

Looking for Scribal Play in Oxford, New College MS 314

We are not unaccustomed to considering a manuscript as at least partly playful in light of its marginal or other illustrations. Thanks to Twitter, much of the world is now familiar with the famous ‘penis tree’ that appears in the margins of Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Français 25526 (at the bottom of fol. 160r), a fourteenth-century copy of the *Roman de la rose*. These sorts of figures—along with jousting snails, mocking monkeys, and other curious, comical, and occasionally disturbing figures found in the margins of medieval manuscripts—were common enough that Umberto Eco gave them a key role in his 1980 novel *The Name of the Rose*.¹ We imagine these spaces to be opportunities for artistic creativity and play, perhaps even for daring expressions of dissent. By contrast, when considering the work of the scribes who copied the text of these manuscripts, we tend to evaluate them in relation to the much less playful criteria of accuracy or inaccuracy. The fact that a scribe’s role in manuscript production was mainly that of copyist, rather than composer, seems to leave little room for play or pleasure.

The idea of medieval scribes as mechanical, mindless, or slavish copyists has come under increasing pressure over the years. Forty years ago, Barry Windeatt made a powerful case for reading scribal variants in medieval manuscripts as evidence of scribal responses to the literary works they were copying, traces of their close engagement with these texts.² In his recent book on scribal corrections in later medieval English manuscripts, Daniel Wakelin likewise argues that ‘the scribes, and sometimes readers, of English in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries often exercised intelligence in correcting it[. T]hey contribute to the long history of critical attention to English literature.’³ But where might we look for potential evidence of scribal playfulness?

We might start by examining how scribes responded to playfulness in texts like Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, which includes a number of bawdy comic tales or *fabliaux* that feature adulterous sex and trickery. It is true that the textual variants recorded in John Manly and Edith Rickert’s *Text of the Canterbury Tales* indicate that several manuscripts of Chaucer’s work (perhaps a good dozen or so) show evidence of scribal or editorial efforts to tone down Chaucer’s bawdy humour by omitting, erasing, or altering objectionable words like *snynven* (a crude term for copulation, used on seven occasions in *The Canterbury Tales*) or by modifying *fabliaux* like the apparently incomplete *Cook’s Tale*, which is transformed by a series of spurious interpolations into a moralizing allegory in Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 686.⁴ Perhaps the most censorious scribal or editorial responses to Chaucer’s ribaldry may be found in London, British Library MS Harley 7333, described by Larry D. Benson as the product of a ‘champion prude’ or, rather, prudes.⁵ Benson clarifies that this label should really be applied more specifically to the manuscript’s ‘editors’, since the manuscript seems to have been produced by a team of scribes overseen by what Manly and Rickert describe as a ‘committee of ecclesiastics one of whose aims was the removal of objectionable features’.⁶ This copy of *The Canterbury Tales* takes pains to remove Chaucer’s rude language (e.g. the reference to ‘fartyng’ in line 3338 of *The Miller’s Tale*, and all but one instance of *snynve*), in addition to omitting the infamous scene of fornication in a pear tree in

¹ On these and other marginal figures in medieval art, see especially Michael Camille, *Image on the Edge: The Margins of Medieval Art* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

² B. A. Windeatt, ‘The Scribes as Chaucer’s Early Critics’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1 (1979), pp. 119–41.

³ Daniel Wakelin, *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft: English Manuscripts 1375-1510* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 4.

⁴ See *The Text of the Canterbury Tales: Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, ed. by John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, 8 vols (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1940), vols 5–8.

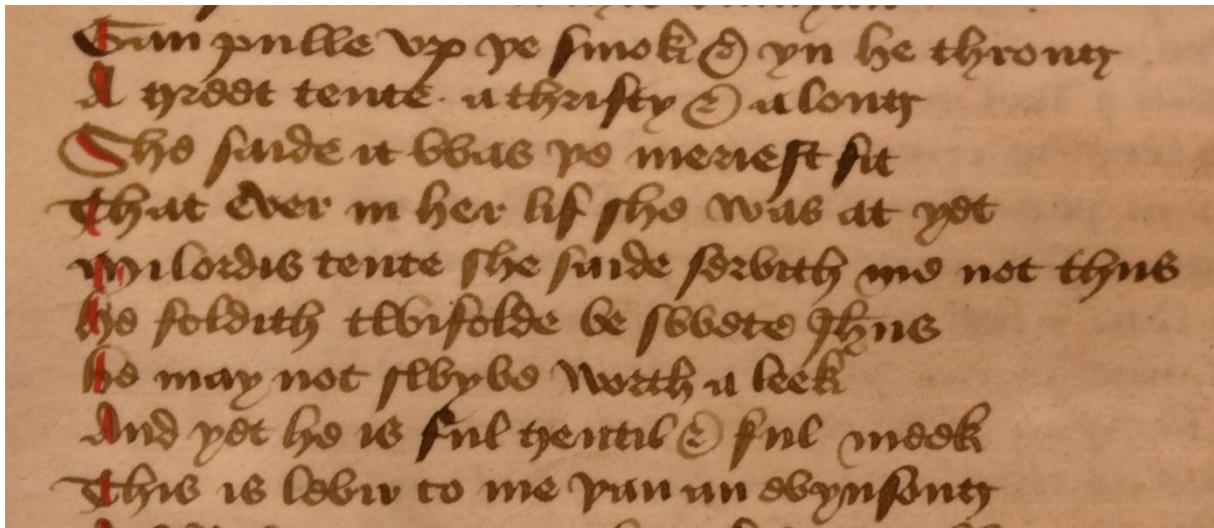
⁵ Larry D. Benson, ‘The “Queynte” Punnings of Chaucer’s Critics’, *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, Proceedings, No. 1 (1984), pp. 23–47 (p. 32).

