When scribes won't write: gaps in Middle English books

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"Ther lakketh no thyng to thyne <gap> eyen"

Geoffrey Spirleng, who copied *The Canterbury Tales* with his son in Norfolk in the 1470s, had a special concern with finishing. As he completed his copy, he wrote an elaborate colophon in a decorative handwriting modelled on textura, with a prayer ending "amen" and a proud description of himself and his son. Sadly he had stopped too soon. Because of problems in his exemplars, he had duplicated two tales and omitted two entirely. He noticed this omission and so crossed out his colophon with a note explaining that "the book of Cant*er*bury is nat yet ended" and added the missing tales after.[1] The wording is telling. A scribe should not stop when the text "is nat yet ended"; a scribe should copy all of the text and only stop when it does. That makes it odd, then, that Spirleng does sometimes stop writing not at the end, nor even at the joins between Chaucer's tales which gave many scribes pause, but in the middle of the text. He stops writing in the middle of lines before carrying on, leaving a gap or blank space: "Ther lakketh no thyng to thyne <gap> eyen," he writes, for instance. The missing word is "outter." He leaves a gap like this thirty-six times for passages shorter than a line. Four other times he leaves a gap for a whole line.[2] Spirleng is not alone among the copyists of English in leaving these little gaps of a line or less; lots do it. These are not, on inspection, erasures

[1] Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunter 197 (U.1.1) [hereafter Gl], f.102v, f.115v. Richard Beadle, "Geoffrey Spirleng (*c*. 1426–*c*. 1494): a scribe of the *Canterbury Tales* in his time," in *Of the Making of Books: Medieval Manuscripts, their Scribes and Readers: Essays presented to M.B. Parkes*, ed. P.R. Robinson and Rivkah Zim (Aldershot: Scolar, 1997), 116–46, describes Spirleng's work in detail, with further comment in Daniel Wakelin, *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft: English Manuscripts 1375–1510* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 46, 49, 61–62, 109, 230–31. For very helpful feedback, I would like to thank the anonymous readers for *SAC* and those present at a MEMORI seminar in Cardiff in January 2013 where I first discussed this topic.

[2] Citing Gl, f.59r (*Tales*, VIII.498). All line-references to *Tales* refer to *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987). Some gaps were filled by an eighteenth-century antiquary.

of words; the words were simply not written in the first place. What is going on when scribes won't write?

There are (as emerges below) two main causes for these gaps. The first sort of gap occurs when a scribe thinks that there is text missing from his exemplar and so leaves a space in order to slot in what's missing later. As it happens, one of Spirleng's exemplars survives, so we can see that there was one occasion when he left a whole line blank where his exemplar had skipped a line; he worked out that something was lost and so in his copy left room to supply it later.[3] There is a dislike of incompleteness here like that which made him retrieve two omitted tales after he had finished. The second sort of gap, though, occurs when a scribe does find the text in his exemplar but does not believe it is right or that he has read it rightly and so leaves a gap to solve the puzzle later. For instance, in nineteen other gaps for which Spirleng's exemplar survives, the exemplar does have the word required but Spirleng leaves space for it. This second sort of gap is the main focus of this article. For leaving a gap deliberately seems odd, given his concern for completeness elsewhere. What were he and other scribes thinking when they refused to write the words they saw in their exemplars?

Given the effort needed to let the pen jump forward, not writing thus looks like a conscious choice. As such, the gaps raise a larger question about how far scribes exercised agency in their work, and about the forms that agency might take in concentration, attention, precision, improvisation, intellection, invention. Did scribes think as they put pen to paper and, if so, what did they think about, how did they think? Matthew Fisher stresses that "writing is always intended. Whether that writing is composition or copying, medieval manuscripts did not come into being by accident."[4]

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[3] Gl, f.106v (*Tales*, IV.89), following Cambridge, University Library [hereafter CUL], MS Mm.2.5, f.146v. Gl, f.75v (VII.3312), f.78v (VII.184), and f.85r (VI.1408) also leaves three gaps for a missing line, in a part of the MS for which the exemplar does not survive, and where no extant MS lacks these lines, according John M. Manly, Edith Rickert and others, ed., *The Text of the Canterbury Tales, Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, 8 vols (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940) [hereafter M-R], in their collations for B.1374, B.4502 and F.1408.

[4] Matthew Fisher, *Scribal Authorship and the Writing of History in Medieval England* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2012), 13, and similarly 15.

Yet the intention in copying can be invisible, especially when scribes do copy what is in front of them, in what Fisher calls "replicative" copying or Richard Beadle calls "*verbatim* copying."[5] Such copying entails following the exemplar from the beginning through to the end, in every word; it involves reproducing other people's words and not one's own; so the evidence for what the copyist thinks is sparse and implicit. In the smooth surface of the accurate text, it is only wrinkles which reveal the scribe's presence – moments where he adds paratexts, such as annotations or new titles, or where he disrupts the text by revision, when he pursues what has been called "professional" or "active reading".[6] At these points where scribes change what they copy, we can see them thinking. Among the points which reveal the scribes deliberating over their work are those where they refuse to write and leave a blank space. The gaps offer a fleeting glimpse of the effort and intelligence behind the seemingly automatic process of copying smoothly from beginning to end. As often in palaeography it is these interruptions of the scribes' normal procedure which can tell us how that normality was maintained. As Ralph Hanna puts it, the scribe's "customary modes of procedure" become "second nature" to us too, so we need to be "arhythmically disconcerted:" "it is the disruptions to expected rhythms that may introduce the researcher to particularly interesting topics."[7] The explanation for such disorder might turn out to be simple and everyday; but even everyday events can reveal the unarticulated assumptions and experiences of people in the past.

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[5] Fisher, *Scribal Authorship*, 37-38; Richard Beadle, "Some Measures of Scribal Accuracy in Late Medieval English Manuscripts," forthcoming in *Probable Truth: Editing Texts from Medieval Britain*, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Anne Hudson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 223-39 (238). Daniel Wakelin, "Writing the Words," in *The Production of Books in England 1350-1500*, ed. Alexandra Gillespie and Daniel Wakelin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 34-58 (50-55), and *Scribal Correction*, 45-53, also argues that such *verbatim* replication is common. All commentators distinguish this *verbatim* reproduction of substantives from the much rarer practice of *literatim* copying, which reproduces the exemplar letter-by-letter in every detail of spelling.

[6] For these models, see Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Maidie Hilmo and Linda Olson, *Opening Up Middle English Manuscripts: Literary and Visual Approaches* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012), 207-44, and B.A. Windeatt, "The Scribes as Chaucer's Early Critics," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1 (1979): 119-41 (122).

[7] Ralph Hanna, *Introducing Medieval English Book History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 60-61.

Such close reading of scribal activity, to evaluate scribal thinking, offers a useful supplement to our knowledge of the external conditions of scribes' work: who they are, where they worked, where they developed their orthography. Recent research has been answering those crucial biographical questions with increasing precision.[8] Alongside those enquiries about the context of writing, we might in addition interpret and evaluate the internal dimensions of scribes' activity. We could ask about such practical matters as how fast they wrote; how much they wrote in one stint; how accurate they were; how they emended errors; how they chose a script. We could also ask what they *thought* they were doing, why they did things and what it felt like to do them.

In this particular case, while leaving a gap might seem a failure of thought – not solving a puzzle, not understanding something – instead it suggests carefulness in copying. That might be counterintuitive: such gaps might seem to the editor inept disruptions of textual transmission or to the critic of variance delightful signs of scribal freedom from the tyranny of replication. It has been suggested that the gaps in one manuscript are signs of the scribe's "active revision" and his "freedom to intervene in the creation of the text."[9] But conversely (this article will suggest) the intention in not writing is *not* to disrupt the text nor to rewrite it but to preserve it better without rewriting. That's because the scribes imagine the text as something which exists outside the material realities of the exemplars they copy and their ability and work as copyists. While we in our research often focus on the material text – on the necessary mediation of the text by the book – in the white space of the gap the scribes imagine something like an immaterial text, as though seeking to transcend the imperfections of book production. As such, they also suggest a

[8] Pre-eminently for the fifteenth century by Linne R. Mooney and Estelle Stubbs, *Scribes and the City: London Guildhall Clerks and the Dissemination of Middle English Literature, 1375-1425* (York: York Medieval Press, 2013), and by the website they have created with Simon Horobin, *Late Medieval English Scribes*, http://www.medievalscribes.com, ISBN 978-0-9557876-6-9.

