not because scribes were unable to copy their exemplars, but because “copying” wasn’t conceived narrowly with regards to the prose Brut and other texts of vernacular history writing. This is not to say that the prose Brut wasn’t copied, but to argue that it was not only copied. Vernacular historiography in particular invited textual alteration, addition, supplementation, and other forms of composition. For many vernacular historiographical texts, exemplars were the occasion for copying and composing, for replication and intervention.³⁵

Caxton’s earliest printed books transformed the landscape of the book trade in England, but his methods of acquiring and assembling texts were steeped in manuscript culture, and thus reflect continuity with existing medieval textual practices.³⁶ Caxton’s collation of multiple manuscripts to produce his printed texts was not an unprecedented methodological innovation in the 1480s. In the preface to his second printing of Canterbury Tales,

he employed a different manuscript than he had for his first edition. He stages a debate in the preface, in which he putatively replies to the accusation that his first printing of the text “was not accordyng in many places vnto the book that Gefferey chaucer had made.” This performance recalls both scribal awareness of the plurality of available exemplars, and a rejection of the trope of the incompetent scribe. Caxton insists, in the rhetoric of the trope, that he “had made it accordyng to my copye, and by me was nothyng added ne mynusshyd.”

Caxton here positions himself precisely as a print-culture equivalent of a responsible scribe: he assessed the textual quality of available exemplars, and made informed and intelligent judgments about the nature and purpose of a text both before, and while, copying.

The doubled trope of scribal incompetence and corrective scribal emendation, though most problematic for Latin religious texts, spread throughout a wide range of texts in all of the vernaculars present in medieval Britain. The evidence of scribal concern for the accuracy of exemplars, and the labor of scribes to correct and emend corrupt texts, sits rather uncomfortably alongside the large number of extant medieval manuscripts bearing abundant witness to obvious, incontestable, and unmotivated errors, such as reduplicated copying. Any scholar who has worked with medieval manuscripts is unlikely to be surprised at the almost unimaginably basic mistakes scribes are capable of making. The category of scribal error described by Leonard Boyle as “grammatical inanity” neatly captures something of the problem—scribes make frequent and spectacularly foolish mistakes.

The capacity to make such mistakes, and the enormous volume of these uncorrected errors, indicates something important about medieval conceptions of textual “error” itself, and the level of concern with these “errors” in many contexts. The representation of scribes as corruptors of text is so ubiquitous, and so durable, as to be quite obviously a literary trope. The roots of this image extend back to the earliest texts of Western society, found in the verses in Deuteronomy, Exodus, and Revelations quoted above. Eusebius, Quintilian, and


Origen all complained about scribes and textual infidelity.\(^{39}\) Greetham notes: “Both Cicero and Martial complained about the widespread incompetence of scribes, and the complaints have never stopped.”\(^{40}\) Setting aside the question of the unauthorized “publication” that plagued Eusebius (although issues with the circulation of *Piers Plowman* and the *Canterbury Tales* have led scholars to argue for similar scenarios), the trope of the scribingly-corrupted text continues to enjoy powerful resonance. Scribal incompetence has long been constructed as a plague inflicted upon all texts, even as generations of scribes have dutifully and carefully copied the opprobrium heaped upon their own heads.

Incompetent scribes are a literary trope, but complaint is a genre. Authors complained about scribes, scribes complained about other scribes, and readers complained about scribes and authors. Such complaints are no less real for being conventional. Interrogating complaint as a rhetorical stance assumed in relation to the written word and the physical textual object, however, reveals the more ambiguous nature of error, and the manifold varieties of medieval writing. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries did not lack for complaints about scribes, most notably, of course, Chaucer’s complaint about Adam Scriveyn.\(^{41}\) Chaucer’s rebuke to Adam is well known, yet it warrants quoting in full:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Chauciers words} & . \text{ a Geffrey vn to Adame his owen scryveyne} / \\
\text{Adam} & . \text{ scryveyne} / \text{ if euer it þee byfalle} \\
\text{Boece or Troylus} & / \text{ for to wryten nuwe} / \\
\text{Vnder þy long lokkes} & / \text{ þowe most haue þe scalle} \\
\text{But after my makyng} & / \text{ þowe wryte more truwe} \\
\text{So offt a daye} & . \text{ I mot þy werk renuwe} /
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{39}\) Gamble notes: “The currency of unauthorized, excerpted, or corrupted texts is so frequently given as the reason for publication that it is almost a topos in the literature of the period” (*Books and Readers*, 118). Gamble also mentions Thomas Wirth’s claim “that the topos is merely an authorial convention” (291 n. 110).


\(^{41}\) See Ralph Hanna, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 174–93, particularly his observation: “Chaucer’s awareness of the ways he might be misunderstood was not only fastidious, however; it was also prescient. He knew that he was *sui generis*, that he made demands of a unique sort on contemporary transmission procedures. These forms of transmission were geared to other kinds of textual production—for example, the varieties of active redaction that typify surviving versions of Auchinleck romances” (175). On the Auchinleck manuscript, see, further, Chapter 4 below.
Adam Scriveyn’s miswritings, miscopyings, and mistranscriptions, as lamentable as they may be, are the kinds of errors that can be rubbed and scraped. Adam’s work may be more or less “truwe” to Chaucer’s original Boece or Troilus, but the errors and variations he is accused of perpetrating upon Chaucer’s text are precisely the scribal variants that can be corrected. The mechanical corrections to which Chaucer on the surface refers are a far cry from more troublingly transformative types of scribal copying and manuscript transmission. The verses articulate the frustrations attendant upon errors that can be corrected, yet in doing so, expose those that cannot be easily fixed. Chaucer de-authorizes Adam Scriveyn’s work, and thus narrows the discourse of what constitutes authorship. Purely mechanical errors, those which can be rubbed or scraped, do not challenge the paradigmatically distinct roles of author and scribe. Chaucer’s verses may humorously lament the tide of scribal error, which is inevitable, but they are not an attempt to hold that tide back.

The threat of “new writing” is not that it introduces scribal error, but rather that it can obscure, overwrite, or even eclipse the authorial. “Writing new” can be a mechanical act—copying in the most limited sense as enacted by Adam to produce another copy of one of Chaucer’s poems. But, it can also be a creative proposition. Underlying the verses to Adam are concerns about the transformations that cannot be corrected, that is, about precisely the kinds of writing that produced the two texts to which the verses refer. Boece and Troilus are both, in the broadest sense, translations. Both record an author negotiating the challenges of writing new texts that are already old texts. Boece translates from a number of Latin and French sources, and also adds translations of supplementary commentary. In Troilus, Chaucer repeatedly dramatizes the difficulties of situating a new Troy story amidst the many old Troy stories. Between Homer and Boccaccio, Dares and Dictys, and Joseph of Exeter and Guido della Colonna, Chaucer’s new writing relies upon imagination and invention, revision and redaction, and other complex transformations that cannot be carefully delimited or contained. A

42. The text presented here is that of Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.3.20, as printed in Alexandra Gillespie, “Reading Chaucer’s Words to Adam,” Chaucer Review 42 (2008): 269–83.

43. Apart from translating Boethius’s Latin Consolatio, Chaucer also translates materials from Jean de Meun’s Li livres de confort de philosophie and Nicholas Trevet’s Latin commentary on the Consolatio. See Sources of the Boece, ed. Tim Machan with the assistance of Alistair J. Minnis (Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2005).
new manuscript copy of an old poem can be new writing, but so too is a new poem on an old subject.

