



The Identification and Use of Authorial Variants in the *Miller's Tale*

PETER ROBINSON*
University of Birmingham

ABSTRACT

This **article** argues that one may use textual variation **as** a means of achieving a closer appreciation of the text studied, an **understanding** of the processes that shaped the textual tradition, and a discrimination of which variants are likely to be the author's own composition, rather than introduced by scribes. Central to this process is a determination of exactly which variants derive from the author. **As well as** traditional literary judgement, one may use analysis of the whole textual tradition (employing computer-assisted methods to gather and analyse **all** data of textual variation) to **create** a hypothesis of textual relations throughout the tradition, and hence a view of what manuscripts (and what combinations of manuscripts) are most likely to preserve readings archetypal to the whole tradition, **and** so most likely to be of the author's own composition.

KEYWORDS

textual variation, archetype, collation, phylogenetic analysis, manuscript tradition, electronic publication

I. INTRODUCTION

It is not usual now for editors to declare that their business is the establishment of the text which their author wrote. There are good reasons for this **reticence**: the **claims** of various past editors that their editions presented a 'definitive' text, **all the very** words their authors **actually** wrote, were certainly overconfident. **A few** simple observations are **usually** enough to demolish such claims.' Most authors revise and, certainly, many textual traditions exhibit **evidence** of the

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Address for correspondence: Peter Robinson, University of Birmingham, Institute for Textual Scholarship and Electronic Editing, Elmfield House, Selly Oak Campus, Birmingham B29 1LQ (United Kingdom). E-mail: p.m.robinson@bham.ac.uk

author's tinkering here and there. When even the author seems unsure what the text should be, who is the editor to declare 'this is the text'? A second observation: when a text has been copied or published in different forms by different people, how are we to distinguish between the 'sacred words' of the author and the 'disposable interventions' of others?

This editorial reticence is also consonant with the long-running move in the academy away from authorities of all kinds. Once we have proclaimed the author dead, we can do what we like with the author's text, so it seems, except try to establish what the author's text might have been. Thus, editorial practice and rhetoric these last decades have been towards the presentation of the texts of the documents, and exploration of the various transformations of the texts within these documents. One might mention the various inflections of the 'social text' ideas of Jerome McGann and Donald McKenzie, with their focus on the roles of many others, beside the author, in the making of the many texts we actually read.' It happens too that this new emphasis on the many texts, and the many beside the author involved in their making, has coincided with the increasing sophistication of the presentation of print editions and, especially, with the potential for computer methods to present near-limitless numbers of texts. It is easier now for scholars to present meaningful information about the differences between texts (indeed, one may present all the texts, and all the information) and so scholarly effort is readily channelled into this and away from the rather controversial and difficult business of establishing what the author (whoever this might be) wrote and/or rewrote and when.

This move has some awkward consequences. We still speak of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*: yet we are reluctant to assert that any one word in the text is actually what he wrote. This leaves readers in a curious limbo. What is the relationship of Geoffrey Chaucer to the text of this tale? If we cannot assert that any one text represents the particular words of Geoffrey Chaucer, then are all texts equal? Does it matter which text of the tale we read? And, if it does matter, then what criteria, in the regrettable absence of the author, are we to use to determine which text we should read?

Apparently, here a gap has opened between scholars, who seem comfortable with a world of many texts (all of which merit our attention), and readers, who just want a text to read. Readers may fairly ask "which text should I read?" and may fairly find the answer "all of them" unhelpful.³ In this essay, I want to point towards some ways of answering this question. The short answer to the question, "which text should I read" is: read the text which gives you the most, the most meaning, the most entertainment, the most sense of encountering what we call Geoffrey Chaucer's *Miller's Tale*. I propose that one can identify words and phrases at particular points in some witnesses, which give more to the reader than the corresponding words and phrases in other witnesses do. I propose that the accumulation of these words and phrases does give a more satisfying and richer text. In addition, I argue that we have reasonable cause to locate the source of most of these words and phrases with Chaucer himself, by reference to a historical reconstruction of the witness relations within the tradition: these are the 'authorial variants' of the title. Finally, I assert that even if this last cannot be proved, the engagement by

the reader in the discrimination of one reading from another may lead to a closer appreciation of the *Miller's Tale*, of the processes that shaped its text, and of what is distinctive about Chaucer. There are two key parts to these propositions:

1. One can identify, at every point, all the different forms of the text
2. One can make, at every point, a judgement as to which is the most rewarding for the reader

II. DISCUSSION

The first part of this is now easy, for the *Miller's Tale* at least. My edition of the *Miller's Tale* on CD-ROM gives, for every word or phrase, at every point in every one of the fifty-four witnesses (fifty manuscripts, four incunables) that have this line, the exact variants on that word or phrase in every other witness (Robinson, 2004). Here is a screen shot⁴ of the variants at a key moment in the poem, when Absalon presents himself at Alison's window, red-hot iron in hand, for a kiss: line MF⁵ 605 in the *Canterbury Tales* Project numbering, A or I 3793 in the numbering of the Skeat/Robinson/Riverside editions (Benson, 1987; Blake, 1997; Skeat, 1894).