[9] Patricia R. Bart, "Intellect, Influence and Evidence: The Elusive Allure of the Ht Scribe," in *Yee? Baw for Bokes: Essays on Medieval Manuscripts and Poetics in Honor of Hoyt. N. Duggan*, ed. Michael A. Calabrese and Stephen H.A. Shepherd (Los Angeles, CA: Marymount Institute Press, 2013), 219-43 (233, 235).

concern with preserving the text with as little variation, caused by the exemplar or by the copyist, as possible. These inaccuracies suggest a commitment to accurate copying, and an interest in the text as it might exist in a version other than that witnessed in the material forms the scribe possessed.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and in the vernacular, with a seeming lack of rules or orderly systems for textual dissemination, such an interest in the non-varying text is not to be taken for granted. One thing we know about scribes of English at this period is that they change things; the texts of English works tend to vary from one manuscript to the next, in small details and large points of content. Most studies of scribal practice have focused on their variation, which has long been the subject of editorial untangling and more recently been subjected to interpretative analysis.[10] The most powerful accounts of scribal practice stress that it was one of "essential variance:" the text in the hands of scribes was "manipulated, always open and as good as unfinished."[11] Indeed, it has been well observed that we now rather "take for granted the *mouvance* of medieval literary culture and the variance of medieval textual culture."[12] It is true that many scribes at many times either did not mind varying or even liked to vary what they copied. This is the crucial context within which we must consider the procedure of leaving gaps – and against which, in the end, the motive for leaving gaps seems striking. But an interpretation of the gaps can at least challenge our assumption or orthodoxy that scribes varied all the time and willingly; the gaps suggest that they also – not *instead* or *only*, just *also* – sometimes intended not to vary.

Introducing gaps

[10] Derek Pearsall, "Variants vs. Variance," in *Probable Truth: Editing Texts from Medieval Britain*, ed. Vincent Gillespie and Anne Hudson (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 197-205 (197-201), summarizes this scholarly tradition.

[11] Bernard Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology*, trans. Betsy Wing (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1999), 21, 33-34; Bernard Cerquiglini, *Éloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris: Seuils, 1989), 42.

[12] Siân Echard and Stephen Partridge, "Introduction: Varieties of Editing: History, Theory, and Technology," in *The Book Unbound: Editing and Reading Medieval Manuscripts and Texts*, ed. Siân Echard and Stephen Partridge (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), xi-xxi (xii).

That claim cannot, of course, be made for the intentions of all scribes across the centuries. First, the focus here is solely on the copying of English literary and learned works – poetry, history, religion, science – from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth centuries. More practical or documentary genres might differ, the copying of Latin and French might differ, and earlier processes of copying might do so too. Even within this narrow set of manuscripts, the small phenomena of gaps cannot by themselves satisfactorily explain which scribes sought to prevent variance and which did not; a full study of their copying and exemplars would be needed for that. Indeed, it is important to note that the decision to introduce gaps is not taken often: the phenomenon, though fascinating, is not common. Yet the aim here is not to compile a comprehensive history of scribes' gaps, or of other aspects of their practice, but to interpret such gaps as do occur for what they suggest about their behaviour and intentions.

It is informative, though, to get some impression of how common these gaps are, through a rough survey. As a fair sample of Middle English books, I began by studying all the fifty-two once separate Middle English manuscript books in the Huntington Library. Studying one library's holdings in full gives an impression of the frequency of a phenomenon without starting by selecting juicy oddities.[13] Of the fifty-two manuscripts in the Huntington Library, only four contained spaces left for a whole line or a more. The four were all Chaucer's or Chaucerian rhyming verse.[14] Rhyme is important for revealing where a line or more has gone astray; and perhaps the ambitions of post-Chaucerian poems won them this sort of careful attention. Then as well as these larger gaps, twelve of the fifty-two books had smaller gaps for just a word or few. Most scribes

[13] Wakelin, *Scribal Correction*, 11-15, discusses the advantages and disadvantages of such a survey.

[14] San Marino, CA, Henry E. Huntington Library [hereafter HEHL], MS Ellesmere 26.A.13, f.28v (*Regiment* 603-9); MS HM 114 (as noted in n.33 below); MS HM 140, f.39r (Lydgate, *Albon*, III.752); HEHL, MS HM 268, f.96v (Lydgate, *Fall*, IV.2483-85), f.128v (VI.1320), f.144v (VII.561). 6 of the 52 once separate books are now bound into pairs, making 49 shelfmarks in total; the distinction follows the catalogue by C.W. Dutschke, *Guide to medieval and Renaissance manuscripts in the Huntington Library*, 2 vols. (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1989), available online at http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/hehweb/toc.html.

leave only one or two such gaps; and even the scribes who leave the most among the Huntington Library's books only leave half a dozen or so. This phenomenon is not, then, common in any one book nor across this whole collection. Yet it is not limited to only one kind of book: in the Huntington Library alone, these little gaps occur in two copies of the prose *Brut*, an herbal, a treatise on urine, two books of religious prose.[15] In verse they occur in a mystery cycle, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, verse homilies, the famous so-called Ellesmere Chaucer, and one book containing both Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and Langland's *Piers Plowman*.[16] They range from the grim to the glorious in genre of text and quality of manuscript production.

We might also wonder about the frequency of these gaps in a less random sample of books of intrinsic interest. Happily, one group of editors of Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* has given some measure – not an accurate one but a first impression – of the frequency of gaps in their textual apparatus. John M. Manly and Edith Rickert's collations of manuscripts in volumes V to VIII of *The Text of the Canterbury Tales* often record where the scribes leave a "space," as they call it. They record "space" 156 times. A

[15] HEHL, MS HM 58, f.14r (*Agnus Castus*, 175.18), f.14v (*Agnus Castus*, 176.3), and later filled in a paler ink f.10v (*Agnus Castus*, 171.28, "yeolo"), f.14r (*Agnus Castus*, 175.14, "wort"); MS HM 136, f.5v (*Brut*, 11:27), f.15v (*Brut*, 37:12), f.30r (*Brut*, 72:11), f.156r-v (*Brut*, 391:14); MS HM 127, f.46v (Rolle, *Form of Living*, 666); MS HM 149, f.95v (Love, *Mirror of the Blessed Life*, 198.14); MS HM 505, f.72r, later filled (Daniel, *The Dome of Urynes*, "moyst"); MS HM 39872, f.9v (Jacques le Grand, *Le Livre des Bonnes Meurs*, I.iii). Debatable are gaps on HM 113, f.1v (*Brut*, 5.5, 5.6 and 5.8): two gaps are for proper nouns ("troy," "eneas" and "greek") and the gaps only occur on the first page, so they might be part of an abandoned plan to write these words in rubric.

[16] HEHL, MS HM 1, f.67v (*Towneley Plays*, 20.77), f.81v, later filled (*Towneley Plays*, 22.345-46); MS HM 128, f.206v, later filled (*Siege of Jerusalem*, 173-76; MS HM 129, f.7v, later filled (*Northern Homily Cycle*, "oure way"), f.26v, later filled (*Northern Homily Cycle*, "esk"); MS Ellesmere 26.C.9, all later filled by different hands, on f.37r (*Tales*, I.3461, "Thomas"), f.74v (III.1116, "gentil man"), f.143r (VI.951, "fond"), f.188r (VIII.220, "of lilie"). Jordi Sánchez-Martí, "Pynkhurst's 'Necglygence and Rape' Reassessed," *English Studies* 92 (2011): 360-374 (367-68), spots the second of these four filled gaps in the so-called Ellesmere Chaucer; his suggestion that it is the work of the scribe of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* in London, British Library [hereafter BL], MS Cotton Nero A.x is unconvincing. Gaps in the related Hengwrt Chaucer, all later filled, are listed by A.I. Doyle and M.B. Parkes, "Palaeographical Introduction," in Paul G. Ruggiers, ed., *The Canterbury Tales: A Facsimile and Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript with Variants from the Ellesmere Manuscript* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), xix-xlix (lxvi). See also HM 114, in n.33 below.

glance at many manuscripts reveals that Manly and Rickert do not have a full record of gaps in manuscripts of *The Tales*; gaps are easy to miss and the collation by Manly and Rickert was not designed to record them especially.[17] In particular, Manly and Rickert often miss gaps which fall at the end of lines of verse, which they simply list as a word being omitted ("om.") without signalling that space is left for it. At least fourteen more such gaps at the ends of lines could be added to their tally.[18] Nonetheless, Manly and Rickert's collations are a useful gauge, according to the methods of one group of scholars, of the frequency of gaps, or "space," the proportions of the different sorts of gap, and the places where they occur. The gaps fall into the two main sorts (indicated above): those where the exemplar was almost certainly lacking, and those where the exemplar might have been lacking or where it might have had the word but the scribe nonetheless chose not to write. Of the gaps Manly and Rickert record, fifty-nine are whole lines of verse left blank; also, two manuscripts share a gap in The Tale of Melibee as long as a line of prose and five share a gap of a whole stanza in The Monk's Tale.[19] That suggests a possible proportion of about four tenths (65 of 156, or 42 %) emerging where scribes spotted large passages missing from the exemplar. The remainder, just over half, are gaps of one word or just a few, shorter than a line. Either they could be prompted by smaller omissions in the exemplar or they could

[17] A.S.G. Edwards, "Manly-Rickert and the Failure of Method," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 32 (2010): 337-344 (342), notes problems in the accuracy and inclusiveness of M-R's corpus of variants.

