

The Problem of Authorial Variants in The Wife of Bath's Prologue

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In *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, Ellesmere and some other manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* contain passages absent from Hengwrt and the majority of the surviving witnesses.¹ It has been argued that these so called 'added passages' may be a result of a partial survival of a different authorial version of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. According to one possible view the existing witnesses of *The Canterbury Tales* go back to an unfinished authorial draft, which contained Chaucer's 'second thoughts' in the form of corrections.² The scribes or their supervisors had to edit this draft and to decide for themselves which readings were best and should be included in their copies. The passages in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* may have been marked for cancellation in Chaucer's holograph or written somewhere in the margins, and so found their way into some manuscripts, but not into others. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to relations between manuscripts containing the added passages, and to a few other variants outside these added passages which may also bear upon the problem of authorial revision, in the hope that this will stimulate further discussion.

The Added Passages

The central question to be answered in connection with the added passages is how many independent lines of descent are represented by their witnesses. The five added passages occur in the following witnesses, belonging to four separate branches of the textual tradition:³

	Dd/AB	E	CD	O
44/1-6	Dd Cx1 Tc2 Ne Cx2 Pn Wy Cn Ma Ii He Ds En1	Si	Ry1Se	Ch
574/1-10	Dd Cx1 Tc2 Ne Cx2 Pn Wy Cn Ma Ii Ds En1	El Gg	Ry1 Se	Ch Ad3
598/1-4	Dd Cx1 Tc2 Ne Cx2 Pn Wy Cn Ma Ii Ds En1	El Gg Si	Ry1 Se Ha2	Ch Ad3
604/1-8	Dd Cx1 Tc2 Ne Cx2 Pn Wy Cn Ma Ii Ds En1	El Gg Si	Ry1 Se Ha2 Ld1	Ch
694/1-4	Dd Cx1 Tc2 Ne Cx2 Pn Wy Cn Ma Ii He Ds En1	El Si	Ry1 Se (Ha2)	Ch

The study of relations between these manuscripts strongly suggests that the CD group which contains Ry₁ Se Ha₂ and Ld₁ does not constitute an independent line of descent for these passages: these manuscripts appear to have received them by contamination from the Dd/AB manuscripts. Contamination is also a very likely explanation for the presence of the passages in Si—a witness closely related to Gg. Analysis of the texts of three of these five manuscripts—Ry₁ Se and Si—has shown that, though they share the majority of readings with their groups, they also contain a number of readings characteristic of the Manly and

Rickert AB manuscript group. The text of the passages themselves in Ry₁ Se Si Ha₂ and Ld₁ is also close to the AB version. It is interesting that whereas Si and Se share with the AB group the added passages and a large number of readings, including the renumbering of the husbands in lines 450-525, Ry₁ borrowed from the AB group only the added passages and the renumbering of the husbands, but no other readings.⁴ Ha₂ and Ld₁ received just some of the added passages.⁵ This is revealing as showing how the added passages could travel across the stemma. Some scribes were interested in correcting only what they saw as major inconsistencies, such as the presence or absence of passages of text and misnumberings, but were indifferent to the correction of individual readings through a more detailed comparison of the manuscripts.

Ad₃ is also unlikely to represent an independent line of descent for the passages. This manuscript has various textual similarities with El and contains only two of the added passages, and these are in a form close to the El and Gg version. Thus in l. 9 of the second passage Ad₃ El and Gg omit 'as,' present in all other manuscripts, and make this line metrically irregular:

But I folwed ay my dames l(~~Ad~~₃ 574/9)
 But as I folwed ay , my dames (~~Dd~~)₆e

In l. 10 of this passage all the manuscripts have a demonstrative 'that,' whereas Ad₃ El and Gg have a demonstrative 'this':

As wel of this as other thinges(~~Ad~~₃ 574/10)
 As wel of that , as of othere thyng(~~Dd~~)₆ore

Gg seems also to have received the added passages by direct import from the same source as El. The evidence for this is the closeness of the text of the passages in El and Gg, and the fact that no other manuscript of the E group to which Gg belongs (apart from Si, where contamination with AB is obvious) has the added passages. An example of a textual error shared by El and Gg against all the other manuscripts which have this passage is the omission of 'that Ihesu' in l. 694/1:

For which crist· hym self , wa(~~El~~₆ Gg)_{yn}
 For whicæ that iæu crist , hi~ self(~~Dd~~)₆as slayn