Previous	MI 605	Variant map	* Next
I un thyn	Absolon	thyn dere	derehyng
It it un I	alison	thyn	del derehyng
Omitted		my	
		thyn owne	
		I un thyn dere	
		O my	
		thyn swete	
		and thyn	

Show original spellings

thyn dere	7 wits.	Ad1 Bo1 En3 Ha3 Mg Mm Ph2
thyn	27 wits.	Ad3 Bo2 Bw Ca Cp Dd Ds1 En1 En2 Fi Ha2 Ha5 Hk Hr La Lc Ld2 Ma Ne Ni Pw Py Sfi Tc1
my	6 wits.	Ch El Gg Hg Pa To1
thyn owne	9 wits.	Cx1 Cx2 Df Hc Ln Pn Ra3 Tc2 Wy
I am thyn dere	1 wit.	Gf
O my	2 wits.	Ha4 Ii
thyn swete	1 wit.	Ra1
and thyn	1 wit.	Sf2

The top half of the screen shows all the variants at each word in the line, with them 'stacked' above one another so that one can see at a glance the various ways the line could be read. The greatest concentration of variants is on the words *thyn dere* in the text given in the first line: eight variants in all, including *thyn dere*. The lower half of the screen gives detail of exactly what witnesses have which of these eight variant readings, ranging from *my* to *I am thyn dere*. A further panel, not shown, gives the distinct forms of the whole line and their distribution across the witnesses.

The second part of this proposition relies upon our judgement to determine which variant is to be preferred. Let us exercise our judgement on these variants. Which makes the most sense; which gives the most meaning? Essentially, the division is between witnesses which read *my* and *thyn*. Six have *my*, including the pair of Hengwrt and Ellesmere most commonly regarded as the prime sources for the text of the *Canterbury Tales*, and another two have *O my*. Twenty-seven have *thyn*, and another nineteen have variants based around *thyn: thyn owne. thyn dere* and others. Now, it is easy to see why a scribe might have written *thyn here*, following on from the earlier *I am thine Absalon* and simply repeating the *thyn*. But *my* actually makes better, if slightly more challenging, sense. First, it is rather nonsensical for Absalon to say of himself that he is *Alison's durling*: he hopes to be this, but he is not yet. He can reasonably say he is *thy Absalon*, but he is not (yet) *thyn darling*. On the other hand, for Absalon Alison is definitely *my durling*. Secondly, in dramatic terms *my* gives a sudden and unexpected shift of emphasis: within a few words, in one line, from Absalon presenting himself as Alison's man (*thyn Absalon*) to Absalon presenting his affection for Alison: she is *my durling* (a presumption of affection which is of course absurd). One may also detect an irony here: Absalon is now thoroughly disillusioned with Alison, she is no longer his darling at all, and he intends to demonstrate this with the aid of a hot iron. The pedestrian *thy durling* loses this altogether.

It is possible that another reader might make a case for *thy darling* on similar lines, finding that reading persuasive in the context of events at this point of the tale in ways I have not considered. But there is another argument for reading *my durling here*. This is clearly the harder reading here, and it is easy to see how scribes might automatically substitute *thyn* for *my*. It is not at all so easy to see how scribes might substitute *my* for *thyn*. This introduces the notion of direction of variation: from a presumed more original (even, dare we say it, authorial) *my* to a later, introduced, (dare we say it, scribal) *thyn*.

Following this argument on, we may base our decision concerning these readings not only on the context of the readings themselves, but also on a view of the direction of variation at particular points and, by extension, of the direction of variation within the whole textual tradition. I observed above that the famous pair of manuscripts Hengwrt and Ellesmere are among the six reading *my here*. A hypothesis emerges: one could explain this variation, at this point, by presuming that Hengwrt and Ellesmere both have the archetypal reading, a reading which scribes found difficult. In this case, we would expect that the reading in Hengwrt and Ellesmere would be shared by a few other witnesses also close to the archetype, and that the

further one moves from Hengwrt and Ellesmere, the more distant from archetypal *my* would be the readings. On the face of it, this is exactly what seems to be happening at this reading. Hengwrt and Ellesmere are joined by four other manuscripts (Ch Ps Gg To1) which at other points (as we shall see) also appear to share archetypal readings with that pair, against many other witnesses. And other witnesses do indeed show a move towards the increasingly eccentric: to the verbose and metrically impossible *I am thyn dere* in Glasgow Hunterian MS 197, written some seventy years after Hengwrt and Ellesmere. We note too that witnesses long suspected of being descended from a single scribal copy seem to share the same introduced reading: all five of Manly and Rickert's a group read *thyn*.

Possibly this is an isolated instance: possibly this pattern, of a few manuscripts (particularly Hengwrt and Ellesmere) sharing an apparently archetypal variant, which is not present in most other manuscripts, occurs only here. Or perhaps it is not isolated and there are significant other instances of other variants in the *Tale* sharing the same pattern. It is possible using the variant search tool VBASE on the CD-ROM to test whether there are other variants with a similar pattern of preservation. At its simplest: we are interested in variants which are present in both Hengwrt and Ellesmere, but which are not found throughout the whole tradition. Our hypothesis is that if a reading stood in both Hengwrt and Ellesmere, then it is likely to have been present in the archetype of the whole tradition, and so to have been present widely across the whole tradition. For the great majority of variants, nearly 6000 of them in fact (VBASE shows 5809 variants shared by Hengwrt and Ellesmere; of these 5714 are found in more than half the witnesses, that is in both Hengwrt and Ellesmere and at least 25 other witnesses), this is exactly what happens: a reading shared by Hengwrt and Ellesmere is found right across the tradition. But in a significant number of cases, a reading found in both Hengwrt and Ellesmere is found in comparatively few other witnesses. VBase finds twenty-four instances in the *Miller's Tale* of a reading present in both Hengwrt and Ellesmere, and in no more than twelve other witnesses. Here are all twenty-four instances. For each, I give all the variants identified by our collation at that point, the witnesses which agree with the reading of Hengwrt/Ellesmere, and the number of witnesses for each variant (I suppress the sigils for the witnesses for the other readings, to save space). The first line reference is the *Canterbury Tales* Project number for the line (L1-4: Link 1, line 4; MI-12: *Miller's Tale*, line 12); the second line reference, in brackets, is the line number in both the 'traditional' numbering of Skeat and others and in the 'Fragment' numbering of the Riverside edition (Benson, 1987) and others.