[18] *E.g.* they occur 3 times in Holkham Hall, MS 667, f.53r (*Tales*, III.520), f.54r (III.704), f.68r (IV.1686, not even "om."); and 11 times in Oxford, Bodleian Library [hereafter BodL], MS Arch. Selden B.14 [hereafter Se], f.9r (I.359), f.50r (I.3316, not even "om.," and I.3336), f.109v (III.1937, III.1938, III.1941), f.135r (V.232), f.200r (VII.2345/B.3535), f.248r (VI.890), f.259r (VI.1387), f.259v (VI.1437). This is not only a problem of Manly and Rickert's terminology. At the end of lines of verse, it is possible that the scribe did not deliberately leave a gap but simply skipped a word unwittingly; however, while the turn at the line-end from line to the next might another interrupt his flow, it might also demand his attention. Also, the rhyme seems often to have acted as a check on the scribes' accuracy in other respects (as Wakelin, *Scribal Correction*, 194, 229-30, 253-55, 267, 273, argues), for instance by revealing where something is missing, which makes it less likely that scribes would omit rhymes unwittingly. M-R also miss gaps in other positions: *e.g.* CUL, MS Gg.4.27, f.375r (also foliated "353"), for *Tales*, VIII.158, left at the end of the stanza after VIII.161, which M-R describe (their G.158) simply as "Out" or missing.

[19] M-R's B.2967 in sigla Hg, Ht (*Tales*, VII.1777) and B.3197-3204 in Cp, Hg, MC and Sl^2 (VII.2007-14).

be prompted by the second cause for gaps: by some reluctance to copy through incomprehension or doubt. Given the possibility of either cause for even these small gaps, it might be only a minority of gaps which reflect a decision to leave something out when it had been present in the exemplar. And in proportion to the length of *The Canterbury Tales* and the numerousness of the manuscripts, gaps where scribes decided not to copy are not common. But that does not make them uninteresting; indeed, it might make them more curious. Regardless of its frequency relative to other things, this phenomenon is interesting in itself and for what it reveals about the normal scribal practices it disrupts.

Anyway, while gaps are not present in a majority of books in English from this period, they are not limited in their occurrence to just a few quirky books or to one circumscribed milieu or genre. It is difficult to link the tendency to leave gaps with any one group of scribes. There are some likenesses among a few of the people who leave gaps (described below). For instance, Richard Osbarn is one of the London-based bureaucrats of the early fifteenth century who propagated copies of Ricardian verse; Geoffrey Spirleng is also a bureaucrat by training; yet that is not a tight comparison: Spirleng copies his Chaucer half a century later and in Norfolk, within very different networks. And the other gaps in the Huntington Library's manuscripts occur in diverse kinds of works, such as medical texts copied roughly perhaps for the scribe's own use to luxurious manuscripts of Lydgate's verse illuminated for a wealthy purchaser. Even the various copies of *The Canterbury Tales* vary in quality of production and in script, from hurried anglicana and poor parchment to calligraphic bastard secretary and elegant decorations. So it is unwise to homogenize the external contexts of such men's work; instead, the gaps tell us something about the internal dynamics of copying which many scribes shared.

Other kinds of omission and repair

It is also important to distinguish these two sorts of gaps – for text which the exemplar lacked or for text which the scribe could not copy – from similar-looking but different phenomena. As well as

leaving gaps on the page, scribes sometimes left out passages of the text, without any space for it, when they chose to excerpt, abridge or abandon works. This excision of text is a different phenomenon from the insertion of blank space. Sometimes scribes omit passages for brevity or to suit new purposes. For instance, one copyist of Ezechiel and the Minor Prophets in the Early Version of the Wycliffite Bible excerpts and abridges them and marks the places where he skips sections by trailing off with "*et ce*tera."[20] There are also instances of what looks like the hostile repudiation of the text. One scribe of a chronicle stops when he reaches the politically sensitive recent decades of the fifteenth century and notes "I dar write no Forther."[21] A scribe of *The Canterbury Tales* stops copying The Squire's Tale after a few lines because he, or perhaps his patron, judges it absurd: "Ista fabula est valde absurda in terminis et ideo ad presens pretermittatur nec vlterius de ea p*roceda*t*ur*" ("This tale is very absurd at the end and so for now let it be laid aside and not continued further").[22] Some people, then, did stop writing in acts of wilful variance.

Yet usually when scribes abridge or truncate texts, they conceal it; they neither comment nor leave a blank space. Such interruptions and abandonments, then, differ from the leaving of visible gaps. If the cause for the omission were censorship or bowdlerization, a gap or comment showing that something had been cut would draw unwanted, teasing attention to it.[23] If the abbreviation were designed to save materials, leaving a blank space would defeat that purpose, as there would now be paper or parchment wasted.[24] And if the goal of omission were to compose a new, shorter work, then a blank space could distract readers and invite invidious comparisons with the longer text which was the source. Abridgements, then, are

[20] Manchester, John Rylands Library [hereafter JRL], MS Eng. 89, *passim*, *e.g.* f.2v, col. 1, lines 10 and 14.

[21] Champaign-Urbana, IL, University of Illinois, MS 82, f.218v.

[22] Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS fonds anglais 39, f.57r (*Tales*, VI.28). See similarly f.73v, cutting short The Monk's Tale (VII.2022).

[23] George Kane, ed., *Piers Plowman: The A Version: Will's Visions of Piers Plowman and Do-Well*, rev. edn (1960; London: Athlone, 1988), 137-38, articulates the general tendency.

[24] When the purpose of abridgement was to save time, too, then leaving space might defeat the purpose: it might require ever so slightly more pause for thought and mental effort than just continuing writing adjacent.

often invisible, and thus differ in appearance from the decisions of scribes to leave gaps.

Indeed, gaps might suggest that the text were incomplete, and there is evidence that scribes and readers did not like the impression that they had incomplete or interrupted texts. When scribes of English comment explicitly on their text– that is, when they make a meta-discursive comment about it, rather than copying or changing it, which is merely an implicit comment – the most common thing they say, with dismay, is that something is lacking. They frequently note that something *caret* or *deficit* or in English *lacketh*, *faileth* or *wanteth*.[25] Just occasionally they say a little more: for instance, in a colophon which is often quoted, another scribe of the prose *Brut* chronicle worries that his copy has stopped too soon: "Here is no more [. . .] and þat is because we wanted þe trewe copy þ*er* of."[26] Similar are some comments by incomplete tales in a few copies of *The Canterbury Tales*. While one scribe cut short The Squire's Tale (as noted above), another wrote nervously by the interrupted fiction "Squyers tale for Chawser made no more."[27] That is, he stresses that this is Chaucer's incompletion, and not his own.

Moreover, as is well known, scribes often tried to rectify omissions. They incorporated spurious bits into *The Canterbury Tales*, whether recognizing and seeking to conceal incompleteness or thinking they had found a more complete a copy.[28] Similarly, people conflated the versions of Langland's *Piers Plowman* in order not to

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[25] *E.g.* among a few MSS of *The Canterbury Tales*, CUL, MS Dd.4.24, f.204r (*Tales*, VIII.711); BL, MS Harley 1758, f.167v thrice (VII.800, VII.814, VII.824), f.168r (VII.888); BL, MS Harley 7335, f.99r (VIII.553); BL, MS Royal 18.C.ii, f.107v (III.188-194); BL, MS Sloane 1686, f.104v (II.1055) , f.196r (V.880); Philadelphia, Rosenbach Museum and Library, MS 1084/1, f.7v (*Gamelyn*, 281-83). On this phenomenon, see Wakelin, *Scribal Correction*, 258-61.

[26] BL, MS Egerton 650, f.111r, discussed by Kathleen L. Scott, "Limning and book-producing terms and signs *in situ* in late-medieval English manuscripts: a first listing," in *New Science out of Old Books: Studies in Manuscripts and Early Printed Books in Honour of A. I. Doyle*, ed. Richard Beadle and A. J. Piper (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995), 142-88 (147-48).

[27] Princeton, University Library, MS 100, f.60v. And on The Cook's Tale, see Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 392, f.57v, and BL, MS Harley 7333, f.60r.

[28] Described by Stephen Partridge, "Minding the Gaps: Interpreting the Manuscript Evidence of the *Cook's Tale* and the *Squire's Tale*," in *The English Medieval Book: Studies in Memory of Jeremy Griffiths*, ed. A.S.G. Edwards, Vincent Gillespie and Ralph Hanna III (London: British Library, 2000), 51-85, and Simon Horobin, "Compiling the *Canterbury Tales* in Fifteenth-Century Manuscripts," *Chaucer Review* 47 (2013): 372-89 (384, 389).

leave anything out.[29] On a local level, when they found single lines missing they were not averse to devising a new line to remedy the omission. For instance, one scribe of *The Canterbury Tales* leaves a gap for a missing line, but then later in a different ink adds into the space something spurious:

> The Iuge onswerd of this in his absence
> ⌐This to graunt were grete offence¬

Such additions, if measured against what modern editors think is authorial, are wrong; but they are not wildly wrong. This scribe rightly spots that he needs a rhyme and his guess of what the line will say is good: here the judge refuses to judge until the accused is brought forward.[30] Although there is a spurious invention here, the impetus seems to be to avoid the appearance – perhaps the patron's accusation – that they have not written the whole text.