Contamination is a very likely explanation for the presence of the passages in Ch.⁷ Though textually Ch is close to Hg and does not share any significant readings with the AB group or Dd outside the added passages, its version of the added passages is close to these manuscripts. The following readings are shared in the added passages by Ch and the group AB. In the first passage (44/1-6) the last three lines are correct only in Cx₂, and its close relatives Pn Wy, and in Dd where corrections in the hand of the main scribe eliminate mistakes characteristic of the AB group:

Dyuers scolis makyth parfight clerkis
 Anð dyuers practik in many sondry werkys
 Makyth the werkman parfyte si(~~Cx~~₂)_y

All the other manuscripts—that is the AB group, Si Ry₁ Se dependent on AB, and Ch—have a metrically and stylistically inferior text:

Authorial Variants in The Wife of Bath's Prologue

Dyu s scoles maken dyu s clerkes
And dyu s praktyke in many sondry werkys
Maketh yea fite man sik(Ch)

In the fourth passage (604/1-8) El Cx2 Gg Pn and Wy have a metrically regular and syntactically concise version of the first line:

Yet haue I , Martes Mark vp on my(El)ace

A different version which is metrically less regular and looks like a simplification of a 'lectio difficilior' appears in Ch Cx1 Ha2 Ii Ne and Tc2:

Yet haue I a marke of Mars vppon my(Gl)ace

The fact that the genitive of 'Mars' was indeed a difficult reading for some of the scribes can be seen from two more variants found in the rest of the manuscripts:

Yet haue y Mars marke vppon my (CaDd Ds1 En1 Ma)
yit haue I Mars is marke , vppon n(Se LdCe)

The third line of this passage is metrically regular in El Ds En1 Gg Ha2 Ld1 Ry1 Se:

For god so wys , be my sauaciou

Other manuscripts—Ch Cn Cx1 Cx2 Dd Ii Ma Ne Pn Tc2 and Wy—have the following metrically irregular reading:

For god so wissely be my sau(Ch)on

Though this change could have occurred independently by coincidence, it is significant in the background of other agreements between Ch and the AB group. Again the reading 'wys' in this context was difficult for the scribes and could have provoked a change to a more grammatically explicit form of the adverb.

In l. 6 El and Gg have again a metrically regular version:

Al were he , short· or long· or blak (El)or whit

Ch Cx1 Cx2 Ld1 Ma Ne Pn Ry1 Se Tc2 and Wy have a metrically irregular reading:

Al were he longe short blak or(Ch)ite

A different word order is found in Dd Ds1 En1 Ha2 and Ii:

Al were he short long blak or whyt

A close parallel for this line is l. 422 in the General Prologue supported, for example, by Hg El and Ch:

Were it of hoot· or ~~o~~moyst· or dr(Ch)

It seems that the Ch version of the added passages is particularly close to Dd, though Ch did not have access to the superior source from which the first passage in Dd was corrected. When Dd agrees with El, Ch also often agrees, as in the following four lines:

For blood bytokeneth golde as me was taught (Ad₃ Ch, Dd Ds El
En₁ Gg Ry₁ 574/7)

For blood betokenete golde as was me (Cn Ma)

For blo~~o~~ betokeny~~t~~e gol, as I was taught (Cx₁ Cx₂ Ii Ne Pn
Tc₂ Wy)

And alle was fals I dremed of it right (Ch Dd E₁ Gg Ma Ry₁
574/8)

An~~o~~ al was fals I dremed of him right (Ad₃ Cn Cx₁ Cx₂
Ds₁ En₁ Ii Ne Pn Tc₂ Wy)

For certes I am a' venerable (Ad₃ Ch Dd Ds El En₁ Gg Ry₁ 598/1)

For certis y am fu' venerable (Cn Ii Ma Si)

For certis I am al fully venerable (Cn Cx₁ Cx₂ Ha₂ Ne Pn Se Tc₂ Wy)

Venus me yaf my luste , my likerousnes (Ad₃ Ch Dd Ds El En₁
Gg Ry₁ Se Si 598/3)

Venus me yaf· my lust and my licourousnes (Cn Ma Wy)

Venus me yaf my lust~~o~~ a likerousnes (Cx₁ Cx₂ Ne Pn Tc₂)

Venus me yaf· my lust , my liky-g· & likerousnes (Ha₂ Ds₁)

