

The Penitent's Tale; or,
New College Library's Copy of *The Works of Mr. Alexander Pope* (1717)



New College Library, Oxford, NB.91.18, frontispiece

Mary C. Flannery's perceptive article in this issue of *New College Notes*, on scribal interpolations in the *Canterbury Tales* MS 314 in New College, brings to mind for me a modern tale of interference within a more recent, related literary text in New College Library.¹

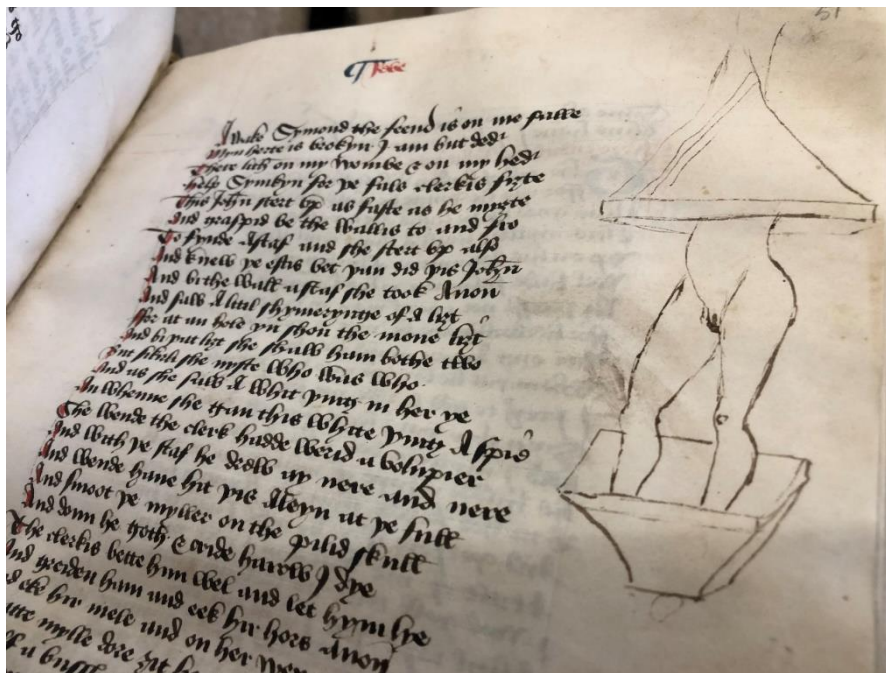
¹ Mary C. Flannery, '[Looking for Scribal Play in Oxford, New College MS 314](#)', *New College Notes* 12 (2019), no. 3.

First, to recap on our Geoffrey Chaucer manuscript: MS 314 (c. 1450–70) is written on very stiff parchment in a plain, cursive hand, with—as can be seen—some red and blue decoration. The colophon, apparently written by the scribe, reads: ‘Explicit Tractatus Galfridi Chaucer de Gestis peregrinorum versus Cantuariam’.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 314, f. 311v

The same scribe produced a copy of Thomas Hoccleve's *Regement of Princes* now held in the Bodleian.² And we think our Chaucer manuscript was most probably owned in East Anglia during the first half of the sixteenth century by Sir William Fermor (d. 1558), who was Sherriff of Norfolk and Suffolk in 1540.³ MS 314 is fascinating on account of its scribe having inserted additional obscene words and verses of his own into the text, as Carissa M. Harris has argued, to emphasise female sexuality, being spurred on as he is by Chaucer's own existing obscenities in the work.⁴ Aside from the textual additions, a different type of interjection has been made by an unknown reader of the manuscript: they have added a crude sketch into the margin of 'The Reeve's Tale', likewise focusing on female sexuality.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 314, f. 51r