Elsewhere, then, sometimes scribes rewrite the text deliberately, by omitting passages with no space or intent to reinstate them; at other times they conceal omissions deliberately, by supplying spurious text, or protest about them nervously. Given this dislike of incompleteness, and the willingness to remark upon gaps or to invent something to fill them, the decision to create or preserve gaps in one's copy seems more puzzling.

Two types of gap: missing text or mystifying text?

It is possible to imagine (as was noted) two broad motives for doing so. The first sort of gap left for whole lines or more is simpler to explain than the second. Like the notes that something *deficit*, gaps are usually left for whole lines because the scribe of an exemplar had omitted something and a copyist spotted that and left room to restore it. For such a long gap, spotting an omission seems the likelier cause; it would be unlucky for a scribe not to understand

[29] Among many accounts, see Ralph Hanna III, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and Their Texts* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 204-13; John M. Bowers, "Two Professional Readers of Chaucer and Langland: Scribe D and the HM 114 Scribe," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 26 (2004): 113-46 (140); Lawrence Warner, *The Lost History of* Piers Plowman*: The Earliest Transmission of Langland's Work* (Philadelphia, PA: U of Pennsylvania P, 2011), xv, 15, 20.

[30] BL, MS Add. 25718, f.50v (*Tales*, VI.171-72). *The Riverside Chaucer* has this as "The juge answerde, 'Of this, in his absence | I may nat yeve diffynytyf sentence.'"

his exemplar for as long a stretch as this. The problem with the exemplars emerges, for instance, in the manuscripts of John Hardyng's verse chronicle, where such gaps often recur from copy to copy, as A.S.G. Edwards has noted. Scribes recognize the shortfall and invent lines to patch it up or (as considered here) leave a gap.[31] Sometimes the scribes of surviving copies spot omissions for themselves; sometimes they follow exemplars in which somebody had already realized and marked it in another way, for instance by writing *caret*. For example, in the so-called Devonshire Chaucer the scribe leaves a line blank where his exemplar merely signalled the jump in the text with little crosses in boxes in the margin.[32] But whoever first spots the lacuna, how do they do so? Because these long gaps tend to occur for a line or more of verse, as in the books of the Huntington Library (noted above), it seems to be the rhyme-scheme or stanzaic pattern of verse which reveals the jump in the text. Tellingly, people often leave these gaps for whole lines too late, only at the end of a couplet or stanza: they do so at this point, because it is only when a couplet or stanza ends that one can see whether it has its full complement of rhymes, and so of lines. It is the incompleteness of the rhyme-scheme which reveals that the exemplar is lacking.

Some corroboration that lines were missing in an exemplar comes from the work of a scribe who copies the same work twice: Richard Osbarn, a scribe of the Guildhall, part of the bureaucracy of the City of London, who copied literary manuscripts on the side, as a mixture of freelance extra earning and fanatical hobby. Among other things, he wrote all of one copy of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* and contributed to a second, collaborative copy. In his single-handed copy, he did not leave a gap the first four times a

[31] A.S.G. Edwards, "The Manuscripts and Texts of the Second Version of John Hardyng's *Chronicle*," in *England in the Fifteenth Century: Proceedings of the 1986 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Daniel Williams (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1987), 75-84 (79-82).

[32] Tokyo, Takamiya, MS 24, f.125v (*Tales*, IV.2020); BL, MS Egerton 2726, f.133v. For another gap, see Tokyo, Takamiya collection, MS 24, f.58v (II.328-29).

line was missing but he did for the later five times.[33] When he copied part of the poem in the other, collaborative copy, he again left gaps for the later omissions and but also for some of the earlier ones now, and he marked one of the earlier ones with the note "caret" ("it is lacking").[34] The fact that many of the lines are missing in both copies suggests that they were missing in some exemplar he had to hand; it also looks as though the omissions were not always marked in his exemplar, for with two of them he notices and leaves a gap or *caret* in one copy and not another. That suggests that he spotted the problem and introduced the gaps for himself, rather than just blithely reproducing gaps he found in an exemplar, at least in the earlier omissions. Moreover, the fact that this was a problem with an exemplar and not with the scribe's comprehension is suggested by the fact that some of these gaps later got filled. In his solo copy, Osbarn filled all the five gaps for whole lines and also added in the margins the four lines for which he had not left gaps. In his collaborative copy, another scribe, scribe C of that copy, who seemingly checked the others' work, filled some of Osbarn's gaps with the missing lines.[35] It looks as though Osbarn and his colleague checked another source in order to do so,[36] so there might seem little more to say: the problem lay with the exemplars. But it is worth noting that the solution lay not only with finding better exemplars but with the scribes' intelligence as well. Osbarn had to realize that gaps would be useful when he found a fuller text, and sometimes he did not work it out. Similarly, two passages with missing lines for which Osbarn had left gaps in his solo copy

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[33] HEHL, MS HM 114, not leaving a gap on f.209v (*Troilus*, II.26, nearly identical), f.212v (II.250, totally different from the modern editor's text), f.216v (II.509), f.217r (II.537) but leaving one on f.225r (II.1083), f.239v (III.292), f.255v (III.1375), f.274v (IV.790), f.310r (V.1377). All are identical to the modern edited text, except where marked. There are also smaller gaps left and later filled on f.210r (II.55), f.210r (II.64, on which see n.49 below), f.258v (III.1574), f.265r (III.169), and further gaps in this MS's copy of Langland's *Piers Plowman*, discussed by Bart, "Intellect," 235.

[34] BL, MS Harley 3943, f.20r (II.250: gap left; scribe C fills), f.23v (II.509: missing and marked "caret"), f.31v (II.1083: gap left; scribe C fills), f.45v (III.292: gap left; scribe C fills).

[35] See n.0000 and n.0000.

[36] And in fact Osbarn's solo copy has been heavily corrected by checking an exemplar from a different strand in the textual tradition: Ralph Hanna III, "The Scribe of Huntington HM 114," *Studies in Bibliography* 42 (1989): 120-33; Mooney and Stubbs, *Scribes and the City*, 30-37.

in the collaborative copy were written by a different scribe who left no such gaps. So it was not automatic but effortful to do this; not all scribes were equally intelligent, nor was any scribe consistently intelligent. Even leaving gaps for something missing, which might seem more passive than deliberate, required agency.

The practice of leaving gaps for whole lines is, though, consistent in cause. For smaller gaps of a word or few, no general pattern is found, whether in the content – not regularly the verse line – or in the thinking process – from the verse-form – which prompts the scribe to leave room. When the gap extends only to one or a few words, the gap was likely left for one of three reasons. Some of these shorter gaps occurred where the exemplar was missing something. Others occurred where the exemplar had the text, but in some mangled form, and person copying it refused to reproduce the nonsense. Finally, other gaps occurred when the scribe who devised the gap might have had an exemplar which made perfect sense but about which he was himself uncomprehending. Given this variety of causes, to explain these short gaps as a group we need to generalize at a level which is riskily aloof from the *text* but which does bring us close to the *scribes* and what they think and do. Though the three reasons for small gaps – omission in the exemplar, muddle in the exemplar, uncertainty on the part of the copyist – are different, one of them to the scribes' discredit, overall these small gaps suggest, as do the longer ones, the scribes' intelligent interest in accurate copying.

First, some small gaps might occur where the scribe spots little lacunae in the text he inherits. This seems the case, for instance, in a copy of the anonymous poem *The Court of Sapience*, from the later fifteenth century. The handwriting is modelled on bastard anglicana of a calligraphic quality, although with **g** from secretary script. The quality suggests that the scribe wrote for a living, as does the fine quality of some of the other books he made.

[37] In his copy of *The Court of Sapience*, he leaves nine gaps for just a word or two, some of them likely where something was lost from his exemplar. Notably in the line "What nedeth drinke w[-]{h}ere thirst hath no <gap>," he leaves a gap for the word "powere" which should come at the end of the line and he writes "d" in the margin.[38] The letter "d" might stand for the Latin *deficit*, meaning *something is missing*, which is commonly written (as noted) where text is lost. A few scribes and users evidently felt familiar enough with *deficit* to abbreviate it to "def" or "de" with a superscript "t"; one scribe wrote "+d" and "defect*us*" either side of the same line, which suggests that "d" did often note that something *deficit* or *is missing*.[39] So the scribe might here leave a gap because he spots that "powere" is lacking from his exemplar. He might have recognized that "were" two lines earlier needed a rhyme, or the syntax might have told him that the determiner ("no") lacks its following noun, as do the article "the" and the preposition "for," each followed by gaps elsewhere in this copy.[40] Or the syntax and sense might together reveal an incomplete doublet or list, as where the scribe leaves a gap for the word "reygne" after "vniu*er*se" and "Cite," in a description of "thre" places, which suggests that another spatial dimension is needed ("in vniu*er*se | Cite *and* <gap> thise be the thre diu*er*se"). Interestingly, although grammar can suggest that something is missing, it cannot suggest what, especially when these

[37] New York, Columbia University Library, MS Plimpton 256 (hereafter Pl), with the scribe's oeuvre identified by Carol Meale, "Patrons, buyers and owners: book production and social status," in *Book Production and Publishing Britain 1375–1475*, ed. J.J. Griffiths and Derek Pearsall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 201–38 (212, 230–31 n.64), and Kathleen L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts* (London: Harvey Miller, 996), ii, 331–32 (no. 124). There is some variation in the handwriting, notably in the use of **g** in BodL, MS Fairfax 4, another of his MSS.