The famous lines from the end of Book Five of *Troilus and Criseyde* similarly suggest what is at stake in scribal writing as a potential site of authorship and invention. The lines are well known but warrant quotation as they register the tensions between variation and originality:

And for ther is so gret diversite
In Englissh and in writyng of oure tonge,
So prey I God that non myswrite the,
Ne the mysmetre for defaute of tonge;
And red wherso thow be, or elles songe,
That thow be understande, God I biseche!\(^{44}\)

A recent editor of the text notes of these lines: “Chaucer refers to the diversity of dialects in English, whose confusion can lead to the scribal corruption of poetic texts in such matters as the pronunciation of final -e.”\(^{45}\) Given the seeming ubiquity of medieval “mis-writing” that critical editions and scholarly commentary imply, it is curious that the *MED* indicates these lines provide the sole attested usage for both “mismetren” and “miswriten.”\(^{46}\) Chaucer, of course, is a master at framing a unique complaint as if it were a universal problem. The modern note reproduces part of Chaucer’s agenda in condemning the kinds of mechanical miswriting in the verses to Adam, those leading to mismetered lines or altered by dialectal variations that potentially obscure rhymes. However, the (mis)pronunciation of final -e does not fundamentally compromise the terms of the prayer that Chaucer offers up in the final line. Chaucer prays that the *Troilus* will be understood by its readers, not that the entire poem scans correctly.\(^{47}\) Chaucer, as a poet, clearly cares deeply about final -e and the scansion of his poetry; that the less formally-inclined amongst his audience cared, or even understood that or why they

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46. *MED*, “mismetren” and “miswriten.”
47. Interestingly, the complaints about final -e and the scansion of Chaucer’s poetry go back at least to Dryden, who in describing Speght’s 1602 edition states: “I cannot go so far as he who publish the last Edition of him [Chaucer]; for he would make us believe the Fault is in our Ears, and that there were really Ten Syllables in a Verse where we find but Nine.” *Fables Ancient and Modern*, in *The Works of John Dryden: Poems, 1697–1700*, ed. Vinton A. Dearing, vol. 7 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 34.
The Medieval Scribe

The final verses of *Troilus* are deeply and densely entangled with the poem as a whole, and its final narrative shift to an elevated perspective and spiritual ending. Chaucer stresses the plurality of possible forms of transmission and reception for his poem: written or miswritten, metered or mismetered, read aloud or silently, or sung.

The variety of textual transmissions and the attendant changes are, of course, precisely those Chaucer’s poetry has endured. Whether it is the circulation of two versions of the so-called Plowman’s Tale with the *Canterbury Tales*, the unstable and changing order of the *Tales* themselves, the unique envoy to Vache attached to Chaucer’s “Truth” in a single manuscript, or the different versions of the prologue to the *Legend of Good Women*, Chaucer’s “originals” have not only been miswritten, but substantively reimagined, remediated, and re-presented. Mechanical correction does not address these types of textual variation and transmission. Chaucer, like Troilus himself, seeks a higher good—a perspective set apart from the din of the earthly world. Beyond dialectal transformation and beyond those errors that can be rubbed or scraped are the variations that seem to trouble Chaucer most. For example, considering the envoy to “Truth,” omission in particular can undermine the stability of the poetic text. Like reduplication, omission can be a purely mechanical error. But it also always threatens to be meaningful in a way that duplication is not—omission can be intended, as the exemplum of the cheating scribe worries itself about the scribe who omits the verses on adultery. Omission can be accidental, but it can also be editorial, reflecting a motivated and intended intervention. Chaucer uses those errors that can be corrected as the occasion to assert his particular vision of authorship, and thus the relationship between author and text. In doing so, he redefines the discourse of authorship to exclude scribal variation. Variation is admitted and deplored, but Chaucer moves to preclude the other, more dangerous end of the spectrum of scribal practices—those scribal interventions that were not accidental, but rather intentional.

Lydgate found in Chaucer’s work formative ideas about literary authorship and poetic tradition. For Lydgate as for Chaucer, literary invention and textual variation are troublingly entangled with concerns about poetic origi-

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48. See Thorlac Turville-Petre, “Putting It Right: The Corrections of Huntington Library MS Hm 128 and Bl. Additional MS. 35287,” *Yearbook of Langland Studies* 16 (2002): 41-65, and the muddle he describes in the practices of the best London scribes and, effectively, everyone else in recognizing the grammatical, syllabic, or vocalic function of final –e. Turville-Petre offers an important reminder about “the very considerable trouble ... scribes took to get their text right, if possible even righter than their exemplar” (41).

49. See, generally, the textual notes to the *Riverside Chaucer*. For the Plowman’s Tale, see *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, ed. James M. Dean (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991).
nality and the anxiety of inheritance. Following Chaucer’s privileging of the errors that can be rubbed or scraped over those new writings that cannot be mechanically corrected, Lydgate takes up the processes of textual transmission and transformation as a subject matter in his *Troy Book.* He does so in the midst of an appeal to authority and a performance of humility that pairs textual transformation with concerns about authorship and innovation. Toward the end of Book V of *Troy Book,* after offering a prayer for Henry V, Lydgate performatively avails himself of the modesty topos, asking his readers, “For in metring þou þer be ignoraunce, / ȝet in þe story ȝe may fynde plesaunce / Touching substaunce of þat myn auctour wryt.” The oppositions between “meter,” “story,” and “substaunce” recall most immediately Chaucer’s *Troilus.* The stress Lydgate places on the importance of “substaunce” as against metrical failures (even those created by the poet as part of his translation project from the text of Guido della Colonna) echo the concern that a text should be understood not in spite of, but rather in the midst of, variation. Having echoed the Chaucerian, Lydgate negotiates the legacy of Chaucer himself. Lydgate frames his poetic master as offering moral rather than literary exemplarity when confronted with mechanical and presentational infelicities:

> For he þat was gronde of wel-seying,  
> In al hys lyf hyndred no makynge,  
> My maister Chaucer, þat founde ful many spot—  
> Hym liste nat pinche nor gruche at euer blot,  
> Nor meue hym sylf to parturbe his reste  
> I haue herde telle, but seide alweie þe best,  
> Suffering goodly of his gentilnes  
> Ful many þing enbracid with rudnes.

The Chaucer of these lines, kindly and at ease with the spots and blots left behind by careless scribes, sits uneasily with superficial readings of Chau-

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52. The literature on the relationship between Lydgate and Chaucer is substantial. In addition to the works cited above, see also Derek Pearsall, *John Lydgate* (London: Routledge, 1970).

cer’s verses to Adam Scriveyn. Instead of an adversarial relationship between author and scribe and an underlying anxiety about where the lines between those roles might be, the inevitable errors of hand-produced manuscripts become an occasion for celebrating Chaucer’s virtue. Lydgate depicts Chaucer rising benignly above the trivial flaws introduced by others, meeting rudeness with that quintessentially Chaucerian virtue, *gentilesse*.

Yet, framing textual corruption as an opportunity for virtue does not solve the ongoing presence of errors, ink blots, and corrections. Lydgate continues to stress the intense physicality of the writing process and the tools necessary to its practice. He acknowledges that he and others who attempt to follow in Chaucer’s footsteps “was never noon . . . þat worþi was his ynkhorn for to holde.”

Lydgate draws the audience’s attention to the physical instantiation of the text being read:

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And in þis lond ȝif þer any be,
In borwe or toun, village or cite,
Þat konnyng haþ his tracis for to swe,
Wher he go brood or be shet in mwe—
To hym I make a direccioun
Of þis boke to han inspecchioun
Besechyng hem, with her prudent loke
To race & skrape þoruȝ-oute al my boke,
Voide & adde wher hem semeth nede.
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This request continues to echo the language of Chaucer’s verses to Adam in its use of “race” and “skrape.” Lydgate also embraces the variety of scribal labor as seen in the two aspects of the trope of the incompetent scribe. Lydgate’s lines treat textual correction and emendation as proper to the role of the reader. They also very precisely trust the competence of scribal readers to improve a text, rather than corrupt it, by removing and adding material according to their judgment, “wher hem semeth nede.” For Lydgate, unlike Chaucer, poetry is not gospel, and errors made in its copying do not compromise poetic authorship.