L1-4 (31 12): And worthy for to drawn to memorie

	9 mss	Ch Dd El Enl Gg Hg Ps Pw To1
in	41	
into	4	
	1	
vnto	1	

- LI-31 (3139): And therefore if that I mysspeke or seye
 that I 12 mss Ad2 **Bo2** Ch Dd El En1 Ha4 Ha5 Hg Ht Ln **Ph2**
I 41
that I 1
or 1
- LI-32 (3140): Wite it the ale of Southwerk I preye
 preye 12 mss **Bo2** Ch Dd Dsl El En1 Gg Hg Hk Ra3 Tc1 Tol
 yow preye 43
- LI-40 (3148): And eek to bryngen wyues in swich **fame**
 fame 11 mss **Bo2** Ch Cp DI El Gg Hg La **Ra3** Sl2 Tc1
 name 36
 blame 5
 blane **I**
 shame 1
fame blame 1
- LI-54 (3164): Ofgoddes pryuetee nor of **his** wyf
 10 mss **Bo2** Ch Dsl El En1 Gg Hg Hk Ln Ra3
 ne 41
 nothir 3
 and **I**
- LI-56 (3166): Of the remenant nedeth noght **enquere**
 enquere 12 mss **Ad1** Dd Ds1 El En1 En3 Ha4 Hg Hk Ht Sl1 Tol
 to **enquere** 43
- MI-12 (3198): Of euery thyng I may nat rekene hem **alle**
 he n 12 mss Ch Dd DI El En1 Gg Ha4 Hg li Lc Mg Ps
 I 42
- MI-91 (3277): And seyde ywys but if ich haue my **wille**
 ich 6 mss Ch Cp Dd El En1 Hg
 I 45
I may 3
 (...) 1
- MI-132 (3318): With **Poules** wyndow coruen on his shoos
 wyndow 14 mss **Ad1** **Bo2** Ch Cp El Gg Hg La Lc Mg Ph2 Ra3 Tc1 Tol
 wyndowes 41
- MI-138 (3324): As whit as is the blosme vpon the rys
 vpon 8 mss **Ad1** El En3 Ha4 Hg li Py Tol
 on 44
 of 5
- MI-204 (3390): And al his ernest turneth tila **lape**
 til 14 mss **Bo2** Ch Cn Cp Cx2 El En1 Gg Hg La Ma Pn Ra3 Tol
 to 26
 into 7
 but to 10
- MI-231 (3417): For for no cry hir mayde koude hym calle
 for 13 mss Ad2 Ad3 **Bo1** Ch Cp Dd El En2 Hg La Ln Ma Ph2

that	7	
For	1	
()	36	
MI-250 (3436): He cryde and knocked as that he were wood		
that	14 mss	Ad1 Ad3 Bo2 Cp El En2 En3 Ha3 Ha4 Ha5 Hg La Ra3 S12
thogh	12	
()	31	
MI-265 (3451): This man is falle with his Astromye		
Astromye	7 mss	Bo2 Ch Cn El Hg La Py
astronomye	49	
MI-271 (3457): So ferde another clerk with Astromye		
Astromye	4 mss	Bo2 Ch El Hg
astronomye	44	
his astronomye	7	
Astronome	1	
MI-287 (3473): And euere caped vp into the Eyr		
uued	7 mss	Ad2 Bo2 Bw Cp El En2 Hg
gaped	42	
he gaped	6	
he caped	1	
MI-299 (3485): For the nyghtes uerye the white Pater noster		
uerye	7 mss	Ad3 Bo2 El Ha3 Hg Mg Ry l
very	12	
mare	12	
verye	16	
werry	3	
very and	1	
verray	1	
nerye	2	
v rie	1	
MI-598 (3786): Ful softe out at the dore he gan to stele		
o	13 mss	Ad3 Bo2 Cn Cp Dd Ds1 El En1 En2 Ha5 Hg Ma To1
he	5	
it	1	
out of the dore	1	
	34	
MI-600 (3788): He cogheth first and knocketh therwithal		
He cog heth	12 mss	Ad3 Bo2 Ch Dd El Gg Ha4 Ha5 He Hg Ph2 To1
He coughed	37	
And coughed	3	
And knocked	1	
He kallyth	1	
MI-600 (3788): He cogheth first and knocketh therwithal		
nokket ,	13 mss	Ad3 Bo2 Ch Dd El En1 Ha4 Ha5 He Hg Pn Ps To1
knocked	39	
kallyth	1	
cogheth	1	

