

Second assignment; Middle English Questions

Wester, T.I.

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1 What insights can the study of quires and booklets provide into the production and organisation of medieval texts?

The study of quires and booklets of Middle English manuscripts can give great insights into the production process of a given manuscript. Interestingly, many of these insights are gained through mistakes made either by the scribe or editor in the writing and binding processes.

One of the most obvious things to be learned from errors in quiring is the competency of the scribe. Professional scribes often (though not always) lined out their quires in such a way that a given section (or sections) of a story fit nicely within a single quire. Professionals also might leave space at the end of a quire intentionally if they suspected their exemplar to be lacking, as can be seen in various manuscripts obtaining Chaucer's "cook's tale". Amateur scribes – being not so well versed in quiring – would often poorly line the quires, requiring additional sheets to be added after the quire was already largely filled out. Examples of such quire management can be found in the Thornton manuscripts. These forms of mistakes are especially indicative of amateur scribes in the case of prose, as poetry is inherently easier to lay out.

When a single manuscript was copied by multiple scribes, their quiring can give us insight into their role delegation and communication. This can be seen clearly in the Trinity Gower, where one scribe (named "The B scribe") had improperly ruled his quires, thus not allowing for a proper connection

to the next quire, which was copied by a different scribe (the “C scribe”). This mistake was only corrected when the manuscripts were assembled, suggesting relatively sparse communication between scribes. Furthermore, the additional lines required in the quire by the B scribe, were supplied by the C scribe, suggesting that the latter may have had a more central role in the assembly process.

2 What are some of the major challenges and issues that scholars encounter when transcribing English manuscript texts, and how can these challenges be addressed to ensure accurate and meaningful transcriptions?

When transcribing manuscripts, there are problems which arise no matter the language one is transcribing in. Spelling variations or errors, illegible or damaged documents, and highly stylised hands being just some of the (perhaps more common) examples. Middle English has its own set of challenges, including the ones listed above, though I will discuss the difficulties more particular to Middle English.

One problem in transcription of Middle English texts is punctuation. The only form of punctuation used in Middle English is the virgule. This mark was used in a similar manner to the modern comma, though in appearance looks more like a slash. The choice is up to the one transcribing whether to use the comma or slash in these cases, in both cases possibly injecting modern meaning into the medieval text. In either case, the transcriber would probably want to clarify the symbol and its exact meaning. The absence of the modern period to indicate the end of a sentence also may cause confusion, especially since the beginnings of lines are capitalised. One might be inclined to transcribe periods here where there are no present in the original manuscript, thus making the transcription easier to read for a modern audience.

Another problem is the frequent use of abbreviations in Middle English texts. Frequently, scribes would abbreviate certain words or sections of words, often leaving a mark to indicate the abbreviation. The difficulty in this case is whether to transcribe the abbreviation, potentially with a mark

similar to the original, or transcribe the unabbreviated word, once again, potentially with a mark indicating that the word was originally abbreviated. Leaving in the abbreviation stays more faithful to the manuscript, and putting a mark of any kind may provide insight into the culture of the time, as certain abbreviations may have been made because the scribe thought their meaning obvious to their audience.

One more peculiarity in Middle English manuscripts stems from the trilingual nature of England at the time. Due to the prevalence especially of French as a written language, there may have been scribes copying English texts who were not at all familiar with the English language. An example of this is “Ihesu Swete”¹ where the scribe transcribed both the þ and y in the same manner, even though the y would have typically been dotted, the scribe in question dots both letters. He furthermore frequently confused and þ. These errors are likely due to the lack of English practice on account of the scribe. Here the difficulty in transcribing is whether to be accurate to the language or to the scribe. It is possible of course to correct the scribe’s mistake and reinsert the þ undotted and wherever necessary, though this would not be an accurate reflection of the text as the scribe read and wrote it.

3 How does Cambridge, Cambridge University Library MS Ff.1.6 (“Findern”) fit into the general picture of English manuscript culture? What insights can be gained from the contents, script, and provenance of this specific manuscript?

The Findern manuscript originates from Derbyshire Findern, which was not central place in the history of English manuscript copying such as Westminster and greater London. The main point of interest regarding this manuscript is the scribes who copied it. Firstly, there are over 50 recognized individual scribes, copying within the same quires and even within the same page. The hands range from processional to amateur and many sec-

¹chicago II Newberry Library, ms 31, fol. 135r

tions are signed by their respective scribe. These signatures notably included women's names – a large part of which in processional hands. This gives an insight into the extent to which women were involved in manuscript culture in the Middle English period.