If Chaucer haunts Lydgate’s works generally, it is *Troilus*, of all of the texts of the Troy tradition, that worries the *Troy Book* in both its presence and absence as a source. In a passage of Book II of his *Troy Book*, Lydgate

55. *Troy Book*, V.3531–39. The passage echoes a similar sentiment from slightly earlier in Book V, in lines that immediately follow those recalling Chaucer’s *Troilus*, “And þouþe so be þat any word myssit, / Amendeth it, with chere debonair” (V.3494–95).
finds himself about to embark upon the rather daunting task of describing Criseyde. Turning from Guido della Colonna, situating himself *vis-à-vis* Chaucer’s *Troilus*, and lamenting his own “crokid lynys rude,” Lydgate celebrates Chaucer’s transformation of the English language and his use of “be gold dewe-dropis of rethorik so fyne, / Oure rude langage only tenlwmyne.” There are two sets of imagery at play in these lines. On the one hand, Chaucer “enlumines” the English language through his use of rhetorical “colors,” and Lydgate positions his verse as less metrical, eloquent, and rhetorically sophisticated. At the same time, Lydgate stresses the emphatically physical nature of books themselves. His language very specifically recalls the illumination of manuscripts. Lydgate continues speaking of Chaucer’s poetry in metaphors of bookmaking and decoration: “Whan we wolde his stile confert / We may al day oure colour grynde & bete, / Tempre our aȝour and vermilyoun: / But al I holde but presumcioun.” The emphasis on grinding and beating of raw materials into the necessary inks for writing and decorating manuscripts is not merely metaphorical. Azure and vermillion are used to make the red and blue inks used for the alternating paraphs that essentially define the appearance of English manuscripts after 1200. To counterfeit style cheaply is forgery. For books, it is not forgery, but rather visual convention and tradition. Poetic style may be impossible to copy, but reproducing the appearance of manuscripts is simply conventional. Lydgate suggests the process of physically writing and illuminating manuscripts is analogous to the complex processes of textual transformation that constitute his more flexible conceptions of authorship.


57. *Troy Book*, II.4699–700, 4705. The phrase and the passage have received much critical attention.


59. The *MED* first records “enlumenen” as a verb indicating manuscript decoration (sense 2b, “to illuminate [a book with letters of gold!”]) in Lydgate’s *Fall of Princes*. However, note Chaucer’s earlier use of a different form of the word in the same sense, “Kalenderes enlumyned,” in *An ABC*, line 73.


61. Morgan, “Technology of Production,” 84: “Most medieval manuscripts are either undecorated, or decorated only from c. 1200 with red and blue initials flourished with pen-work of the other colour.”
Copying, then, occupies stylistic registers as well as being a more superficially textual phenomenon, and it can incorporate emulation, not only duplication. Lydgate’s concern with copying plays with the overlap between his interpretation of Chaucer’s poetic style and the visual conventions of vernacular literary manuscripts. The next section interrogates different types of copying as intentional performances that frame the reception of texts. The very imprecision of the term “copying” warrants clarification. The modern senses of “translation,” particularly Walter Benjamin’s meditations on the matter, better capture some of the nuance of the processes implied by the varied uses of the term copying as applied to medieval scribal practice. The debates about the nature of translation are, of course, extensive, but the concern with what is borne or carried over (the Latin etymological roots of “translation,” trans + latio) applies not only to meaning, but to the physical translation of text from one codex to another—that is, copying. What can be thought of as the scribal equivalent of word-for-word translation is what I will term duplicative copying. Duplicative copying is the type of copying in which an effort is made to retain lineation, mise-en-page, marginalia, annotations, decorations, and other features beyond the strictly textual. This holistic type of copying is more commonly, but not exclusively, found in connection with Bibles and other devotional texts, and texts that accrued complicated commentary traditions, including canon law books, Psalters, and encyclopediae such as the fourteenth-century Omne bonum. A second type of copying will be called replicative copying. Replicative copying can be

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understood as verbatim copying, but it is important to distinguish it from duplicative copying. Replicative copying’s primary concern is the reproduction of text, not gloss, of content, not context. Replicative copying does not reproduce an exemplar’s paratextual features—it is, in some sense, the copying of a text, not that of a book. It should be stressed that neither duplicative nor replicative copying addresses the dialectally motivated varieties of copying, such as “litteratim” (letter-for-letter) copying. Both duplicative and replicative copying can translate the dialect of a source text partially or completely without otherwise changing either the layout or even a single word of an exemplar.

Most manuscripts fall short of the quintessential exemplarity of the Bible, and the act of copying also struggles against an archetypal vision of the activity. It is uncontentious to claim that the scribes of the exquisitely beautiful Lindisfarne Gospels were exceptionally careful in writing the text of the Gospels, although there are, of course, “errors” in the manuscript’s text.66 The nature of the variants preserved in the manuscript cannot be casually, or causally, dissociated from their beautiful, painstakingly written forms. That is, the scribes of the Lindisfarne Gospels meant to copy their exemplar(s), and meant to establish their new text as definitive. Although errors exist, the pages of the codex were neither seen nor employed as the site for revision, redaction, or invention. Looking to the other end of the Middle Ages, the commonplace book Oxford, Balliol College MS 354 belonging to the London grocer Richard Hill offers a different type of scribal intentionality. The manuscript contains, among numerous other texts and accounts, some excerpts from Gower’s Confessio Amantis.67 The editor of Gower’s poem notes of the passages that they are “not very correct, and short passages or couplets are omitted here and there,” an observation that reflects the editor’s very particular set of interests in an (accurate) text of the Confessio.68 This particular manuscript, written over one hundred years after Gower’s poem was composed, contains a series of interconnected exempla taken from the Confessio.

66. See Michelle Brown, *The Lindisfarne Gospels: Society, Spirituality and the Scribe* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 153: “Insular scribes and scholars do exhibit an interest in comparative readings and a respect for copies of texts which were ultimately associated by tradition or inscription with venerated figures in Church history. . . . The texts . . . of the Lindisfarne Gospels . . . incorporate fewer variants from the Vulgate (as defined by printed editions which have themselves relied upon such manuscripts to establish their readings, thereby necessitating a rather circular approach) than other Gospelbooks made in Britain, Ireland or Insular centres on the Continent.”


sio, rather than presenting a continuous text. Richard Hill’s book does not preserve a “bad” text, nor was it poorly copied—the extraction, presentation, and organization of its heterogeneous texts must be considered in terms of the manuscript itself, and read as a distinct historical process. It cannot be argued that the scribes of the Lindisfarne Gospels were more careful than the London grocer who copied excerpts of Gower’s Middle English poetry. The necessarily different intentions of different scribes render the idea of copying as itself relative, and historically conditioned.