MI-605 (3793): I am thyn Absolon my derelyng;

my	6 mss	Ch El Gg Hg Ps To1
thyn dere	7	
thyn	27	
thyn owne	9	
I am thyn dere	1	
O my	2	
thyn swete	1	
and thyn	1	

MI-634 (3822): Ne breed ne ale **til** he cam to the **Celle**

til he cam	14 mss	Ad1 Ad3 Ch Dd Ds1 El En1 En3 Ha5 Hg La Pn Ps Ryl
but shortly down he	4	
til he come	31	
Ne no thyng	1	
†til he come	1	

MI-641 (3829): For with the **fal** he brosten hadde his arm

ne brosten hadde	14 mss	Ad1 Ad3 Bo2 Ch El En3 Ha4 Ha5 Hg Lc Mg Ra3 Ryl Tcl
brosten hadde he	1	
he brosten hath	10	
he broken hadde	5	
brosten hath he	5	
brosten he hath	3	
he hath broken	1	
to brosten is	1	
he brosten	1	
brosten was	1	
brosten hadde	4	
broken he hadde	1	
he broken hath	1	
he hath brosten	2	
broke was	1	
hathe eyn broken	1	
brosten he hadde	1	

MI-655 (3843): For whatso that this Carpenter answerde

†t	11 mss	Bo2 Ch Cn Ds1 El En1 Ha5 Hg Hk Ma Nl
euer	15	
†	1	
what	1	
	25	

This list repays detailed study. The easiest explanation for the occurrence of readings in both Hengwrt and Ellesmere, which are not shared across all the other witnesses, is that the two manuscripts share an exemplar below the archetype. That is, these are readings introduced into the tradition in a single copy, which Hengwrt and Ellesmere both descend from. Other witnesses do not descend from that copy, and so do not have those readings. However, two factors weigh against this easy explanation. The first is the distribution of these readings in other witnesses. One would expect that if Hengwrt and Ellesmere were descended from a single copy below the archetype, a few other witnesses might also descend from this copy, and one would see a regular pattern of agreement with Hengwrt and Ellesmere and these other witnesses. with the same sigils

occurring over and over again. But from the table above there does not appear to be any such regular pattern of agreement. While some witnesses do have more of these variants than do others (notably Ch, with 18, and Bo? with 16: no other has more than 12) the sigils do not co-occur as one might expect were this a group descended from a single exemplar within the tradition. Rather, the spread of these variants right across the tradition, with 45 of the 58 witnesses having at least one of these twenty-four readings, suggests the contrary. These variants stood in the ancestor of the whole tradition, and so might be found by descent in any witness within the tradition. The fact that a few witnesses have more of these variants than others arises from a few witnesses (notably, Hengwrt and Ellesmere) being closer to the archetype than are other witnesses.

The second, and most critical, factor is the nature of the variants themselves. There is no question of the quality of the Hengwrt/Ellesmere reading in every one of these twenty-four instances. The Riverside and Variorum editors accept the Hengwrt/Ellesmere reading, mostly without comment, at every one of these twenty-four points (Ross, 1983). Further, at each of these points, one may use the same criteria we employed for the variants *my/thyn* at line 605 (3793: included among these twenty-four) to distinguish which of the variants is the more difficult, and therefore the more likely to have been lost in transmission, and so (by definition, as the most difficult) the richest in information to the reader. Briefly, for each:

- L 1 4 (31 12) to **memorie**/in memorie/into meinorie: scribes might readily substitute the familiar *in/into memorie* for the less common *lo memorie*.
- L 1 31 (3139) that **I/I**: Chaucer commonly uses pleonastic *that* to fill out the metre; scribes commonly omit it. (Cf. M 250, M 655 below).
- L 1 32 (3140) **preyeyow preye**: Scribes may have thought the line short, and so supplied the pedestriaii pronoun; but Chaucer elsewhere uses lines of this pattern; hiatus *at the/ale* gives the extra syllable, while suppression of the pronoun gives the line dramatic force (see on *enquere/to enquere*).
- L 1 40 (3148) **fame**/name/blame: *Name* is dull; *fame* implies not just reputation but widespread reputation, even notoriety.
- L 1 54 (3164) **nor/ne**: *Nor* is necessary to avoid elision.
- L 1 56 (3166) **enquere**/to enquere: Cf. *preye/yow preye* above. Scribes commonly add prepositions and pronouns to smooth the sense; but their suppression may speed the narrative, invoking a sense of urgent speech.
- M 12 (3198) **hem**/[omitted]: omission of *hem* gives easy sense, with *alle* as the direct object of (or, adverb qualifying) the verb *rekne*. But *hem* is more emphatic, linking to the *everything* of the first half of the line.
- M 91 (3277) **ich**/I: *ich* is emphatic once more; scribes might prefer the more usual *I* form.
- M 132 (3318) **wyndow**/wyndowes: again, the majority of the scribes have the easier and less vivid reading. *Wyndow* invokes a particular window, probably the rose window of the old St. Paul's, and so a particular shape; *wyndowes* could be any of the windows, and any shape.