The rural location of this manuscript and other manuscripts such as Thornton has lead some to the theorise about rural book sharing networks. In these networks, exemplar works would be shared between local literate individuals or families. This theory is furthermore given credence by the signatures within the manuscript. This was not a common practice generally in England at the time, though it makes sense in a setting where one might frequently lend one's manuscript to others.

The manuscript contains mostly secular love literature. This, combined with the many hands and presence of amateur hands, leads some to believe that this may have been a work of community entertainment. Local people would borrow an exemplar through the aforementioned networks, and copy said exemplar collectively.

4 Provide an account of the foreign influences on Middle English vocabulary, specifically from French/Latin, Norse, and other languages.

Middle English vocabulary loans from many other languages. In many cases, there are specific areas where English borrowed from specific languages, both in taking words directly an in anglicising them. Examples of both can be found in culinary terms, where French was highly influential. Words such as “pork” or “mutton” come from French, whereas the respective animals kept their English names. This sets a trend for French, where many loanwords related to the higher classes of society, “court”, “parliament”, and “feast” are all words borrowed from French, and relevant to the (predominantly French) aristocracy.

This class of influence contrasts with the influence Old Norse had on Middle English, as it borrow many more everyday words such as “sky”, “mist”, and “ugly”. There are furthermore many farming related words which are borrowed from Old Norse such as “plough”, “sow”, and “egg”. This is reflec-

tive of the lifestyles the Scandinavians living on the British isles would have had, being mostly peasants rather than lords as with the French.

There is one more great influence Old Norse had on Middle-, and Old- English that teaches us a lot about the interactions between the Scandinavians and Anglo-Saxons, that being the borrowing of the third person personal pronouns “they”, “them”, “their” and “theirs”. This is quite unconventional vocabulary to borrow especially since Old English already had pronouns of this variety. It has been theorised that these pronouns came into use to ease communication with the Scandinavians. It would have been possible (with some effort) to understand Old English as a speaker of Old Norse, though certain words would be difficult to distinguish, such as the masculine singular “he” and the plural “hie”. Adopting the Old Norse “they” in place of “hie” made this distinction a lot more clear, the same goes for the other genders and cases.

Many vocabulary influences came through religion as well. Through the catholic church, Latin words entered the English dictionary such as “confession” and “glory”. The original languages of the new-, and old- testament – respectively Greek and Hebrew – also left their marks in words such as “gospel” deriving from evangelion, and “amen” being adopted from Latin which took the term from Hebrew.

It is interesting that there are few influences from Celtic languages in Middle English, even though the English lived in close proximity to speakers of Irish, Cornish, and Gaelic. It is theorised that this lack of influence is due to the fact that the Celts were a conquered people, thus being below the English in status, making resistance to their cultures and languages great.

5 England was a trilingual country (English, French, Latin) in the Middle English period. What were the functions of the three language? Consider illustrating your account with examples from the Compendium texts.

In the middle English period, England was a trilingual country with people speaking English, French and Latin. These languages were not however equals as is the case in places such as modern-day Belgium. Rather, these languages all had their own functions in society which is reflected in the manuscripts handed down to contemporary scholars.

Out of the languages listed above, French and English form the starkest contrast in use. French was the language of administration and aristocracy in England from the time of the Norman conquest, whereas English was used by the common people.

In late Middle English, the divide between the two languages had started to shrink somewhat. The aristocracy in England were no longer entirely French, due to a combination of factors. One major contributor however was the loss of Brittany, severing the geographical ties the king of England had with France. It is possible that the aristocracy would have started to learn English at this point, reflected in manuscripts such as Auchinleck which is theorised by some to be an educative work in the English language written for children. French remained the legal-, and aristocratic- language however, and it remains disputed whether Auchinleck was intended for the aristocracy or simply for a wealthy and literate Englishman such as a banker or merchant.

Latin occupies a role largely separate from French and English, that being as the *lingua franca* of theology and academia. Texts such as religious and medical treatises, bibles, and other literature intended only for the learned would have been written in Latin or imported as such from the continent. Latin furthermore appears interwoven within English manuscripts to transition between sections, and as untranslated idioms. Examples of both of these can be found in Chaucer's Canterbury tales.