Duplicative copying can most readily be conceptualized (and identified) in multiple manuscripts of a single text that share mise-en-page and other paratextual features. As Christopher de Hamel notes: “Twelfth-century scribes did not often devise their own methods of page layout. They copied texts with remarkable faithfulness to the actual arrangement of their exemplars.” Such conservatism in this particular variety of scribal practice is unsurprising, given both the nature of the sacred texts being copied and the largely monastic scribes doing the copying during this period. Moving away from monastic scriptoria in the twelfth century to the nascent commercial book trade in Paris at the end of the thirteenth century, Richard and Mary Rouse identify seven connected deluxe manuscripts of the text known as Somme le roi, all of which share both a text and an extensive program of illuminations, that “radiated from a single centre . . . the court of Philip the Fair.” Such a program can only be transmitted through duplicative copying. Parkes’s well-known and oft-cited article on ordinatio demonstrates very clearly the processes behind the development and transmission of sophisticated layouts; he notes of the complex organization of Dijon, Bibliothèque municipale, MS 568, a presentation copy for Louis IX of Vincent of Beauvais’s Speculum maius: “the concomitant apparatus of headings, running-titles, tabulae, and other devices was disseminated along with the compilations.” In its earliest incarnations, duplicative copying enabled the transmission of complex page layouts, whether text and gloss or text and image. These books, some coming from a centralized locus of production, others shaped in a common milieu and connected by a common imagined


reception, are a salutary reminder that the layout and execution of all books, both in the vernaculars and in Latin, in deluxe codices and private commonplace books, was anything but unconsidered.\textsuperscript{73}

By the middle of the fifteenth century, duplicative copying was less common. The nature, number, and types of texts being composed and copied had proliferated, and the nature of the book trade had changed fundamentally.\textsuperscript{74} Nonetheless, some fifteenth-century manuscripts employed duplicative copying as the basis for a particular visual rhetoric, a way in which to cue audience expectations about genre, and to participate in recognizable textual traditions. Vincent Gillespie observes of the visual similarity found among some thirty manuscripts of Pore Caitif and also among 115 manuscripts of Prick of Conscience that “accurate scribal work might well have consisted not only in careful attention to the copying of the text but also in the perpetuation of the structures and layout of the text in the scribal exemplar.”\textsuperscript{75} It is clear that mise-en-page and extratextual features including running heads and marginalia were frequently copied. This visual style marks copying that takes place with an agenda, and with an eye to historicizing a text or genre. Also pointedly harking back to the more conservative traditions of earlier centuries, a large number of manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible share a recognizable mise-en-page of double columns, running heads, and subdivision by penwork initials and paraphs. Hudson notes with characteristic caution that the “manuscripts that survive vary in type and quality a good deal less

\textsuperscript{73} More general examples might include the distinctive style of St. Augustine’s, Canterbury, at the end of the eleventh century, or St. Alban’s in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. See also Lincoln, Lincoln Cathedral Library, MS 98, a book that has been clearly visually designed to recall the images, color schemes, and iconography of the Lincoln Cathedral Chapter Bible, MS 1. See C. M. Kauffman, \textit{Romanesque Manuscripts}, 1066–1190 (London: Harvey Miller, 1975).


than might be expected given the history of the text.” 76 Again, participation in a visual textual tradition enables the similar manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible to deploy something of the inherited authority of convention.

Although issues of authority function quite differently for poetic texts, duplicative copying is not unattested in manuscripts of vernacular poetry. In contrast to the extremely heterogeneous nature of the manuscripts of Langland’s *Piers Plowman* or Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, many of the manuscripts of Gower’s *Confessio Amantis* closely resemble each other. 77 Pearsall remarks of these Gower manuscripts:

> There is a type of manuscript . . . which is so frequently found among the surviving copies that it can almost be characterised as “standard” . . . copied during the first quarter of the fifteenth century . . . by a good professional London scribe . . . in double columns, with forty-six lines per column . . . [featuring] two miniatures and the decoration . . . organised according to a regular hierarchy with . . . decorated initials (champs) of different sizes, pen-flourished coloured initials, and decorated or undecorated parahps, used to mark out different elements. 78

Such a “standardized” appearance of these manuscripts is, in part, connected to Gower’s conceit of presenting a Latin commentary linked to the vernacular text. That is, scribes had to employ some version of the more complex layout of text and gloss derived from the glossed Gospels and Bibles of the twelfth century. The more common forms of replicative copying were avail-


able, but clearly discouraged in some fashion, and on the whole the scribes of the *Confessio* instead continued the tradition of duplicatively copying the poem.

It should be stressed that the *Confessio* performs the relationship between text and gloss. The Latin commentary’s appearance either in the margins of manuscripts, or in red ink in the text columns, textually enacts a polyvocal dialogue that visually plays out on the page. The standardized layout of *Confessio* manuscripts is a rhetorical performance, a means to generate a particular reception visually antecedent to the reception of the text—to see it, before reading it, as an instance of text and gloss is to associate the poem with the discourses of authority deployed by the religious texts for which the layout was first designed. Some scribes rejected the complex layout of the poem, eschewing duplicative copying in the strictest sense. Instead, they chose to move the Latin commentary from the margins into the columns of the text. In the process, other, hybrid texts were created. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 35 is a fragile manuscript on paper, dated to the first quarter of the fifteenth century. At the bottom of a column on f. 4r, the scribe of Ashmole 35 notes: “And also Iohn Gower whiche was maker / of þis boke made 7 deuysed it to be in maner / of a confessioun þat þis said Iohn Gower was confessid.” The tripled emphasis on making and organizing, “maker,” “made,” and “deuysed,” stresses the form and structure not only of the poem (organized as a confession between the narrator Gower and his confessor Genius), but more notably of the book itself. The scribe of Ashmole 35 blurs the distinction between the “boke” made by John Gower and


80. See Derek Pearsall, “Gower’s Latin in the *Confessio Amantis*,” in *Latin and Vernacular: Studies in Late-Medieval Texts and Manuscripts*, ed. Alistair Minnis (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell and Brewer, 1989), 13–25; and Pearsall, “The Organisation of the Latin Apparatus in Gower’s *Confessio Amantis*: The Scribes and Their Problems,” in *The Medieval Book and a Modern Collector: Essays in Honour of Toshiyuki Takamiya*, ed. T. Matsuda, R. Linenthal, and J. Scahill (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer and Yushodo Press, 2004), 99–112. Pearsall concludes: “What I have found is that scribes of the *Confessio* mostly copy what is in front of them with care and accuracy and occasional ingenuity but no more effort of thought than is immediately necessary. Where the exemplars or the general instructions . . . are difficult to follow, scribes do their best to solve practical problems (sometimes of their own making) in the management of a complex layout” (112).


82. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 35, f. 4v.

83. *MED*, “devisen,” 4a, “to design or plan”; 5, “to form (sth.), fashion, shape, or construct; compose (a letter, poem).”
the poem, between the manuscript itself and its unique text. His doubling of Gower’s name echoes the slippage between author and narrator. The scribe was himself likely responsible for translating the Latin apparatus into Middle English. Certain kinds of errors, such as declined Latin forms, are found in the Middle English text (“Tiresiam” for Tiresias), suggesting he was translating on the fly from an exemplar featuring the Latin apparatus. Even while transforming Gower’s poem into his own book, however, the Ashmole scribe retained the poem’s recognizable lineage as a visual artifact. The in-column Middle English apparatus in Ashmole 35 is not so very different from the in-column Latin apparatus found in other manuscripts, or the marginal Latin apparatus found in the most rigorously executed manuscripts of the Confessio. The dialogue between apparatus and poem is preserved in Ashmole 35, though its multilingual character is altered. The authority of the apparatus also functions differently, commenting as much upon itself as upon the text of the poem, rather than offering the illusion of a voice linguistically external to the text of the poem. It is Gower’s Confessio, but in some ways it is a very different poem.