Since Dd is related to the AB manuscripts very high on the stemma (according to Robinson's analysis it is related to an exemplar of the AB group),⁸ the closeness of the text of the passages in Dd and Ch indicates that the passages were copied into an ancestor of Ch from a manuscript which had this relatively early version. The few readings which Ch shares with small numbers of A or B manuscripts, particularly with Cn and Ma, or Ii, but not with Dd, are likely to be due to coincident variation. Thus in line 604/4 Ch Gg Cn and Ma have a variant 'leued' instead of 'loued' as in other manuscripts:

I leued neu be noon discrecion (Ch)

I loy~~u~~neuer by no dyscress (Cx₂)

This change could have occurred independently since confusion between 'e' and 'o' is not uncommon in Chaucer manuscripts. In l. 574/6 Ch agrees with Cn Ma Ne in the following reading:

But yet I hope ye shal do me good (Ch)

Cx₁, Cx₂ and the closely related Pn Tc₂ and Wy have a variant 'truly' possibly introduced by Cx₁ and left uncorrected in Cx₂:

But yet I hope truly ye shul do me good (Cx₂)

The majority of other manuscripts—Dd Ds₁ En₁ Ii Ry₁ Se—have yet another reading:

But 'et I hope , that 'e shuln do me good (Dd)

A different version is found in El Ad₃ and Gg:

But yet I hope , that he shal do me good (El)

The variant found in Cx₁ Cx₂ Pn Tc₂ Wy is metrically defective. The other readings are both metrically regular and make sense. Though usually El and Ad₃ have a superior version of the added passages, with fewer mistakes than the AB manuscripts, the reading 'that ye' was selected by the Riverside Chaucer and is defended by Manly and Rickert as more Chaucerian.⁹

Since Ch does not seem to represent an independent line of descent for the passages, the manuscripts which remain to be discussed are the AB group, Dd El and Cx₂. All the five added passages occur in the manuscripts of the AB group, in Dd and Cx₂.¹⁰ Only four of the passages—those at the end of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*—occur in El. The fact that the first passage (46/1-6) does not appear in El is hardly surprising: in the first part of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* the text of El is close to the text of the E group, the common exemplar of which lacked the added passages. The two members of this group which have some of the passages (Si and Gg) appear to have received them through contamination. The authority of the first passage, not present in El Gg Ad₃, is confirmed by the evidence that it was present in the manuscript used by Caxton in the preparation of his second edition. It appears that this manuscript contained a text of high quality: thus, it had the first passage in a form as correct as Dd, eliminating the mistakes found in AB manuscripts.¹¹

It is interesting that the manuscripts which seem to have received the added passages from the same source as El reflect them inconsistently: Ad₃ has only two, whereas Gg does not have the last passage, and though the beginning of the Prologue is missing in Gg, according to Manly and Rickert it certainly did not contain the first.¹² The fact that El Ad₃ and Gg reflect the passages inconsistently may be due to the nature of the exemplar from which they received the passages. Manuscripts which represent the AB version of the passages – Dd AB group and Ch – include all the five passages and show no hesitation as to the position of the passages in the text. It is likely that they received the passages from a clearly written copy and it is possible that El Gg and Ad₃ could go back to a copy where the passages were marked off from the remainder of the text (as deletions, or by marginal annotation.)

Our present knowledge of the textual tradition derived from comparison of readings independent of the added passages suggests a likely genetic connection between the AB manuscripts, Dd El and the lost exemplar of Cx₂ somewhere very close to the source of the whole tradition.¹³ The conclusion that these are the only manuscripts that appear to have received the added passages by direct ancestral descent further confirms this hypothesis. The common exemplar of these manuscripts must have existed at the very earliest stages of the development of the textual tradition and this makes the authorial origin of the added passages likely. This exemplar was different from the manuscript which was a source of Hg and manuscripts close to it such as Ch (the added passages aside) and Bo₂.

Spurious Lines

Apart from the added passages there are about twenty-eight spurious lines in all the fifty-eight fifteenth-century witnesses to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. Most of these lines are supported by only one, two or three witnesses. Manuscripts which commonly have spurious lines or highly idiosyncratic versions of well-attested lines are Bw and Ln, the CD group (particularly Fi Ps Ry₁ Sl₂), Gl Ra₃ and Tc₁. Only four of the spurious lines (46a, 222a, 260a and 382a) are shared by any significant number of manuscripts, but in all four cases the manuscripts belong to just one genetic group: AB or CD. Apart from a much wider manuscript support for the added passages, what immediately strikes in comparing them and the spurious lines is the difference in quality: most spurious lines are stylistically poor and are almost invariably in metrically irregular verse. Lines 46a, 138a and 222b can serve as examples:

I wil hym not forsake no thing (46a) at Ta₁ Ne Cn Ma li He En₁
 Se)
 What schulde thei thynk ouer Chastyte eny (138a) By
 Sum tyme kouerchiefs sum tyme knyfis a (222b) Ps

Obviously it was not easy for the scribes to imitate Chaucer, and by comparison with such obviously unauthentic lines the added passages have serious claims for authenticity.