- MI 138 (3324) uponlon: scribes substitute the more ordinary *on* for the more rhetorical upon.
- MI 204 (3417) **til/to**: again, the more usual and less forceful preposition is substituted.
- MI 231 (3417) **for/that/[omitted]**: therepeated *for* at the beginning of the lines, requiring either dramatic performance or moderii punctuation to inake sense of it, **clearly** confused the scribes, causing most to omit it.
- MI 250 (3436) **that/thogh/[omitted]**: aiiother instance of pleonastic that; compare on L1 31 and MI 655.
- MI 265 (3451) and MI 271 (3457) **Astromye/Astronomye: Skeat** (cited by Ross 1983: 184) explains this as a **joke** on the carpenter, who caniiot get his technical terms right. The **joke** is lost on the scribes.
- MI 287 (3473) capedgaped: substitution of a familiar word for an unfamiliar word.
- MI 299 (3485) **uerye/verye/very/mare/werry/etc**: nine different variants **here**, in our collation, suggests thiat the scribes were **just** as baffled by this term as are modern **editors**. It appears that **Hengwrt/Ellesmere** simply reproduce what was in their exemplar, where others seek for **some** kind of sense
- MI 598 (3786) gan to **stele/gan stele/gan he stele**: this appears similar to the situation in L1 36, L1 56, but with the **reverse** result: **Hengwrt/Ellesmere** supply the preposition others do not. However, the situatioii is not thie same: it is common to **suppress to** in phrases with gan, and once more the **Hengwrt/Ellesmere** reading is slightly the more **unusual** and **also, metrically** preferable.
- MI 600 (3788) cogheth...**knokketh/coghed**...knocked: the present tense **is** unexpected, as the preceding aaid following lines are **firmly** past tense. But the shift into the present at the highpoint of the **narrative** is dramatically effective.
- MI 605 (3793) **my/thyn**: see the discussion above.
- MI 634 (3822) **cam/com**: **there** is evideiice that Chaucer preferred the form **cam** for the simple past (thus its use in rhyme position rhyiningon *ram* in the description of the Miller in the General Prologue); scribes might substitute their own form of the past **in** its stead.
- MI 641 (3829) he brosten **hadde/he** brosten **hath/he** broken **hadde/brosten** hath **he/etc.**: no less than seventeen different readiiggs **here**, among the 54 witnesses, suggest that contemporary readers had trouble with the **unusual** word **order** and verb form.
- MI 655 (3843) **that/euer/[omitted]**: again, the pleonastic *that* is likely to be lost. Cf. L1 31, MI 250 above.

None of these, it must be said, makes a critical difference to the meaning of the **Tale**.⁶ But in each case, there is a significant difference in quality between the reading shared by **Hengwrt** and **Ellesmere** and those readings found in the other witnesses. Typically **the Hengwrt/Ellesmere** reading is more expressive, more vivid, more challenging, more dramatic, less familiar. These are exactly the qualities we normally **identify** as distinctively Chaucerian, exactly the qualities for which Chaucer's contemporaries and many critics **have** valued Chaucer's **poetry** so highly. In every case, we can see why a scribe might misunderstand and miscopy. If we are seeking authorial variants, this seems a likely place to find them.

As a result of the discussion above, another question **arises**: is it possible that these readings represent Chaucer's own revisions? Might he **have** first written the inferior variants,

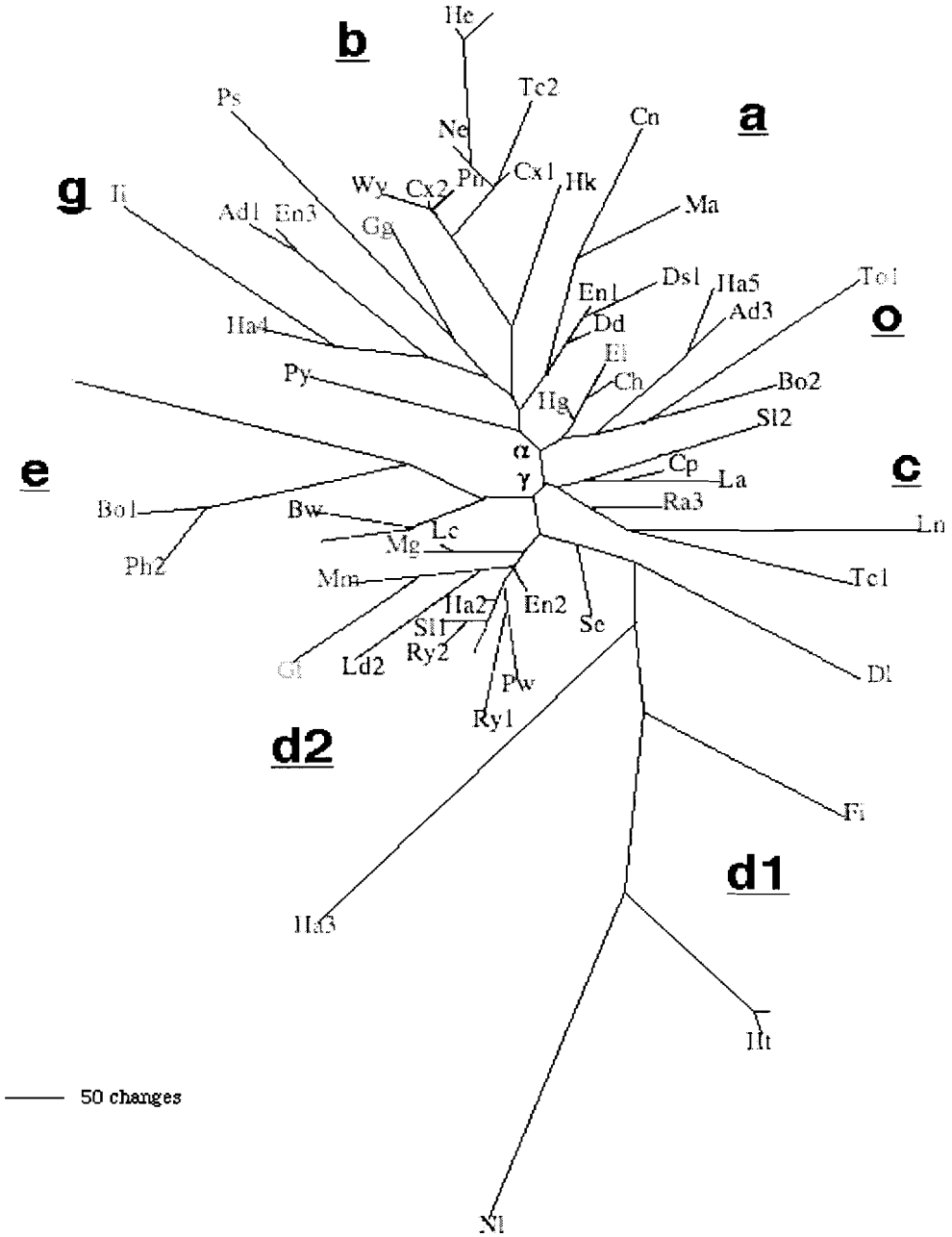
then revised them away? There are problems with this. First, if that were so, we would expect to see evidence that the readings introduced by Chaucer are confined to witnesses descending from the revised witness. We do not see this: the hypothetical Chaucerian readings are present across the whole tradition. Second, if we consider Chaucer capable of writing the better readings characteristic of Hengwrt and Ellesmere, then why could he not have written those first? It is easier to assume that these readings were present in the archetype, that they represent Chaucer's first and best thoughts, and that the loss of these readings within the tradition is the small change of textual traditions, as a succession of scribes misunderstand and miscopy.