[38] Pl, f.6v; E. Ruth Harvey, ed., *The Court of Sapience* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984), line 374. The letter **h** in "w[-]{h}ere" is written over erasure, as my diacritics show.

[39] Respectively BL, MS Harley 7335, f.90r (*Tales*, at a jump between III.2294 and VIII.1); BL, MS Harley 1758, f.167v (*Tales*, VII.814), f.168r (VII.888); PUL, MS Taylor 2, f.25v/a34 (*Fall*, I.4024, which lacks the negative particle *not*); HEHL, MS HM 115, f.26r. All line-references to *Fall* come from *The Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, EETS es 121–124, 4 vols. (London: Oxford University Press, 1924–27).

[40] Pl, f.22r (Harvey, ed., *Court*, 1431, 1452). Likewise, in BL, MS Harley 326, f.83r, this scribe leaves a gap where syntax suggests something is missing; in fact, Frederick J. Furnivall, ed., *The Three Kings' Sons*, EETS es 67 (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1895), 136, line 8, prints this passage without any corresponding gap, but he adds an editorial comma betraying that the syntax is awkward.

gaps occur in doublets or lists. In such synonymy or hyponymy, the rhetorical effect comes from the piling up of words in copiousness and not from any particular choice of word, so it is difficult to guess which words would fill out the trope. For instance, it is tricky to guess which animal will be listed in the gap here, because the surrounding lines list fauna as diverse as:

> The broke the pantere *and* the dromedare
> The ase the camell and the full of sight
> The boore the swyne the <gap> *and* the hare
> The fox tigir of moost spedy myght [41]

In such a menagerie how would the scribe of *The Court of Sapience* guess that he needed a "whesel'? So he leaves a gap.

Yet the inventive vocabulary in synonymy or in tropes such as similes might not only have impeded the scribe from guessing when a word was missing; it might also worry him even if the word were present. After all, this scribe is not entirely alert to things missing: he is not sharp-eyed enough, ironically, to see the missing lynx in the line before the weasel ("the lynx ful of syght," the line should say). So he might not be noting omissions but might instead be baffled by things which are present but which he cannot read. He might refuse to write "whesel" even if it is in the exemplar, if the letters are formed so that they are visually illegible; or the spelling might be garbled so that it cannot be parsed; or the word might be legible and correct but the copyist be unable to decode it either visually or intellectually, say, if he does not know the word or think it is legitimate in this context. You might not expect a "whesel" among these other beasts or might not recognize its spelling. The word *weasel* seldom began with <wh> in fifteenth-century English, as it does in the other manuscript of this poem used by the editor.[42] The names of animals sometimes baffle scribes: for example, scribes of Lydgate's *The Fall of Princes* leave gaps for a "cowe," where it is the animal painted on the hull of a ship, and for "a stynkyng hound," to which a villain is compared; neither animal seems the only or the obvious choice at these points, and whatever is or is not in the exemplar the scribes refuse to

[41] Pl, f.22r (Harvey, ed., *Court*, 1450-53).

[42] According to the forms listed in *OED*, *weasel*, *n.*, and illustrated in *MED*, *wesel(e* (n.).

guess.[43] In *The Court of Sapience*, we might suspect that this scribe was baffled, because several of the gaps are for Latinate or Francophone words which might be unfamiliar: "enourne," "venym," "zemeth," "raveyn" and maybe "reygne," as well as the archaic "whatkyns."[44] It might seem unlikely that some of these words would give a fifteenth-century person pause for concern, but in the other copies of this poem other scribes gloss two of these words, "reygne" as "s*cilicet* gou*e*rner" ("namely *governor*") and "quatkyn" as "what qualis" (in both English and Latin). Maybe these words were confusing, then, to the scribe who left the gaps; or maybe an exemplar had interlinear glosses which confused him as to which word was right.[45] The scribe's incomprehension emerges in the gap for "enourne," where the poet says he "can not please paynt <gap> ne endite."[46] Here nothing in syntax or sense would reveal that anything is missing, for the "ne" (meaning *nor*) already links three things in *synonymia*. Rather, whoever first left the gap was probably able to see something in his exemplar, even if garbled or damaged, that he did not understand, for he left room for it. The poet says that he "can not please paynt <gap> ne endite," and his rhetorical gesture of humility is made real by the scribe who refuses to "enourne" or embellish by guessing words he does not know.[47] As George Kane remarked, scribes were sometimes "reluctant to copy faithfully, letter by letter, something that they could not understand:" but as

[43] Respectively BL, MS Add. 21410, f.134r (*Fall*, VII.1087); JRL, MS Eng. 2, f.9v (*Fall*, I.1704, later supplied in different ink).

[44] Pl, respectively f.2r (Harvey, ed., *Court*, 68), f.16r (1043), f.16v (1083), f.21v (1403), and maybe f.2v (98), f.28v (1854). Though French in etymology, "powere" (f.6v, 374) is less likely to be misunderstood than missing from the exemplar, as "d" attests (as discussed above). Also this scribe writes "powere" and "power" without trouble in BL, MS Cotton Vespasian B.ix, f.41r, line 16, and f.75v, line 32; Sir Norman Moore, ed., *The Book of the Foundation of St. Bartholomew's Church in London*, EETS os 163 (London: Oxford University Press, 1923), *e.g.* 1, line 13, and 60, line 21.

[45] BL, MS Harley 2251, f.287v (modern pencil foliation: Harvey, ed., *Court*, 98); Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.21, f.51r (98 again), f.79v (1854). There are other glosses on BL, MS Harley 2251, f.287v and throughout Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.21, on f.51r, 68v, f.75v, f.77v, f.79r-v, f.80v, but no more on words omitted from Pl. BL, MS Harley 2251, and a different part of Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.21, are by the so-called Hammond scribe, on whom see an entry in Mooney, Stubbs and Horobin, *Late Medieval English Scribes* and n.0000 below.

[46] Pl, f.2r (Harvey, ed., *Court*, 68). Without "enourne" the line is not decasyllabic, but the syllable-count varies throughout the MS, so metre is unlikely to be the prompt for a gap here.

[47] Pl, f.2r (Harvey, ed., *Court*, 68).

well as causing them to vary what they wrote, that reluctance might also have caused them not to write at all.[48]

What prompted this uncertainty seems to be (looking more widely) very diverse, and every single gap can reveal particular words which tested scribes, say, for their orthography, archaism, neologism or stylistic decorum. Nonetheless a few patterns emerge from these particulars. Among them, a sizeable minority of gaps is left for foreign-derived words, like "enourne," and especially for outright foreign names of people or places. For instance, as well-informed a scribe as Richard Osbarn twice left a gap for the name of Procne, once working it out and filling it later ("proygne"), once having the gap filled by a colleague with a commonplace word ("Songe").[49] A scribe of Lydgate's *The Fall of Princes* leaves gaps for four classical figures [50] Most strikingly, in one well decorated copy of *The Canterbury Tales*, the scribe left thirty-one gaps, of which seventeen were for classical and foreign people and places such as "Alocen and Vitulon," "Thelophus," "Pirrus" and five times "Odenake."[51] This is not a blanket ignorance of foreign names: this scribe does in adjacent passages copy the names of Aristotle, Achilles and more.[52] This is important because it suggests that the proper nouns were not left blank simply in order to highlight them by writing them in red ink or a display script later, as one would suspect if all the names were blank.[53] Instead, there is some

[48] Kane, ed., *Piers Plowman: The A Version*, 132.

[49] HEHL, MS HM 114, f.210r (*Troilus*, II.64), filled by Osbarn in a different ink; BL, MS Harley 3943, f.17r, filled by scribe C of that MS wrongly.

[50] JRL, MS Eng. 2, f.3v (*Fall*, I.538), f.9v (I.1636), f.19v (I.3615), f.66r (III.1230), discussed by Wakelin, "Writing the Words," 56.

[51] Se, f.135r (*Tales*, V.232), f.135r (V.238), f.145r (II.288), f.199r–v (VII.2272, VII.2291, VII.2295, VII.2318, VII.2327). See also f.171r (VII.964, "Sophie"), f.200r (VII.2345, "Thymalao"), f.244v (VII.603, "Stilboun"; VII.604, "Corynthe"), f.248r (VI.889, "Avycen"), f.258v (V.1379, "Mecene"), f.259r (V.1387, "Aristoclides"; V.1411, "Gawle"), f.259v (V.1437, "Nicerates wyf").

[52] Se, f.135r (*Tales*, V.233, V.239).