More generally, the duplication of both text and layout for manuscripts suggests something important about how books and the process of copying them were understood. Certain texts and even genres tend to appear in predictable, because practical, layouts—single columns for Middle English alliterative long line poetry, for example, or double columns for four or five stress Middle English couplets, or the brackets used to mark tail-rhyme stanzas, to give only a few examples. Texts successfully travel retaining these layouts, as “Sir Thopas,” or the tail-rhyme verses found in Langtoft’s Anglo-Norman Chronicle. Such conventions are not unconsidered: it is essential to recognize scribes engaging critically with their exemplars as texts and visual models. Duplicative copying in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries was no longer the reflex it was in the twelfth century for the glossed Psalter or books of the Bible. The heterogeneity of available texts and possible layouts makes it clear that the broad similarities in certain texts and genres at

84. There are a number of corrections to the unique Middle English text in Ashmole 35 that nominally suggest the scribe may have been copying from some form of intermediary papers (e.g., “the on the on” f. 24v, “ayenst þat po þat,” f. 37v), but it is also possible the eyeskip took place with reference to the Latin exemplar, not the Middle English text. Regarding the kinds of errors made in the process of making a translation, see P. M. Jones, “Sloane 76: A Translator’s Holograph,” in Medieval Book Production: Assessing the Evidence, ed. Linda Brownrigg (Los Altos Hills, CA: Anderson-Lovelace; London: Red Gull Press, 1990), 21–39.

85. Pearsall includes Ashmole 35 as part of the group of twenty-eight manuscripts (of forty-eight surviving) that share duplicatively copied features.

86. See Rhiannon Purdie, Anglicising Romance: Tail-Rhyme and Genre in Medieval English Literature (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 2008).
the end of the Middle Ages are not accidental, and that diversity can indicate intent. The commercialization of the book trade by the early fifteenth century, in particular the shift from bespoke volumes to books created without a pre-agreed commission, contributed to the standardization of production. Nonetheless, it is suggestive that duplicative copying harks back to the more standardized twelfth-century model of books produced in monastic contexts, rather than the fourteenth-century bespoke vernacular codices that were antecedent chronologically, though not structurally.87 The conservatism of duplicative copying at later dates can mark the deployment of a visual rhetoric of authority and tradition.

Duplicative copying can extend beyond the paratextual to script itself. Such modified script might be deployed as an archaizing script intended to deceive, as in forgeries.88 Alternately, archaizing hands might be used to create text that aligned with or resembled existing text, as with the “supply leaves” employed to replace worn or lost folios from well-used books, particularly large and expensively decorated volumes.89 Archaizing hands offer important insight into the imagination of book production in the Middle Ages. It is crucial to distinguish the intent to deceive from the attempt merely

87. Thus, Hanna’s important reminder, with regards to the Auchinleck manuscript, but applicable more broadly to mid-fourteenth-century book production: “At this date, the book must have been ‘bespoke.’” Ralph Hanna, London Literature, 1300–1380 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 76. Note, too, that monastic houses continued to produce books into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: A. I. Doyle, “Book Production by the Monastic Orders in England (c. 1375–1530): Assessing the Evidence,” in Brownrigg, Medieval Book Production, 1–20.


to preserve or imitate: many recopied charters and later copies of charters in cartularies that might or might not be “forgeries” are not visually deceptive, and do not attempt to duplicate the script of the exemplar.\(^9^0\) Instances of archaizing hands and attempts to duplicate script evince an awareness of the temporal development of handwriting and its ability to represent the distant past. Moreover, they show that scribes could avail themselves of a wide range of stylistic choices in order to control interpretation.

Not all archaizing hands were deployed to produce supply leaves or to fabricate forgeries. On f. 1\(^r\) of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. F.4.32, the book better known as St. Dunstan's Classbook, a late-fifteenth-century or early-sixteenth-century hand has added two lines prominently across the top of the folio, noting, “Pictura et scriptura huius page subitus / visa; est de propria manu sancti dunstani [The picture and writing seen beneath on this page are in the hand of Saint Dunstan himself].” Written in a hand described by Parkes as “odd,” employing anachronistic features that mark the script as an attempt at archaizing, the lines ascribe both the picture and the text that follow as the work of Dunstan, an attribution modern scholarship has confirmed.\(^9^1\) Typical of medieval and early modern readers of books (but abhorrent to modern readers), whoever added the two lines to this book did so without hesitation, centering the inscription on the page directly above the large drawing of Christ with Dunstan prostrate at his feet, an image possibly executed by Dunstan himself.\(^9^2\) Despite being an addition, the carefully centered inscription creates a sense of visual affiliation and connects the attribution to the book’s antiquity. The archaizing scribe’s brazen addition echoes the authentically medieval text written over Dunstan’s worshipping body. The first-person inscription written above the figure of St. Dunstan at the bottom right of the folio becomes even more powerfully authentic after the archaizing hand has drawn attention to it as Saint Dunstan depicting himself as prostrate at Christ’s feet, a doubled act of humility.

It is the visible tension between intention and influence, between production and reception, that archaizing hands trouble in our study of manuscripts. They highlight the situatedness of script itself. That is, archaizing hands generate text meant to be read as if original or internal to a book, despite having

\(^9^0\) Thus, “it must be confessed that if the forgers of these two charters took pains to imitate the ancient handwriting, it was not so with all medieval forgers.” H. E. Salter, “Two Forged Charters of Henry II,” *English Historical Review* 34 (1919): 65. On cartularies, see Chapter 2.


\(^9^2\) The manuscript was digitized as part of the Early Manuscripts at Oxford project and is available at http://image.ox.ac.uk/show?collection=bodleian&manuscript=msauctf432.
been added by someone external or subsequent to the initial processes of composition. There are, however, assumptions about originality that go into privileging this sequence that medieval practice does not support. Archaising and stylized hands are not uncommon, and can be found in manuscripts surviving from throughout the Middle Ages. London, BL, MS Cotton Vitellius C.iii, bears marks of “the archaising appearance of the script due to the effort of the copyist to reproduce a kind of ‘square’ minuscule while keeping the proportions of the later Anglo-Caroline.” Still another archaising hand can be found in the early-twelfth-century compilation known as the Liber Landavensis, Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS 17110E. In the codex, the work of Hand C, a scribe responsible for text added to one folio, is likely dated a century after the production of the book itself. A late-fifteenth- or early-sixteenth-century scribe added an archaized list of contents to London, BL, MS Harley 3020, a late-tenth- or early-eleventh-century codex connected to Glastonbury, while late-sixteenth-century hands added two texts, a supply leaf, and headings to the twelfth-century Durham, Durham University Library, MS Cosin V.II.6. Archaizing hands did not necessarily follow centuries after the work of the scribes they emulated. For example, a single scribe wrote the majority of Oxford, All Souls College, MS 98. Two scribes went over the manuscript in order to revise and correct parts of the text. As they did so, they employed archaising hands designed to resemble the script of the original scribe. Not all archaising hands are

93. Maria A. D’Aronco, “Gardens on Vellum: Plants and Herbs in Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts,” in Health and Healing from the Medieval Garden, ed. Peter Dendale and Alain Touwaide (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 2008), 101–27, 123. Note also that, in addition to the archaising hand in MS Cotton Vitellius C.iii, the three manuscripts D’Aronco discusses exhibit features of duplicative copying; she notes: “It seems clear that the three copyists were reproducing an exemplar similar in layout” (122) with regard to London, BL, MSS Harley 585, Cotton Vitellius C.iii, and Hatton 76. See also Maria A. D’Aronco and Malcolm Cameron, The Old English Illustrated Pharmacopoeia. British Library Cotton Vitellius C.iii (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1998), 23–24.