⁶ *ibid.*, and *The Text of the Canterbury Tales*, I, p. 212.

The Merchant's Tale, as well as any excessively critical remarks concerning the church and priesthood.⁷

While outliers such as MS Bodley 686 and MS Harley 7333 give us evidence of later medieval scribal and editorial censorship of Chaucer's bawdy humour, other manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* indicate that some scribes were perfectly willing to indulge—and even indulge in—Chaucer's ribaldry. The copy of *The Canterbury Tales* preserved in Oxford, New College MS 314 (c. 1450–70) is one such manuscript. As Carissa Harris and other scholars have established, it is one of a handful of manuscripts that not only preserve, but actually go so far as to expand on Chaucer's ribald passages.⁸ On fols 95v and 96r of the manuscript, the scribe has interpolated a total of fourteen lines of original verse into *The Merchant's Tale*, elaborating on the moment when the old knight January, previously stricken blind, miraculously recovers his sight just in time to espy his young wife May cavorting with his squire Damyan in a pear tree. In the first cluster of interpolated lines, which appears after the Merchant bluntly informs his audience that Damyan 'Gan pulle vp þe smok and yn he throng' (*The Merchant's Tale*, line 2353), we are given more detail about what Damyan 'throng' into May, and how she responds:⁹

A greet tente . a thrifty and a long
 She saide it was þe meriest fit
 That ever in her lif she was at yet
 Mi lordis tente she saide servith me not thus
 He foldith twifolde be swete Jhesus
 He may not swyve worth a leek
 And yet he is ful gentil and ful meek
 This is levir to me þan an evynsong



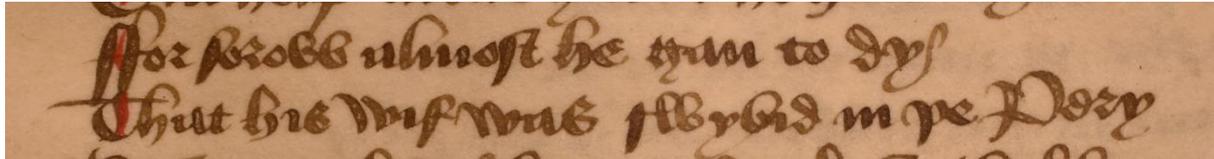
New College Library, Oxford, MS 314, f. 95v [detail]

⁷ All citations from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are drawn from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. by Larry D. Benson et al., 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), and are cited above by line number.

⁸ See Carissa M. Harris, 'Inserting "A grete tente, a thrifty, and a long": Sexual Obscenity and Scribal Innovation in Fifteenth-Century Manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*', *Essays in Medieval Studies* 27 (2011), pp. 45–60; Rosalind Field, "'Superfluous Ribaldry': Spurious Lines in the *Merchant's Tale*', *The Chaucer Review* 28(4) (1994), pp. 353–67; and A. S. G. Edwards, 'The *Merchant's Tale* and Moral Chaucer', *Modern Language Quarterly* 52 (1990), pp. 409–26.

⁹ All transcriptions that follow are my own. I have silently expanded abbreviations throughout, and where yogh appears in the manuscript it has been rendered here as 'gh'.