[53] Contrast HEHL, MS HM 39872, f.14v (Jacques le Grand, *Le Livre des Bonnes Meurs*, I.iv), f.40v (I.xv), f.85v (IV.v), f.90v (IV.vii), f.96r (IV.x), f.97v (IV.xi), f.122r (V.ix), where the scribe consistently leaves a gap after a Latinate word and begins each gap with ".i.," the usual abbreviation for *id est* (*that is*); these look like gaps for glosses in a different ink or script. This MS also has a gap for the missing or misunderstood word "teipsum" in a Latin quotation of *nosce teipsum* (f.9v, I.iii, "the seid vois seid Notis <gap> ¶ That is as much to sey . as know thou thi self"), as listed in n.15 above.

distinction: the scribe recognizes the more famous classical and foreign figures, such as Aristotle, but not the obscure ones, such as Alhazen and Witulo, the Arabic and Polish scientists. It is as though the scribe were not sure whether the exemplar had got these exotic words right and so would not copy them. Chaucer hints at their outlandishness by saying that some of these names are ones which "knowen thei / that han here bookes herde," but the scribe has evidently not heard.[54] It should be stressed: these foreign proper nouns lie behind only a small proportion of the gaps left in Chaucer's verse.[55] But they do form a distinct group, distinguished by their unfamiliarity, and they suggest most clearly that the scribes' uncertainty might lie behind various other sorts of gap.

The gaps, then, are comparable with the scribes' well-known habit of replacing rarer vocabulary with plainer by unconscious substitution.[56] The gaps could suggest the limits of the scribe's imagination or his vocabulary, as he is unable to recognize and guess a word. Yet these gaps also suggest, more positively, that scribes refuse to do a job poorly – to reproduce what they do not comprehend or what look like other people's errors; to guess and intrude their own words – and so they write nothing. The white space of not writing is not intended as wilful variance of an extreme sort; it is intended as non-intervention, not stupid but thoughtful.

Signs of thinking

That thought-process is sometimes visible. While the exemplar seldom survives to show what made scribes leave gaps – something missing or something mystifying – a few copies themselves show traces of the decision-making. One of the gaps in the copy of *The Canterbury Tales* with the foreign names left blank tells us about the thinking of the scribe.[57] When he omitted the name of the philosopher Avicenna

[54] Se, f.135r (*Tales*, V.235).

[55] M-R's collations record 19 gaps for foreign names, among their 156 in total, at their B.57, B.288, B.305, D.737, E.48, F.238, F.1379, F.1411, C.603, C.604, C.889, B.2157, B.3310 twice, B.3426, B.3481, B.3485, B.357, B.3517. Apart from their E.48 in Holkham Hall, MS 667, f.58r (*Tales*, IV.48, "Poo" for the River Po), these gaps all occur in Gl or Se (their sigla too).

[56] Windeatt, "Scribes," 125-29.

[57] That could be the scribe of the surviving copy or the scribe of an exemplar whose gap he reproduces perfectly.

(Chaucer's "Avycen"), another foreign proper noun, he did not omit it entirely; he included the initial letter "a" at the start of the space.[58] That single "s" suggests that he saw something in his exemplar – perhaps the name wrongly subdivided as though an imaginary common noun with an indefinite article ("a vycen"), perhaps just the name Avicenna which he did not know or in a cryptic spelling. There are other instances in copies of *The Canterbury Tales* in which scribes leave gaps after beginning to write a few letters. Manly and Rickert's collation counts eleven overall. The practice of Geoffrey Spirleng shows that such abandoned copying could occur where the words were present in the exemplar: he writes simply "s" and leaves a gap where his exemplar has the full word "spell" meaning *speak*.[59] One scribe is especially prone to this practice and leaves six of these gaps after starting and abandoning certain words.[60] At these points he is not responding to something absent from his exemplar but is vexed by something present in it. An early scribe of *The Tales*, who signs his name as "Wytton," makes clear what is going on, even when the word is not obviously unfamiliar, as the name Avicenna is. He writes "Shu," for instance, before a gap where modern editors require the world "Soul" (meaning *solitary*):

> But eu*er*e lyue as a wydewe / in clothes blake
> Shu <gap> as the Turtyl / that lost hath hire make.

What makes sense of his muddle is comparing the variants found in other manuscripts: numerous surviving copies have the word *should* here, even though it makes no grammatical sense.[61] So it is likely that this scribe had an exemplar with that error, and that his

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[58] Se, f.248r (*Tales*, VI.889).

[59] Gl, f.18v (*Tales*, I.3480), following CUL, MS Mm.2.5, f.38r. See also BodL, MS Laud. misc. 600, f.126v (II.57, which M-R, as their B.57, record as simply a space without letters); Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 198, f.245v (VII.2661/B.3851); Oxford, Trinity College, MS 49, f.26v (Tales, I.1922); and those in nn.0000-0000 below. M-R seem to suggest that gaps follow incomplete words in CUL, MS Gg,4.27, at VII.1280 (M-R's B.2470), and BL, MS Royal 1.D.xv, f.99r (V.221), but I could not see gaps there.

[60] Holkham Hall, MS 667, f.17r (I.3896), f.77v (III.1943), f.58v (IV.120), f.68r (IV.1686), f.71r (IV.2104), f.29v (IX.40).

[61] CUL, MS Dd.4.24, f.115v (IV.2080), with a cross in the margin. M-R's collation records other MSS' variants at this line (their E.2080). Orietta Da Rold, "The Significance of Scribal Corrections in Cambridge, University Library MS Dd.4.24 of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*," *Chaucer Review* 41 (2007): 393-438, analyses this scribe's work in detail.

false-start with "Shu" and perplexed abandonment of it for a gap are explicable; his alertness to the error is commendable; and his decision not to write is a sign of care and judgement. While it might seem that not writing reflects nugatory and almost non-existent effort, these false starts make visible the fact that often the scribe was trying to decipher his exemplar in difficult circumstances.

The process of reading and thinking about the exemplar is evident too when a very few scribes leave little prompts alongside their gaps. Twice where Geoffrey Spirleng leaves gaps, he adds the correct word in the margin anyway ("mannysh'; "marche" for the name *Mardocheus*).[62] Likewise, in another copy of *The Canterbury Tales*, a Flemish saying is quoted: "But soth pley is <gap> pley as þe fle*mm*yng saith." A gap was left for "quad" and the word "quade" was first written in the margin. That was done by somebody with spindly handwriting and a different form of letter **a** who seems to have been collaborating with the scribe, for he wrote many marginal corrections and cues for rubrication.[63] It would be understandable if the scribes could make out the letters of *Mardocheus* and *quad* but did not recognize them as legitimate English words. These phenomena, the attempted copying of just a few letters and marginal prompts for later writing, are even rarer than the phenomenon of leaving gaps. But these oddities throw light on normal practice – show what is suppressed in the usually empty space of the gap. They show that gaps need not reflect a real inability to decode the graphic marks in the exemplar; they reflect caution about one's own abilities to interpret those marks.

They also suggest that scribes are wary of their exemplars. They do not trust the manuscripts which are the actual record of the text and wonder whether there might be a better text which exists not in their hands but somewhere else, perhaps in another

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[62] Gl, f.36r (*Tales*, II.782), f.40v (IV.1373): both words are present in the proper place in the exemplar, CUL, MS Mm.2.5, f.86v, f.101r.

[63] BodL, MS Hatton donat. 1, f.64r (*Tales*, I.4357). The gap was filled later but remains visible because it was longer than the inserted word, and because the filling "quad" has one-compartment **a** from secretary instead of two-compartment **a** from anglicana, as used by the scribe. The collaborator's marginal corrections are on f.6v (I.504), f.8r (I.687), f.27r (I.2326), interlineations on f.42r (I.3604), f.64v (I.4393) and cues for rubrics on f.64r, f.65v, not all of them filled in.

manuscript, but also in their own mind as an aspiration. The scribes are interested in that immaterial and absent text. Indeed, their dispreference for the material book is evident in their willingness to leave a blank space, even though such interruptions suggest that they had not completed their work and mar often quite luxurious pages. At these fleeting moments, the scribes seem more interested in the text as an idea than the book as a commodity or visual artefact.

Filling the gaps

That is, of course, a paraphrase of what the scribes were doing in terms they are unlikely to have used. That paraphrase also, in its speculation about attitudes to the text, overlooks the practicalities of making books. These prompts served some practical purpose: they would help somebody to complete the copying later; they suggest that gaps were left with the expectation of filling them in the future. That expectation is evident in another set of prompts which are less voluble but clearly designed to be useful for future stages of work. In the copy of *The Canterbury Tales* with many gaps for foreign names, there is a small cross in the margin next to six of the gaps. It is not possible to be sure that such skimpy marks were made by the scribe, but he does make crosses elsewhere and the ink looks identical in colour now (though that could be the effect of drying over time). Tellingly, these crosses occur only where the gap falls at the end of the line of verse. In verse, which ends with a ragged right-hand margin, gaps in this position might not be as clearly visible as they would mid-line. So, while not all the gaps which need a cross get one, the crosses only occur in this copy where they're needed.[64] Whoever writes these prompts is thinking logically about which gaps will be tricky to spot for filling later. That is, the effort of not writing at first might well reflect the expectation of more writing later.