94. Daniel Huws, Medieval Welsh Manuscripts (Aberystwyth: University of Wales Press and National Library of Wales, 2000), who describes Hand C as “an archaising hand whose lateness of date is most apparent from the well-developed ‘biting,’” and dates the manuscript to s. xiii (143).

95. Carley, “More Pre-Conquest Manuscripts,” 270 n. 29. See also the catalogue of Durham University Library manuscripts available online, written and revised by A. I. Doyle and A. J. Piper. “Items 3 and 7, together with a supply-leaf in item 8 and headings to items 2 and 4(a), are the work of antiquaries, s. xvi,” at http://www.dur.ac.uk/library/asc/theme/medmss/apvi6/.

“outsiders” to the codices they modify. The visual rhetoric of replacement or affiliation might take place within a single manuscript, and indeed, might be so successful as to be impossible to determine.

Cambridge, Trinity College Cambridge, MS R.5.16, a manuscript of John of Glastonbury’s *Cronica sive Antiquitates Glastoniensis Ecclesie*, suggests what can be at stake in reading the work of archaizing hands. The text’s editor records a series of opinions by eminent paleographers on the date of the manuscript’s script. He quotes Michelle Brown noting that “the hand is a tricky one . . . and gives the impression of trying to be ye olde wrytyng” before describing the script as mid-fifteenth century with some features from the first half of the fourteenth century. He then quotes Parkes: “It has got to be early fifteenth century, although at first sight the script looks like s. xiiiex . . . This may well be another example of . . . the influence of the script of an exemplar on that of the scribe making the copy.”

Scribal intentional- ity and receptivity are central to both paleographers’ arguments—the script is “trying to be” something, or it exerts influence on a scribe. Once scribes are permitted intentionality, script itself can become a consciously-deployed aspect of the composition of manuscripts, rather than a transparent or neutral medium of transmission. Moreover, if scribes are aware of what “old writing” looks like, and how the historical moment of script can shape the arguments of the text, the dangers of forgery and deception come to the fore.

H. E. Salter, in assessing two forged charters, worries: “We have been content hitherto to date manuscripts and charters by their handwriting, but now we are told that this is valueless.” This is, of course, rather dramatic overstatement, but there is another point to be made. Scribes working not transparently but with intention confront and confound the history and genealogy of textual transmission. They assess the pastness of their exemplars, the present tense of the text in their hand, and the future reception of that text by an audience or another scribe. This can lead to Salter’s concern—forgery is an attempt to control the reception of a document, encoding an intent to


98. Parkes, *Their Hands*, notes: “Interpretations of both the message conveyed by a text itself, and of the image of the handwriting in which the text had been transmitted, must depend on the expectations and the range of experience brought to the process of decoding by a reader” (144).

99. Salter’s hyperbole is, of course, prefaced to a sound and sensible analysis of the two forgeries printed by Jenkinson and offers firm faith in the triumph of reason and careful paleographical analysis. Salter writes: “The prospect for the student is serious. The ground is cut away from beneath his feet” (“Two Forged Charters,” 65).
Chapter One
decieve an audience about the nature of a document and its origins. Accepting scribal intentionality can also lead to differently productive engagements with the texts and books of the past.

The final section of this chapter will turn to a scribe exploring the opportunities of the wide variety of transformations inherent to copying, and the historical imagination of copying itself. The scribe, likely a male recluse working in Gloucestershire in the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, assembled Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2125, a book made up of more than thirty texts, primarily on devotional matters, almost all in Middle English. This devotional assemblage was likely for personal use rather than a public performance of textuality. As such, the page offered the scribe not only opportunities to curate the texts included in the manuscript, but to reshape individual texts to suit him. It is a “bespoke” book, to misuse the term slightly in order to make a larger point: it was made to the scribe’s own specifications, inasmuch as the anticipated (self-)reception of the manuscript circularly determined some of the choices made during its copying. Moreover, the scribe was particularly receptive to the influences of his exemplars. Copying for this scribe was an opportunity at once to duplicate exemplars, but also to explore different scripts, to replicate texts, and also to rewrite them. The manuscript demonstrates the scribe’s interest in copying as a space in which decisions about the nature of textual translation could be made.

Scribe C of Pepys 2125 has a distinctive hand due to his fairly consistent use of a back-leaning thorn: the vertical stroke of his thorn consistently “leans back” 45 degrees or more.100 (See figure 2.) This distinctive feature nonetheless varies. The execution of Scribe C’s back-leaning thorn changes throughout the codex: the angle of the vertical stroke differs, the size of the letter shrinks and grows, and the letter moves up and down relative to the baseline.101 Scribe C’s hand varies, but variation does not prevent the hand from clearly being the work of a single scribe. Scribe C’s distinctive thorn

100. See A. I. Doyle, “A Survey of the Origins and Circulation of Theological Writings in English in the 14th, 15th, and Early 16th Centuries with Special Consideration of the Part of the Clergy Therein” (DPhil thesis, University of Cambridge, 1953), 2: 129; and Catalogue of the Pepys Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge, vol. 5, Manuscripts, pt. 1, Medieval, ed. Rosamund McKitterick and Richard Beadle (Woodbridge, UK: D. S. Brewer, 1992), xxv. 101. See Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2125. Scribe C’s stint begins on f. 40r, where the back-leaning thorn is quite prominent. Comparison can be drawn with f. 51r, where the script is larger and more spaciously written, yet the proportionally larger thorn retains the tilt from the vertical. Similarly, the script has shifted by f. 65v, a folio on which the number of lines has increased and is generally more densely written, yet the distinctive thorns remain. On f. 103r the thorn lifts above the baseline in some places but not others, but all instances lean back. Even on f. 118r, which features an elaborate display around a central “i h r,” the scribe retains the back-leaning thorn.
is a usefully distinctive feature. Except, of course, that anything distinctive can be copied. Scribe C was interested in scripts, and in the possibilities of varying his own hand. This is particularly visible in a short devotional tract conventionally titled “On virtues and vices” on ff. 125v–126r of Pepys 2125. In these folios, Scribe C is copying a text from a single exemplar, London, BL, MS Harley 2398.102 This identification, first offered by A. I. Doyle, was made not on textual grounds (the presence or absence of a distinctive reading), as is more usually the case when exemplars are identified. Instead, Doyle identified Harley 2398 as the exemplar used by Scribe C based upon the fact that Harley 2398 itself features a scribe working with a distinctive hand.103 The script in Harley 2398 is tidy but in some ways quite elaborate. One scholar describes the Harley 2398 script as written in a “slightly slanting hand . . . remarkable for its almost fastidious usage of exaggerated squiggles. . . . Also striking is the scribe’s habit of often ending [certain letters] with an otiose small hairstroke at the point of breaking.”104 (See figure 3.) Turning back to Pepys 2125, Scribe C’s hand changes dramatically at the top of f. 125v. Allowing more space between lines, Scribe C’s text suddenly features decorative squiggles on ‘y,’ ‘h,’ and other letters. Scribe C is copying the most obvious features of the script of his exemplar, Harley 2398. The work of one distinctive scribe (back-leaning thorns) embraces the details of the hand of another distinctive scribe (squiggles), in a moment that neatly attests to Scribe C’s intentions to duplicate the script of his source text.

Yet, even as Scribe C duplicates features of the hand of Harley 2398, he replicatively copies “On virtues and vices.”105 Scribe C subjects the texts of


103. McKitterick and Beadle, the editors of the Pepys catalogue, credit A. I. Doyle with first pointing out the lines of duplicative copying in MS Pepys 2125 as copied from MS Harley 2398 (Catalogue of the Pepys Library, xxv). See also the most recent description of the manuscript in Richard Rolle: Uncollected Prose and Verse with Related Northern Texts, ed. Ralph Hanna, EETS OS 329 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xlv–xlvi.