So far, we have been considering a rather narrow range of variants: just those found in both Hengwrt and Ellesmere, and typically removed by scribes. Let us now broaden this. The last section proposed several hypotheses:

1. Certain variants present in the archetype, but likely to offer serious difficulty to scribes, might be preserved in Hengwrt and Ellesmere (thus, *my* in MI 605 (3793));
2. Certain other witnesses particularly close to the archetype might also preserve these archetypal variants (thus, the four manuscripts Ch Ps Gg Tol);
3. These variants will tend to be removed in the succession of copyings that created the tradition, as we have it, as we move away from the archetype, and non-archetypal, introduced, variants set in their place (thus *thyn* and its variants);
4. The witnesses further from the archetype may be set into groups, as they share readings introduced into particular witnesses within the tradition, then copied into descendants of those witnesses (thus, *rhyn* in the a group).

If we find the same pattern in other variants then it might be true of the whole *Miller's Tale*. We could then construct a hypothetical picture of the witness relations across all the witnesses, covering all the variants in the tale, and then use this to guide our views on particular variants. Over the last decade, with the help of many scholars, we have learnt how to apply to textual traditions techniques developed by evolutionary biologists ('phylogenetic methods') for the making of hypotheses of relationship based on characteristics shared and not shared in a population.⁷ In our case, the population is of textual witnesses, not of organisms, but we have found the methods work remarkably well with texts. After all, witness traditions, like living organisms, develop by descent with modification. For example, where we have been able to correlate the hypothetical histories given by phylogenetic methods with historical information about the witness relations, there is a high degree of correspondence.

Using all the data concerning witness relations from the *Miller's Tale* CD-ROM, we carry out a phylogenetic analysis, so making a genetic hypothesis of how the witnesses relate to each other. We show this in a 'variant map', offering a hypothesis of how all the witnesses relate to each other across the whole tradition. For each variant, we place the variants on the map with colours indicating what witness has what reading. This variant map is for the variants on *my* in MI 605 for the fifty-four witnesses extant at this point.



In the previous diagram, the length of each branch represents number of variants: thus, the long branch up to the pair Bo1/Ph2, compared to the short branch leading to the pair Cp/La, indicates that that pair Bo1/Ph2 share rather more variants, relative to the rest of the tradition, than the pair Cp/La. Note that this tree is 'unrooted', and of itself makes no statement about direction of variation or the likely location of the archetype, in relation to the witnesses. It is up to us to decide, on examination of the variants themselves, where the archetype might have been. From the previous discussion, we are likely to locate the archetype near the centre, close to Hengwrt and Ellesmere. Note that the witnesses we noted as sharing the Hengwrt/Ellesmere variants discussed above are also located near this point: thus Ch and Bo2. We label the witnesses clustered around this point the O witnesses; elsewhere around the variant map are labels for the other witness groupings, a b c d etc.