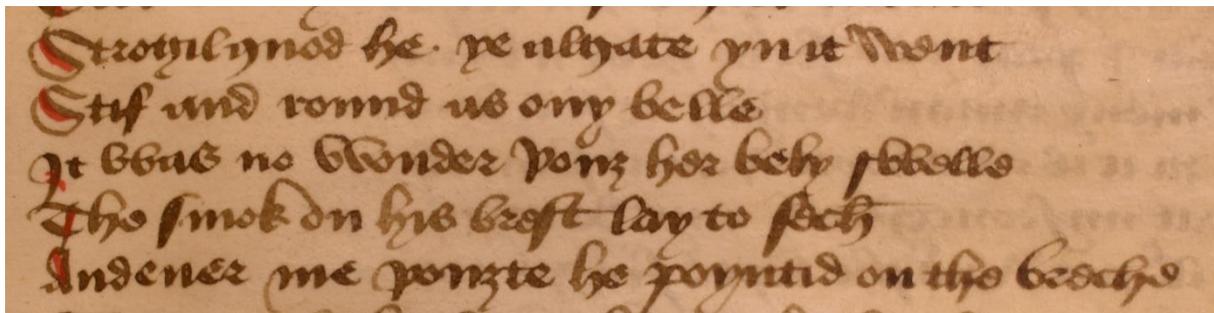
These remarkable lines offer us not only rough dimensions for Damyan’s ‘tente’, but also a very clear sense of how much May is enjoying the encounter, which she contrasts favourably with her husband’s unsatisfying sexual performance: ‘He may not swyve [screw] worth a leek’—doubtless because, as she explains, his own ‘tente’ ‘foldith’ over on itself, a vivid and off-putting image indeed. Strikingly, this passage renders May the only female character in *The Canterbury Tales* to utter the crude Middle English word *swyve*, a word that is also repeated in the second interpolated couplet: ‘For sorow almost he gan to dy / That his wif was swyvid in þe Pery’.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 314, f. 96r [detail]

In conjunction with the previous interpolation, this addition triples the number of occasions on which *swyve* and its variants occur in *The Merchant’s Tale*. The final cluster of interpolated lines elaborates on January’s declaration that, as he could see very clearly from his vantage point, ‘algate in it wente’ (line 2376):

Stif and round as ony belle
 It was no wonder þough her bely swelle
 The smok on his brest lay to seche
 And euer me þoughte he poyntid on the breche



New College Library, Oxford, MS 314, f. 96r [detail]

In case the reader missed it the first time around, this passage begins by revisiting the subject of Damyan’s impressive ‘tente’, which—it is suggested—may be as fertile as it is vigorous. The implication that May’s ‘bely’ may ‘swelle’ after this episode is likely a reminder not only of the perennial risk of begetting a child during such adulterous encounters, but also of the Galenic belief that a woman could only conceive a child if she was brought to orgasm. Although the possibility of May’s pregnancy is hinted at in line 2414 of *The Merchant’s Tale*, which states that January softly ‘stroketh’ May’s ‘wombe’ after they are reconciled, these final interpolated lines in New College MS 314 render the hint much more explicit.

These interpolations are not the only bawdy additions to MS 314, which also adds explicit verse to *The Shipman’s Tale* (fol. 202r, after line 316 of the tale) and a further instance of *swyve* to *The Wife of Bath’s Prologue* (fol. 107v, in line 767 of the prologue). They are, however, the most extensive. This, and the fact that these interpolations survive in whole or in part in three other manuscripts, suggests that they might serve as a potential starting point for reconsidering how medieval scribes might have indulged in and enjoyed the kind of ribaldry that distinguishes part

of *The Canterbury Tales*. That these interpolations belong to Chaucer is doubtful, which means that somewhere along the way a scribe in the process of copying Chaucer's text added them in. In terms of the date of its execution, Princeton University MS 100 (formerly Helmingham, copied c. 1420–30) is likely the earliest extant manuscript to contain part of these interpolated passages (ten out of fourteen lines). In his study of the manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*, Charles Owen suggested that the Helmingham editor (or 'editor-scribe', as Harris describes him) might have authored the ten spurious lines found in that copy of *The Merchant's Tale* (at fols 76r–76v), which he described as 'soft pornography of a high enough order' to catch the eye of another scribe, the 'editor' of London, British Library, MS Harley 1758 (c. 1450–60), who copied the lines into the margin of that manuscript (fol. 88r).¹⁰ In other words, although the authorship of these spurious lines is by no means certain, and though the scribes responsible for copying each of these four manuscripts may simply have been dutifully following their exemplar(s) when copying out these lines, the fact remains that they nonetheless *made the decision* to include them. In both Princeton MS 100 and New College MS 314 (and in the copy of *The Canterbury Tales* copied into the later manuscript Trinity College, Cambridge, MS R.3.15 [1480–1500], which contains all fourteen lines), the interpolations are presented within the main text column as though they were a part of Chaucer's accepted text; in MS Harley 1758, however, they are presented off to the side, and visually enhanced: the first line of each of the three interpolated passages is embellished with a brightly coloured paraph surrounded by contrasting penwork, accents that simultaneously set them slightly apart from the main body of the text and visually draw them to the reader's attention.

Chaucer's bawdier tales, and especially the rare additions that were made to them, offer us opportunities for seeing another side of scribal decision-making in action. As a potential counterbalance to considering manuscripts such as MS Bodley 686 or MS Harley 7333 as exceptionally 'prudish' copies of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, we might devote greater attention to the exceptionality of more playful manuscripts like New College MS 314, which expands upon Chaucer's ribaldry rather than censoring it.

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¹⁰ Charles A. Owen, Jr., *The Manuscripts of the Canterbury Tales* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1991), p. 58; Harris, 'Sexual Obscenity and Scribal Innovation', p. 58 n. 18.