That was a fair hope for a scribe given that book production

[64] Se, f.50r (*Tales*, I.3316), f.50r (I.3336), f.200r (VII.2345), f.248r (VI.890), f.259r (V.1387), f.259r (V.1411). Where there is no cross by a gap at a line-ending, either the gaps come in quick succession (Se, f.109v; III.1937, III.1938, III.1941) or the incomplete line is very short (f.9r, I.359; f.259v, V.1437), so that the disruption is visible.

regularly involved more than one stage of work.[65] Scribes or their colleagues often went through their copies adding corrections, red ink or illustrations in later stages of work, and they or their colleagues often wrote prompts in the margins to guide themselves or others in making these corrections and decorations. They would also leave blank spaces for inserting these rubrics, initials or keywords in other inks and for illustrations.[66] Gaps for words to be added in rubric, in particular, can look a lot like the gaps for text which the scribe thought was missing or misunderstood. Many of the manuscripts of English works with gaps also have rubrication and illumination which were likely completed later; in such cases, envisaging completion of the text, as well, later would be sensible.[67] How that might work emerges in another book by the scribe of *The Court of Sapience* (discussed above), a copy of Roger of Waltham's *Compendium morale*: in this he left twenty-one gaps; but somebody began correcting the text and wrote prompts for filling these gaps, as for other corrections, in the margins. The scribe then inserted the correct text into the longest gap, in ink visibly different in colour.[68] As it happens, he overlooked other prompts for corrections and so left those gaps unfilled; and all the correction petered out in the fifth quire.[69] But leaving gaps could lead to the writing of prompts and the filling of gaps, in turn: gaps, then, expressed a plausible aspiration to perfect the book in stages.

The gaps were sometimes filled well. After skilful filling, it is not always easy to tell whether there was once a gap beforehand, and this probably means that gaps have been identified less

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[65] Aliza Cohen-Mushlin, "A School for Scribes," in *Teaching Writing, Learning to Write: Proceedings of the XVIth Colloquium of the Comité Internationale de Paléographie Latine*, ed. P.R. Robinson (London: King's College Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 2010), 61-87, summarizes ways in which people training junior scribes gave them half-completed leaves or initials to fill in.

[66] As described by *e.g.* Phillipa Hardman, "Reading the Spaces: Pictorial Intentions in the Thornton MSS, Lincoln Cathedral MS 91, and BL MS Add. 31042," *Medium Aevum* 63 (1994): 250-74 (esp. 251-52, 258).

[67] *E.g.* BodL, MS Hatton donat. 1, in n.0000 above.

[68] BodL, MS Fairfax 4, f.17v.

[69] BodL, MS Fairfax 4, f.18v, f.32r. The corrective prompts also peter out after f.37v, late in the fifth quire, so the later gaps have none: they are on f.38r, f.60v (twice), f.61r, f.61v, f.74r, f.81r, f.96r, f.138v, f.139r, f.145v, f.150r, f.157r, f.166r (three times), f.172r, f.177r.

frequently than they occurred. But happily for us, such invisible mending is difficult to do: sometimes the gap was wrongly sized or the filling was in a different ink or handwriting. For instance, the early scribe of *The Canterbury Tales*, "Wytton" (mentioned above), left a gap for a line missing from his exemplar of The Summoner's Tale; he did then work out what that line should be and wrote it in the gap at a later stage: "Who eu*e*re herde / of swich a thyng or now." The former gap is visible because the added line is in ink which is noticeably darker, and because the space left for it was too cramped, so that the added letters overlap the descenders of the letters on the line above. Just as leaving a gap reflects the thinking-process of a scribe, the filling of that gap attests to further development in his or others' thinking. For instance, "Wytton" evidently found an exemplar which could supply his line from The Summoner's Tale, but also then better understood where to put it: he realized that he had left the gap too late, in the second rather than the first half of a couplet; so he added the line anyway in the gap, as needs must, but reordered the two lines with the construe-marks *a* and *b* in the margin, revealing his growing comprehension of what had gone wrong and how to fix it.[70]

Things did not always go so smoothly. First, access to the same exemplar to decode it later or to another exemplar to find missing text was not common enough, and many gaps went unfilled. Then sometimes the scribe filled his gap – perhaps wary of incompleteness – and got it completely wrong. For instance, the so-called Hammond scribe made two copies of John Lydgate's poem *The Horse, the Goose and the Sheep*: in one copy he duplicated a line in error and erased it, leaving a gap; in another he left a gap in that place without any correction. It is unclear whether he caused the omission in the first copy by repeating a line, and then used his faulty copy as the exemplar for another, or whether he inherited the omission in both his copies from a third manuscript. What is clear is that he never later had access to a better exemplar to recover what should go in this gap. He did write something in one of the

[70] CUL, MS Dd.4.24, f.91v (*Tales*, III.2229), discussed by Da Rold, "Significance," 407, who notes (430) another gap filled further down the page (*Tales*, III.2254). The line which this MS lacked was lacking in many MSS of the *a* branch of the textual tradition.

gaps, at a late enough stage to use ink mixed to a different hue; but he filled it with something unique, and so probably invented:

> ¶ High and lowe . were made of oo nature
> Of erth we cam to erth we shal ageyne
> ⌐Of kynges and princes . take we no cure¬
> With theyr victories and tryumphes in certayne [71]

Although he seems to have had access to multiple exemplars of some other works, he seems not to have had any further exemplar or access to the original exemplar of *The Horse, the Goose and the Sheep* and so was limited in his capability to rectify as big an omission as a whole line.[72] The invented line is not silly; it fits the syntax, sense and rhyme.[73] But without another, fuller exemplar, even a well-informed scribe such as this one cannot fill the gap accurately.

As well as being filled by the scribes themselves, it is far commoner for gaps to be filled by readers or users of the books.[74] Yet these people did not usually have access to the exemplar from which the books were copied, nor to any other copy, so they were even worse at filling gaps with the usual text. Sometimes they did well: in another copy of *The Canterbury Tales*, a line for which the scribe left a gap somebody else then supplied, and that person worked out how to reorder the lines as required with construe-marks *a* and *b* (above), just as the scribe "Wytton" did.[75] But usually when a gap was filled by somebody other than the scribe it went awry. For example, in the manuscript of *The Canterbury Tales* with frequent

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[71] BL, MS Add. 34360, f.36v, skipping John Lydgate, *Minor Poems*, ed. Henry Noble MacCracken, 2 vols, EETS os 107, 192 (London: Oxford University Press, 1911-34), ii, 565 (no. 23, line 638); compare his error in BL, MS Harley 2251, ff.286v-87r. Linne R. Mooney, "A New Manuscript by the Hammond Scribe Discovered by Jeremy Griffiths," in *The English Medieval Book: Studies in Memory of Jeremy Griffiths*, ed. A.S.G. Edwards, Vincent Gillespie and Ralph Hanna (London: British Library, 2000), 113-23, lists his known MSS.

[72] Eleanor Prescott Hammond, "A Scribe of Chaucer," *Modern Philology* 27 (1929): 26-33 (29), traces his access to more than one exemplar of *The Canterbury Tales*.

[73] Because this scribe's two MSS both have the variant "nature" in the rhyming line, instead of "mateer" preferred by the editor (Lydgate, *Minor Poems*, ed. MacCracken, ii, 565, no. 23, line 638), the spurious line rhymes with the invented "cure" better than the editor's preferred one would have. That could perhaps have prompted the gap and replacement.

[74] Of course, the difference of their handwriting and ink might make the filling of gaps by other people more visible.

[75] Lincoln, Cathedral Library, MS 110, f.101r (*Tales*, III.757). See also f.103v (III.932) and smaller corrections on f.101r (III.759). Horobin, "Compiling," 384-85, notes attempts to fill in missing parts of the frame-narrative in this MS.

gaps for foreign names, the scribe left five gaps in The Monk's Tale for the name of Odenake, that is, Odenatus, the husband of Zenobia, whose story Chaucer obtains from Boccaccio's *De Mulieribus claris*. Then a person with handwriting of the very late fifteenth or early sixteenth century filled these gaps with the banal words *prince* and *noble*. He did not intervene without thinking, for he knew how to fit his additions to the grammar: in one line "To <gap> a prince of that contre" he added "a nobill" in the gap and so had to cross out the second indefinite article "a" which was no longer grammatical: "To ⌐a nobill¬ ~~a~~ prince of that contre". His motive for deleting that "a" is intriguing. Did he think that "a" was one of the stray, incomplete attempts at copying which accompanies some other gaps, such as this scribe's "a" before a gap for *Avicenna* (discussed above)? Did he think that this "a" indicated that a common noun with the indefinite article "a" was needed here, such as he supplied ("⌐a nobill¬ ~~a~~ prince," *a noble prince*). Or did this "a" make him realize that he was adding something which did not really fit? As the passage went on he stopped filling the last two gaps for "Odenake:" did he see that this was not going to work?[76] It is impossible to say exactly what he was thinking, but it is evident that, while he lacked knowledge, he was not without thoughtfulness.