We have used colour in the CD-ROM (not visible in this reproduction) to indicate what witnesses have what readings. On the CD-ROM, the reading *my* is represented by green, and this is the reading of the three manuscripts Hg El Ch grouped close to the centre of the map. Nearly half the witnesses, including almost all those in the lower half of the tree (those that are believed to descend from a single exemplar y), and the a group manuscripts in the top half have the reading *thyn*. In turn, we may use this picture of the witness relations to guide our view of the variants at any one point. From the variants reviewed so far, a pattern has emerged. Some readings are more difficult, more 'Chaucerian', and are more likely to have been present in the archetype. Characteristically, the variant map will show these readings clustering in witnesses we think likely to be close to the archetype, while the spread of variants across the rest of the tradition will show the difficulties the scribes had with these readings. Therefore, the variant map gives us an additional tool, to help discriminate between variants. We may use our understanding of the text, our sense of scribal practice, and our intuitions about Chaucer's poetic to find our way through the readings, as editors always have. But we may also use the overview provided to temper judgement by the balance of probabilities within the tradition depicted by the variant map.

Thus, we are not like George Kane, who declared that he and his co-editors in the Piers Plowman editions would use editorial judgement and editorial judgement alone to distinguish between variants as "it begins to seem that a useful genetic hypothesis will not be attainable" (Kane, 1960: 85). Nor are we strict Lachmannists: the variant map gives the best guess that phylogenetic methods can construct of the relations within the tradition. It is probable that this reflects reasonably well the actual sequence of copying within the tradition. However, this degree of probability varies according to the nature of the data and the complexity of relations at different points in the tradition. We are on good ground in asserting that Hengwrt, Ellesmere and the Christ Church manuscripts are closely related: but it would be dangerous to assert, for instance, that Ellesmere and Christ Church share an exemplar below Hengwrt on the basis of the variant map. Rather, I suggest we use the variant map to guide our understanding, not to fix it.

So far, we have dealt with relatively straightforward readings: twenty-four readings that are striking in their distribution, but in themselves arguably superior to other readings at each point. But if this method is valuable, it should be able to deal with any reading, and especially the most difficult readings. I will now examine a few such readings:

The first is MI 99 (3285):

Wy lat be quod ich lat be Nicholas

quod ich	15 mss	Ch Cn Cp Dd Dsl El Enl En2 Ha3 Hg La Ln Ra3 Ry1 S12
quod she	30	
that quod she	1	
quoth she	5	
quod she ich	1	
that quoth she	1	
she seyð	1	
seyð she	1	
quoth ich	1	

Here we have *quod ich* concentrated in the core of the Q witnesses, with all three of Hengwrt, Christ Church and Ellesmere agreeing in this reading. The variant map shows that *quod ich* is also the reading of most of the a group manuscripts and of y manuscripts close to the y archetype. In itself, this distribution makes it highly likely that this reading stood in the archetype. The problem is that the reading does not seem to make sense. Alison is exclaiming to Nicholas "take your hands off me, leave me alone". The phrases *Wy late be* and *lat be Nicholas* appear to Alison's direct speech. So what is *quodich*? It would be perfectly appropriate if Alison were reporting what she said ("I told him...") but she is not. The majority reading *quod she* makes perfect sense of the past tense by making this the narrator's interjection ("Lat be" she said...), and so is accepted by many editors (notably the Robinson and Riverside editions). But the past tense with the first person pronoun does not make sense.⁸ An attractive solution is to read the present tense with the first person pronoun, thus *quoth ich*. This makes the phrase part of Alison's speech to Nicholas: half way through the line, she tries to frame her own speech by *quoth ich* ("Let be, I say, lat be Nicholas"), so lending a 'she-protests-too-much' element to her exclamation. The Riverside editors suggest this and, remarkably, this is in fact the reading of a manuscript which shares sufficient readings with Hengwrt, Ellesmere and other witnesses close to the archetype for it to be possible that it might on occasion preserve an archetypal reading lost everywhere else. The manuscript is To1. For other sections of the *Tales* it is a manuscript of no distinction: but for some reason, its exemplar of the *Miller's Tale* seems to have been much closer to the archetype. One could also add that alternation between *quod/quoth* is common, as is shown by the collation of variants at other points where *quod/quoth* appear (e.g. in the phrase *Tehee quod/quoth she* MI 552 (3740)). This gives us something of a split verdict here. Literary judgement and variant distribution both agree on the pronoun *ich*: it is hard to see how archetypal

she would have given rise to the readings with *ich*. Literary judgement favours the present tense *quoth*, but the support for this in the witnesses may seem less firm than one would wish.

There is a similar problem at line 10 of the Miller's Prologue, L1 10 (3118):

Now telleth ye sire Monk if that ye konne

on	2 mss	El He
ye	46	
a tale	1	
{ }	6	

Just two manuscripts have the reading *un*: Telleth *on*. This reading avoids the repetition of *ye* in the line, and is more expressive than the *pallid* Telleth *ye*. But just two manuscripts have this reading: even if one of the two is Ellesmere, one would hesitate to assert on this basis that Telleth *on* was the reading in the archetype. Yet, it may well be Chaucer's own reading, perhaps imported into Ellesmere not from another manuscript but by recollection of an oral performance of the tale. In the section 'Witness Relations' on the CD-ROM I argue that three variants in Ellesmere, at MI 65 (*grene*) MI 511 (3697) (*knokketh*) and MI 622 (3810) (*amydde*) might all have arisen in this way. The last of these is particularly revealing. At MI 622 Ellesmere reads: And *Nicholas amydde ers he smoot*, while Hengwrt has And *Nicholas* in the *ers he smoot*. One would like to unite the preposition of Ellesmere with the article of Hengwrt to give: And *Nicholas umydde the ers he smoot*. In fact, eleven witnesses have the line in just this form: seven witnesses of the b group and four Q manuscripts. It happens that almost exactly the same group of witnesses, once more with Ellesmere, have the couplet MI 534-11534-2 (3721-22):¹⁰ *And vnto Nicholas she sayde stille / Now pees and thou shalt laughen al thy fille*. One cannot but feel that an edition of the Miller's Tale which does not include these lines will be the poorer for it.