104. Bremmer, Fyve Wyttes, xiii. Bremmer reproduces f. 106v of Harley 2398 on p. cvi; the pronounced squiggles on certain descenders and the hand’s overall appearance are quite distinctive.

Figure 3. London, British Library, MS Harley 2398, f. 174v
Harley 2398 to a number of transliterations, dialectal alterations, and other minor forms of translation. For example, the scribe of Harley 2398 almost invariably prefers to use the letter thorn instead of “th” throughout all texts of the manuscript. In Harley 2398, the two-line incipit of “On virtues and vices” contains eleven thorns. The scribe of Pepys 2125, however, transliterates the text: instead of copying Harley 2398’s thorns, Scribe C uses “th” for all eleven instances (though he makes two struck-through errors in the second and fourth lines of the folio, where he has written “that beth þh the wey of vertues” and “And þ the wey of vyces”). In transliterating the thorns of Harley 2398, Scribe C has the opportunity to execute eleven “th”s, and thus eleven of the distinctive squiggles that the scribe of Harley 2398 employs. Scribe C also substituted “y” for Harley 2398’s “i” in a number of places, offering still more opportunities to employ the elaborate squiggles of his exemplar’s script. Scribe C may well, as Beadle claims, have altered his hand to “amuse himself,” but the amusement belies the care taken in duplicating features of the script, and in consciously reshaping his source text in order to include as many squiggles as possible. Beyond the changes to script, Scribe C makes the changes typical of scribal practice, including dialectal changes, adding words, capital letters, and punctuation not present in his source text in order to make his text more clear.

To consider such a moment in isolation is to note its oddness. Doing so, however, overlooks Scribe C’s general receptivity to the influence of his exemplars, ranging from elements of mise-en-page, to dialectal features, to the very letter forms he employs. Scribe C treats the page as a space in which a series of locally determined decisions about the nature of copying could be made. In copying Harley 2398, Scribe C duplicated the script of his exemplar while transliterating the text to afford more opportunities to write the quirks of that script. Elsewhere, he is more rigorous in adhering to the text, rather than the script, of his exemplar. Early in his work on Pepys 2125, Scribe C copies a short text on the active and contemplative life, a text drawn from Bridget of Sweden’s Revelationes. In the sixteen lines of the text on

to have been so taken by the idiosyncrasy of a hand in the exemplar from which he was copying . . . that he amused himself by abandoning his usual style and imitating it for half a page” (319). Notice that the two texts are contiguous in Harley 2398 but separated by thirteen folios in Pepys 2125. According to Hanna’s collation of Pepys 2125, the two texts are in different booklets (Booklet 3, ff. 89–130; Booklet 4, ff. 131–45). Uncollected Prose, xlv–xlvi.

106. Bremmer, Fyve Wyttes: “The þ is used almost exclusively as against th” (xiii).
107. MS Pepys 2125, f. 125v.
108. Thus, Pepys 2125, f. 125v, “cowardyse” and “hertyliche” for London, BL, MS Harley 2398 f. 174v, “cowardise & herteliche”; “y holde me” for “i holde me.” In at least one instance, the reverse is the case: “þe lif of þe moste synnere” for Harley 2398 “þe lyf of þe most synnere.”
109. Pepys 2125, ff. 55v–56v. For an edition of the text on active and contemplative life, see
f. 56v, Scribe C employs nineteen thorns and only two “th” forms (both for the proper name “Martha”). This suggests that he is working to replicate the thorns of his exemplar. The text immediately following, known as “The Clansing of Man’s Soul,” reverses this pattern. To consider only the portion of “The Clansing” at the foot of f. 56v, those lines features “th” in all thirteen possible instances and no thorns. At the end of “The Clansing,” Scribe C introduces his next text, the “miyrour of mankind,” with a two-line display heading extending across the folio, “here bygynneþ materes of þouþ 7 of age. And of vertues / 7 of vices. Wyþ her kyndely condicous.” As is readily apparent, Scribe C has returned to copying thorns instead of substituting “th.” (See figure 4.) More interestingly, “The miyrour of mankind” features a form of “é” different from the form employed in “Clansing” at the top of the folio. The general appearance of the script at the foot of the folio is visibly dissimilar from that at the top. Scribe C’s rapidly shifting usage across these few folios shows him to be very responsive to the dialectal features of his exemplars. More significantly, however, we see Scribe C experimenting with varying his script. Harley 2398 is only one of many exemplars he used to create Pepys 2125. The shifting dialects and scripts show Scribe C making a series of decisions about copying individual texts. To emulate the script of an exemplar once might be amusing, but to do so more than once shows a scribe exploring the transformational horizons of copying.

Indeed, Scribe C read the texts that he was copying. The other text he copied from Harley 2398 is an Easter Sermon. Harley 2398 records (or, at least performs) the sermon’s oral delivery, including phrases such as “were


110. The heading, “Here bygynneth a fourme of a general confession wyth / special synnes jif a man fynde hym greuyd in eny of hem,” prefaces extracts from “The Clansing of Man’s Soul,” for which see P. S. Jolliffe, A Check-List of Middle English Prose Writings of Spiritual Guidance (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), C.2, but noted by Hanna as extracted from E.14.

111. The trend holds for the entire text of “Clansing,” which features only a very few thorns, as against “th,” across ff. 56v–60v.

112. Pepys 2125, f. 60v. The verses are “The myrrour of mankind” (New IMEV, 1259).

113. Pepys 2125, f. 60v. The top 18 lines of the folio feature a back-leaning “é” that is essentially a circle with a line through it; the “é” of the bottom 14 lines of the folio is a more upright, three-stroke “é.”

114. Pepys 2125, ff. 139r–143r. As the editors of the Hull Repertorium of Middle English Prose Sermons (http://www.hull.ac.uk/middle_english_sermons/) note, “With reference to the gospel f. 139r here reads ‘as it is ywrite’ whereas the corresponding passage in the Harley manuscript (f. 176v) reads ‘as it was red.’” Dialectally, note Pepys 2125 “pene” for Harley 2398 “þan,” “whene” for “whan,” “shal” for “schal,” “us” for “ous,” “down” for “doun,” “bute” for “bot,” “thél” for “þey,” “nat” for “not,” “shadde” for “schadde.”
The transcription of the image is as follows:

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Figure 4. Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2125, f. 60v

[Transcription of the text goes here]
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yrad ryst now byfore 30w” and “þe gospel as it was red byfore 30w.” Scribe C rewrites those moments to instead point to their now-textualized origins, noting that his text will discuss “þe gospel as it is ywrit.” Scribes were aware of the historical essence of texts and books: it matters to Scribe C that the orality of the Easter Sermon in Harley 2398 becomes instead the firmly textual in Pepys 2125. Pepys 2125 serves as a crucial reminder that copying is never a transparent act. Copying carries with it all the complexity of translation. Hands can be made to look like other hands, or made to be readily distinguishable, or something else along the spectrum from duplication to complete transformation.