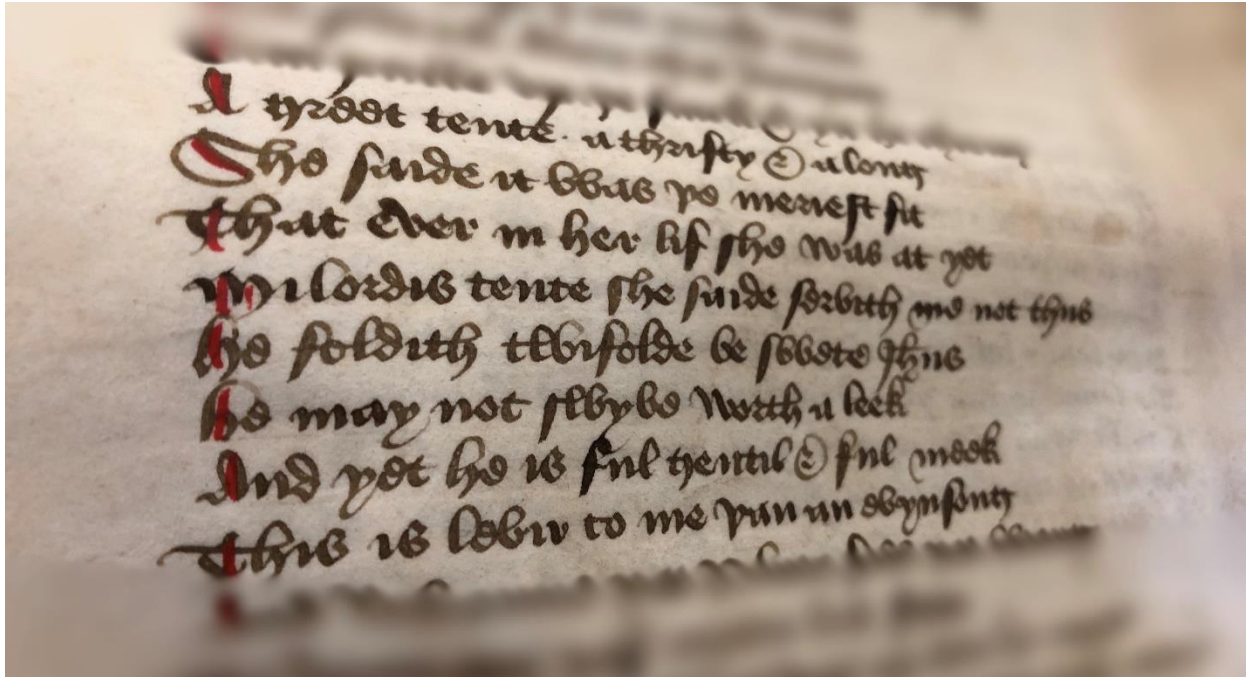
² Bodleian MS Dugdale 45; see Stephen B. Partridge, 'A Newly Identified Manuscript by the Scribe of the New College *Canterbury Tales*', *English Manuscript Studies* 6 (1997), pp. 229–36.

³ For biographical details of Sir William Fermor, see Nicola Clark, *Gender, Family, and Politics: The Howard Women, 1485–1558* (Oxford, 2018), p. 7; for Fermor's association with this manuscript, see Daniel W. Mosser, *A Digital Catalogue of the Pre-1500 Manuscripts and Incunables of the Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edn <<https://www.mossercatalogue.net/record.php?recID=Ne>> (Accessed: 23 December 2019).

⁴ 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.

Mary C. Flannery in her article concentrates on the longest non-Chaucerian textual addition to the manuscript, an additional eight lines of verse to the scene of Damyan and May's copulation in a pear-tree in 'The Merchant's Tale', which commences:

A greet tente . a thrifty and a long
She saide it was þe meriest fit
That ever in her lif she was at yet



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

Our scribe's copy contains a total of fourteen spurious lines interpolated into 'The Merchant's Tale'. As Carissa M. Harris notes, ten of these also appear in an earlier manuscript (c. 1425–1475), but New College's MS 314 is the earliest to include all fourteen additional lines.⁵

Chaucer has been much translated, notably by John Dryden, Alexander Pope, George Ogle (1704–1746), William Lipscomb (1754–1842), and William Wordsworth. Alexander Pope composed a translation of Chaucer's 'Merchant's Tale', most likely in 1704–5, and it was published on 2 May 1709 as 'January and May'—a poem of some 820 lines, reduced from the 1,173 lines that make up Chaucer's tale. In all likelihood, Pope worked at his translation using his copy of Thomas Speght's 1598 edition of *The Workes of our Antient and Learned English Poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, newly Printed*, where spurious lines also appear in the printed Chaucer.⁶

Now, to our related literary text: New College Library holds a fine edition of 1717 of Alexander Pope's works, and it nicely illustrates a modern tale of redemption.⁷ A reader in our library purloined c. 1980 this copy's splendid, engraved frontispiece portrait by George Vertue (1684–1756) of the poet, only to return the frontispiece anonymously on 18 October 2010—along with a note in which they confessed, 'I'm thoroughly ashamed of myself, and I return it with apologies'. Our copy is in a binding of partly mottled calf over pasteboard whose upper board

⁵ Princeton University Library, MS 100 (this manuscript has been variously dated); see Harris, 'Inserting', p. 48.

⁶ *The Workes of our Antient and Learned English Poet, Geoffrey Chaucer, newly Printed* (London: Printed by Adam Islip, at the charges of Thomas Wight. Anno 1598), ff. 32r–32v.

⁷ *The Works of Mr. Alexander Pope* (London: Printed by W. Bowyer, for Bernard Lintot between the Temple-Gates. 1717), New College Library, Oxford, NB.91.18.

fore-edge reveals evidence of chaining (to prevent theft!)—and it now includes the anonymous note by the penitent pilferer too, as well as the restored frontispiece once more.

The volume includes Pope's verse reworking, 'January and May; or, The Merchant's Tale, from Chaucer', written when the Catholic poet was but a teenager. It is remarkable to read Pope's version of the pear-tree scene from 'The Merchant's Tale' here in print which, on page 224, derives (pre-Speght) from those spurious lines included by none other than the scribe who copied out (and made more sexually explicit) the manuscript of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* now held in New College Library as MS 314:

What feats the Lady in the tree might do,
I pass, as gambols never known to you;
But sure it was a merrier fit, she swore,
Than in her life she ever felt before.⁸

Christopher Skelton-Foord
Librarian
New College, Oxford

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 224.