Similarly, one may want to include the couplet LI 46-1/46/2 (3155-56):¹¹ *And euere a thousand good ayenst one badde / That knowestow well thyself, but if thow madde*. Again, this couplet is found in Ellesmere, not in Hengwrt. This time, it is not shared with the b witnesses but is found in several other Q manuscripts (notably, Ha4 Ad3 Gg Tol). In these cases, we find that our instincts for the best literary reading are at odds with the evidence of the witness relations. The best readings should be found regularly in the best witnesses, in a pattern consistent with them having been present in the archetype. Yet these readings are arguably the best readings, but they are found scattered through the witnesses in puzzling configurations. In such instances, editors resort to the catchall of 'contamination': short-hand for saying, the reading seems too good to be the result of scribal intervention, but it appears in the wrong places.

III. CONCLUSIONS

There is no solution to these conundra. Readings do not always follow regular channels of copying; scribes might occasionally invent a brilliant reading of which Chaucer himself would have been proud. There may have been a lost manuscript, in which Chaucer recorded some additional lines and changed some words, from which some scribes might have imported some readings. Chaucer himself may have recited or read the tale aloud, changing some words and improvising some lines as he went: one or more scribes might have recalled these changes and imported them in the texts. The likelihood of these events frees both editor and reader from the need to follow slavish stemmatics: a good reading is a good reading.

One should keep this in perspective. For the great majority of readings in the *Miller's Tale* literary judgement and stemmatic evidence are at one. Hengwrt and Ellesmere agree on some 5750 readings: in almost every one of these (effectively, all except quod ich discussed above) literary quality and stemmatics agree that these are the readings of the archetype of the whole tradition and the readings of Chaucer himself. Hengwrt and Ellesmere disagree on some 120 readings. For most of these it is rather clear that one of the two is guilty of simple miscopying: instances where it is Hengwrt at fault include L1 12 (3120) (Hengwrt u *pale*, Ellesmere alpale) MI 511 (3697) (Hengwrt *ofte*, Ellesmere *softe*), while Ellesmere appears at fault in MI 413 (3599) (Ellesmere to preche, Hengwrt teche) and MI 504 (3690) (Ellesmere grayn *of licorys*, Hengwrt *grayn* and licorys). Cases such as those above, where the text is uncertain either because the better reading has irregular support within the tradition, or because there seems no reading notably better in terms of quality and witness support, are comparatively few: perhaps less than twenty for the whole link and tale. It should be added that none of these variants seriously affect how we read the tale.

On reviewing what I have written, I see that I have used terms which editors now customarily avoid. I have spoken of some variants as being 'better' than others, as likely to be 'archetypal', as likely to have been written by Chaucer himself. I do not see any reason why we should avoid these terms. We choose to read Chaucer rather than other writers because we find him more rewarding, more challenging, more enjoyable. There can be no other basis for this judgement than the text we read. What is true of Chaucer in the whole is true for every reading: some readings are more rewarding, more challenging, more enjoyable than others. It follows that it is likely that Chaucer himself was responsible for these. From this discussion we may discern, too, a rationale for the study of textual variation. I suggest that we should not be interested in textual variation as a route towards the creation of a single text. There can never be a 'single' text of this tale, accepted by all as embodying every word Chaucer wrote and only the words Chaucer wrote. Nor even should we be interested in textual variation because it might significantly affect our interpretation of the *Miller's Tale*: variants, which decisively alter our sense of what we read, are rare. Rather, we should be interested in textual variation because it shows us, variant after variant, as under a microscope, exactly what it is which makes Chaucer so different.

NOTES

1. For a lively and well-documented exposure of the vanity of 'definitive editions' see Shillingsburg (1986).
2. For example McGann (1983) and McKenzie (1999).
3. See, for example, the observation by Peter Barry on the suggestion that one might read at least sixteen versions of Coleridge's 'Eolian Harp': "we had better make sure we have plenty of time on our hands" (Barry, 2000: 603).
4. See appendix of Bordalejo's article in this same volume for a complete list of the manuscript sigils.
5. MI before a number will be used to refer to a certain line number of the *Miller's Tale*.
6. Compare the variants of the so-called 'added passages' in the Wife of Bath's Prologue, where inclusion or exclusion of these leads to very different views of her character.
7. For an account of the phylogenetic methods used by the project, see my article 'Analysis Workshop' in Solopova (2000). An outline of these methods is given in Robinson *et al.* (2001).
8. Ross (1983: 157) argues pertinently for the reading with *ich* but does not explain the past tense *quod*, which he seems to interpret as the present.
9. Both editions by Robinson (1933; 1957) and Benson's edition (1987) read *amydde* as explained here; Ross (1983: 241) accepts the Hengwrt reading, citing support from the analogues for *amydde*.
10. The couplet is included by all modern editors, though Ross (1983) places it within square brackets and with the comment "Not much is lost by their exclusion".
11. Included by all modern editors, once more with square brackets by Ross 1983. On both this and MI 534-1/2 (3721-22) see the longer discussion by Ross (1983: 54).

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