Both Pepys 2125 and Harley 2398 are remarkably well localized: a still-visible strip between f. 144 and f. 145 of Pepys 2125 refers to “Payneswyk” in Gloucestershire. Harley 2398 presents dialectal evidence that suggests it should be localized to Gloucestershire. Harley 2398 also has firm sixteenth-century connections with Mitcheldean, about twenty miles away from Painwick in Gloucestershire. Those twenty miles were clearly bridged at some point, when Scribe C had Harley 2398 in his hands and copied two texts from it. Yet, dialectal evidence becomes a little more troubling when considered alongside the full range of scribal transformations. Whereas identifying hands has always been something of a dark art as well as a science (recent arguments for and against attributing certain manuscripts to the Pynkhurst “school” attest to the ongoing difficulties of such work), dialect has long been

115. More fully, Harley 2398: “Cristene children þes wordes þat I haue ytake to preche of þey beþ ywritte in þe gospel 7 were yrad rys3 now byfore 30w 7 beþ þus muche to see in englysc, “ f. 176; and “I wole firste telle 30w þe gospel as it was red byfore 30w, after I wole expoune it to 30w 7 opene it to 30w. And þe þrydde tyme I wole telle 30w at þis kynges feste of heuene wordes of grete confort to terme of your lufe. . . . This is þe gospel as it was red today byfore 30w,” f. 176v. I am grateful to Emily Runde for her transcriptions of Harley 2398.

116. Compare Pepys 2125: “cristene childrene þes wordis þat ye haue ytake to preche of þey write in þe gospel of þis day 7 beþ þus myche to seye on engliss, “ f. 139v. Also, “I wul firste telle yow þe gospel as it is ywrit 7 aftir y wul expowne it to yow 7 declare it to yow and þe þridde y wul telle yow at þis kynges feste (caret, above line: of heuene) wordis of comfort þat grete,” f. 139v.

117. See Hanna, Uncollected Prose, xlvi; Catalogue of the Pepys Library, 60–61; Bremmer, Fyve Wittes, xvii; and LALME, LP 7200. Bremmer notes of Harley 2398 that a note in the codex “suggests that the manuscript did not leave the area of origin until the mid 16th century” (xvii). This can likely be pushed still later, to at least the seventeenth century and perhaps the eighteenth century. The book entered the BL by way of its presentation by William Oldisworth to Sir Robert Harley in or before 1725. Alexander Baynham was heir of the Baynham family (originally the rather more Welsh “ap Eynon”), which was continuously connected to Mitcheldean from the mid-fourteenth century. Alexander Baynham married Elizabeth Oldisworth, daughter of Arnold Oldisworth, in 1612, and Harley 2398 presumably entered the Oldisworth family at some point after this union. See J. Maclean, “The History of the Manors of Dene Magna and Abenhall and Their Lords, also Fugitive Notes on the Manors of Parva Dene, Ruardyn, and Westbury,” Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society 6 (1881): 123–209, esp. 135.
treated as a more reliable and stable indicator.\textsuperscript{118} It is broadly agreed that scribes of Middle English texts engage in \textit{litteratim} copying (reproducing the dialectal forms of their exemplar), or in some form of translative copying (transforming spellings and dialectal forms to their “own” dialect, whether conditioned by upbringing, professional training, a customer’s expectations, or some other prompt), or some mixture of \textit{litteratim} and translative copying across a single text or across an entire manuscript.\textsuperscript{119} The changes made by Scribe C in Pepys 2125 to the text of Harley 2398 suggest that dialectal and orthographic variation may be more difficult to assess on a different axis than other types of scribal alterations or interventions. Scribe C read his source texts, emulated the scripts of more than one exemplar, rewrote the contents of a sermon to update references to oral performance to reflect their newly textual origins, and slipped into and out of a number of dialects. The virtuosity of his scribal performance marks variation as the foundation of medieval manuscripts, and sameness an act of concerted intention.

All manuscripts differ, even those containing the same text. Medieval clergy were not unaware of the problems posed by variations in manuscripts of the Vulgate Bible. The development of the processes of textual scholarship extend back to Jerome, and forward to Stephen Langton and the creation of the Paris Bible.\textsuperscript{120} The legend of the writing of the Septuagint is, in its broadest form, fairly well known: seventy (or seventy-two) Jewish elders from each of the twelve tribes translated the books of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek, taking exactly seventy-two days to accomplish their task.\textsuperscript{121} Within a few centuries of the initial development of this etiological account,


\textsuperscript{119} Typically classified, according to the LALME introduction, as three types of copying: \textit{litteratim}, partial dialectal translation, and full dialectal translation into the scribe’s “own” dialect. As part of moving beyond purely philological concerns, I believe the second two cases can usefully be brought together under a single rubric, and reconceptualized as translative copying—that is, the scribe demonstrates willingness to alter the dialectal forms of his exemplar, whether carried out partially or fully. On the process of partial dialectal translation known as “working in,” see J. J. Smith, introduction to \textit{The English of Chaucer and His Contemporaries, Essays by M. L. Samuels and J. J. Smith}, ed. J. J. Smith (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen, 1986), 3.


\textsuperscript{121} See Abraham Wasserstein and David Wasserstein, \textit{The Legend of the Septuagint: From Classical Antiquity to Today} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
one prominent strand of the tradition rendered the translation a miraculous event, as Augustine reports in his *De Civitate Dei*:

It is reported that such wonderful and amazing, indeed divine, agreement was found in their words that, although they [the seventy-two translators] sat down to this task separately (for in this way did it please Ptolemy to test them), not in so much as one word with the same meaning or the same significance or in the order of the words did they differ from each other. But as though there were but one single translator, what they all translated was one single version, since of a truth there was a single spirit in all of them. And they had received such a wonderful gift of God, that the authority of those Scriptures was in this way commended not as human but, as they really were, divine.¹²²

For the text of the Bible, of course, such miraculous agreement serves to authenticate the divine nature of the book. But this miracle is very precisely predicated upon the erasure of the labor of scribes: the seventy-two identical translations, produced separately, are miraculous for their genesis. They are doubly miraculous for not bearing the changes axiomatically introduced by scribes.

The perfectly identical text of the Septuagint was presented as a miracle. The vast majority of surviving medieval English books are confronted by a quandary precisely of their own making: the human scribal labor that created medieval books ensures the ubiquity of difference. What is not circumscribed by variation as an absolute, however, is the nature or degree of the changes that scribes might introduce. Granting medieval scribes agency and intentionality, and viewing the products of their hands as something more than the variously defective copies of a forever-lost archetype or Platonic ideal, medieval codices become very different artifacts, no longer only or primarily clues to what might have come before them. Much as the trope of incompetent scribes both condemns their faulty labor as worthless and implicitly pleads for skilled scribes to correct the work of their less able brethren, so too the miracle of identical text cuts both ways. The advent of printing made real Chaucer’s speculative fantasy of a text neither miswritten nor mismetered. In the process, however, the page was no longer the primary

¹²². *De Civitate Dei*, XVIII, 42, from the translation of Wasserstein and Wasserstein, *The Legend*, 126. Note Jerome’s earlier dismissal of the miraculous component of the story of the Septuagint: “I do not know who was the first lying author to construct the seventy cells at Alexandria, in which they were separated and yet all wrote the same words . . . it is one thing to be a prophet, another to be an interpreter” (quoted in Wasserstein and Wasserstein, 124–25).
site for different kinds of authorship—for scribes who acted as editors, revisers, translators, compilers, and authors. The danger posed by scribes was only rarely their incompetence: mechanical errors and errors of grammatical inanity can always be corrected, either physically by other scribes, or mentally by readers. The true threat of scribes was their competence, not only to provide textual corrections, but precisely their ability to make the “improvements” snidely condemned by modern editors. Turning away from the great canonical poetic texts of the late fourteenth century to the historiography of medieval England makes it possible to escape some of the strictures of the moral and aesthetic foundations that have long framed editing. Reading historiographical, devotional, and romance texts in the vernaculars, it becomes exponentially more difficult to identify, let alone articulate, the differences between an average author writing average rhyming couplets in average Middle English and a scribe improving upon the rhymes of his exemplar. Indeed, it is not clear the scribes of some of these texts were working from exemplars at all.