When the gaps left are longer, the fillings can be even more inaccurate. Even when the scribe was well connected it could go wrong, as it does, for instance, in two fillings of gaps by Thomas Hoccleve in one of the copies of *The Canterbury Tales* by Adam Pinkhurst – men whom one might expect to know better.[77] Likewise, in a copy of *The Canterbury Tales* with twenty-two gaps, three were filled by somebody else with errors of placement or content. The scribe left a gap for line missing from a stanza in The Man of Law's Tale and the later user's addition is revealing: the scribe left the gap too late, but the user blithely filled the gap in its wrong position, whereas the scribe "Wytton" knew how to reorder his lines

[76] Se, f.199v (*Tales*, VII.2272). He also fills VII.2291 and VII.2295 (f.199r) but not VII.2318 or VII.2327 (f.119v).

[77] *E.g.* National Library of Wales, MS Peniarth 392 (the Hengwrt Chaucer), f.138v, f.150r, as printed by Mooney and Stubbs, *Scribes and the City*, 126. A third filling of a gap on f.83v, which Mooney and Stubbs foliate as f.88v, is not spurious (contrary to Doyle and Parkes, "Palaeographical Introduction," xlvi).

a and *b* to incorporate things later. Also, whereas "Wytton" found the established text somewhere, this anonymous reader had to invent something, and yet something much less inventive than the poet's own line. Whereas editors think Chaucer's line was starkly allegorical in describing the heroine's kindness ("Humblesse hath slayn in hire al tyrannye"), the added line is flatly literal ("And all so deboner a mongys all company").[78] This person makes another addition which is even blander: it fills a gap left for Chaucer's line "Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye," one of his big principles, with the following:

> That frendes eu*er*yth other muste obeye
> If they woll longe holden companye
> ⌐This ys trew that I yow sertefy¬
> Whenne maystry comth the god of loue anone
> Beteth his winges and farewell he ys gone [79]

Many copies omit the line, so the scribe's gap is forgivable. But the reader's invented replacement is of a lambent dullness which is unforgivable. It is also tempting to suggest that it even unconsciously hints at its own fakery with its assertions of verity: "This ys trew that I yow sertefy." When spurious lines are supplied, they are normally of a telltale blandness like this, with phatic phrases and recapitulations – language used just to fill space. They replace the required proper nouns with common nouns, complex grammatical apposition with a single noun-phrase, going on a "revel" with getting on a "horse," bold humility with everyday politeness, maxims on love with bland asseverations. There's a telling example when a reader fills a gap in a copy of Lydgate's *The Fall of Princes* where Phaedra accuses Hippolytus of rape:

> she hath accused yonge Ipolitus
> [. . .] With full bolde chere *and* a plein visage
> Hou he purposed <gap> ⌐in plaine language¬

[78] Holkham Hall, MS 667, f.43r (*Tales*, II.165). (I consulted this MS from a facsimile stored in the British Library.) This person imitates the scribe's handwriting, but unconvincingly, with more broken strokes and a loopless **d** which might suggest a date later in the fifteenth century or greater care in forming graphs, perhaps trying too hard.

[79] Holkham Hall, MS 667, f.32r (*Tales*, V.764). M-R report that five other MSS and Caxton's first edition omit this line (their F.764), so this scribe's gap is explicable. Also on f.40r (V.339) he fills a gap where a king should return to his "revel" with a reference to him returning to his "horse".

Only be force here beaute to oppresse.

The gap was left for the words "in his furious rage," but the later reader expected Hippolytus to speak "in plaine language."[80] That blandness or bluntness suggests that this guesswork is not creative ambition but is an attempt to complete the text as fully as possible in the most likely, which is to say the most commonplace, way. Just as the scribes pause before exotic words, wary of the limits of their imagination decoding them, similarly when users fill those gaps they keep their imaginations in check.

The value of nothing

Of course, scribes too could achieve this banalization, when they drift in copying into autopilot and write something simpler than the poet's own words; textual criticism has long recognized that.[81] Nor need anybody have worried about it. As the mistaken filling of gaps reminds us, this was a culture which did allow scribes and readers to vary the texts they encountered. Variance was, it should be recalled, an acceptable and common part of manuscript textuality. Indeed, when the scribes left gaps for things, they created more variance of the most dramatic sort – they did not transmit some words at all – and they made room for others to vary things further by inventing replacements. The fact that the gaps were filled, and the fact that the scribes left those gaps to be filled, might suggest a sanguine openness to – literally, an open space for – intervention. If a later stage of book production never occurred as was hoped, with the tidy consultation of authoritative exemplars, then it might be better for one of the book's users to intrude something than to have nothing. A filled gap seems preferable to a gap: the rhyme is preserved, always; something sensible is said, if boring; there is less visual distraction on the page from white space among the words.

But that makes it all the more curious that, when first writing, on these few moments the scribes restrain themselves from

[80] BL, MS Add. 21410, f.4r (*Fall*, I.2833). Of course, for anybody who knows the myth, this could be ingenious: Phaedra's accusation is false and Hippolytus is more likely to use "plaine language" than "rage".

[81] Kane, ed., *Piers Plowman: The A Version*, 132-34, describes this.

replacing, inventing, intervening. Why would they not do so? Whatever the chaotic outcome, the intention (I suggest) was to prevent or even to put right variance. When scribes saw words in their exemplars but did not copy them, they seem to have worried that they would mangle them, or that they were already mangled, and so to have refused to write them until they could be sure that they would get them right. The gap reveals that scribes could be aware of the risk of omitting, simplifying and misrepresenting the poet's words. Though scribes were free to rewrite or emend, they could restrain themselves from doing so. That suggests that scribes did not universally welcome scribal interventions, or else they could have supplied omissions or interpreted obscurities with their own invention. They did not.

Nor did they often return to fill their gaps. That being the case, one might wonder whether they were that bothered with completing the text. We might compare the spaces left unfilled for initials and illustrations: of them, Phillipa Hardman has asked audaciously "whether there ever was a real intention to provide rubricated initials in these spaces, or whether the purpose of a large initial [. . .] could not just as effectively be served by an unfilled space: whether [. . .] the pre-rubrication stage of production came to be seen as an acceptable convention in itself."[82] Does this imaginative insight throw light by analogy on the purpose of gaps left for text? Rather than failing to find any better exemplar or expertise with which to solve their textual puzzle, the scribes might not have cared to solve it. The gap alone is an implicit comment that they recognized and strove to solve the puzzle, and restrained themselves from fraudulent solutions, and that might be enough to soothe the scribe's conscience or satisfy his patron. That might explain why the gaps were left even in books of expensive quality: rather than being shoddy workmanship in outcome, they would make visible the careful workmanship as a process behind that outcome. This would be the "workmanship of risk" described by the craftsman David Pye, in which the flaws in handcrafted objects have their own aesthetic interest, for their contrast with the smoother workmanship reveals the processes behind,

[82] Hardman, "Windows," 258.

and formal ingredients within, the artwork.[83] Or if that seems too aestheticist or anachronistic, might there be a religious significance? This was a culture which believed that all human effort was flawed until it was completed by grace; so there might be satisfaction not copying the perfect text but in humbly aspiring to perfection yet falling from it.

To sketch the aesthetic or religious attitudes behind gaps would require a much wider enquiry than this. But for now it might be possible to infer the attitudes to textuality which underpin them. The gaps suggest an interest not in the text as the copy in hand but in the text as an intellectual structure. This need not be an *ideal* text, for the resulting manifestation is holey, incomplete; but it is an ideational text, an idea in the mind. The gaps allow the reader to imagine how it would rhyme, what it would say, how complete it would be. The gaps might thereby better evoke the text as an idea – invisible, intangible, non-existent – than the copying does as an achieved object. This is an airy suggestion but it might explain the self-restraint of not guessing or inventing something to fill the gap: a reverence for the text as something which survives somehow outside the mangled material instantiations one has of it.

If there is such reverence when scribes won't write, then might a similar reverence underpin the rest of their copying which proceeds more smoothly? Despite our focus on variance, invariant reproduction is far more predominant in the proportion of words scribes copied.[84] It is, though, difficult in the humanities to describe sameness. Might the gaps allow us not to take those accurate copies for granted? Leaving gaps suggest the attention and concentration and intelligence that are going on when the scribe is at work, even if he is merely reproducing. The scribe must be awake enough to notice when not write. Might we, alongside our praise of variance, praise this copying? The gaps are usually only a latent possibility; usually there are none present and all goes well. But

[83] David Pye, *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*, with an introduction by John Kelsey (1968; London: Herber Press, 1995), 34-35, 63. David Ganz, "Risk and Fluidity in script: an Insular instance," in *Teaching Writing, Learning to Write*, ed. P.R. Robinson (London: King's College Centre for Late Antique and Medieval Studies, 2010), 17-23 (18), applies Pye's work to palaeography.

[84] As Kane, ed., *Piers Plowman: The A Version*, 126, concedes, and as noted in n.5 above.

even the possibility of gaps suggests the tension behind the seemingly seamless process of accurate copying. The scribes' agency is present in copying smoothly others' words, in continuous expression, but is only visible when they interrupt that copying. Despite the variance widespread in English manuscripts of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, those scribes sometimes strove not to rewrite, if they could help it, by leaving a gap. Whereof they could not write, thereof they chose to be silent.