Other possibly authorial variants

If Chaucer did revise the text of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* he could have made other changes apart from the added passages. There is, however, very little evidence for such changes: the prologue lacks significant textual variation which could suggest authorial re-writing or corrections. There are very few variants even with minor claims for the authorial origin. A possible criterion for identifying authorial variants is particular closeness to the text of the French source used by Chaucer for *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*.¹⁴ Another possible condition is agreement with the message carried by the added passages. There is one reading satisfying the first condition and one reading satisfying the second condition. The first reading is 'experiment' in the first line of the Prologue found in the following manuscripts:

		CD		E	F	O(CD)
experiment	Cp	Mm La Ld ₁ Ry ₁ Sl ₁ Sl ₂ Fi	(Ra ₂)	Bw	Gl	

The reading in Ra₂ is 'Eryment.' Gl is effectively a member of the CD group in this part of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*.¹⁵ The French source for the beginning of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* is Jean de Meun's *Le Roman de la Rose*. The prototype of the Wife of Bath, La Vieille says

Bele ere, juenne, nice et fole,
 N'ainc ne fui d'amour a escole,

(Ou l'on seust la theorique;
 Mais je sai tout par la pratique:)
Experimenz m'en ont fait sage,
 Que j'ai hantez tout mon aage (2805-12810)

The use of 'experiment' rather than 'experience' is unlikely to signify any revision of meaning. The evidence shows that in Latin, French and English of this period the meaning of both words was similar and they were used interchangeably in scientific texts meaning 'practice, experiment, experience.'¹⁶

The second reading is 'soth' in l. 46 which occurs in the following manuscripts:

	Dd/A	CD	E	F	O(CD)
soth	Cx2PnWy	Mm La Ph3 Dl Hk Ra2Mc Ra1 Py	El Ha4	Ld2 Ry2 Ln	Gl

The reading 'soth' substantially changes the meaning of l. 46 and the following lines and contributes to a more frivolous image of the Wife of Bath in agreement with how she is portrayed by the added passages. As was pointed out by Robinson with the reading 'sith' the emphasis is on the Wife's wish to marry again if widowed, whereas with the reading 'soth' the emphasis is more strongly on the rejection of chastity:

For sothe , I wol nat kepe me chaast in al
 Whan myn housbonde , is fro the world ygon
 Som cristen man , shal wedde me ~~(sith)~~⁷

This reading has rather impressive manuscript support, since it is found in El and was apparently present in the manuscript used for corrections in Cx2. Both variants have a somewhat similar manuscript support, which is however different from the added passages: they both occur in CD E and F manuscripts, but not in the AB group.

Conclusions

There is little evidence for authorial revision in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* apart from the added passages. The authorial origin of these passages is however highly likely on the grounds of manuscript support, early date, literary quality, and agreement with the evidence for other structural changes in the *Tales*, such as the re-attribution of the *Shipman's Tale*.¹⁸ This study suggests that there is only one line of descent for the added passages and supports the hypothesis that all the manuscripts which contain the added passages go back to a single exemplar. This exemplar seems not to have been a fair copy, but rather an authorial working copy with alternative readings shown (for example) by addition, substitution, or deletion. The irregular and contradictory distribution of these variants indicates uncertainty about their status in the ultimate common exemplar. It is likely that this common exemplar was an unfinished authorial draft, rather than a fair authorial or scribal copy. The exemplar (or exemplars) of such manuscripts as Hg Ch (before it received the added passages

from a manuscript close to Dd) and B02 could go back either to the same unfinished draft, in which case their scribe has chosen to ignore the passages, or to a fair authorial or scribal copy which did not contain the 'second thoughts.' The texts of the two archetypes—one archetype being the authorial working copy, the other being the scribal or authorial fair copy—must have been very close, just as Hg and El are close in the second part of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. In *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* the presence or the absence of the passages could have been their main or even their only distinction.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Peter Robinson for discussion and suggestions on the drafts of this essay.

² Tatlock, 1935, 100-139; Blake, 1992, 32 and 1985, 44-57.

³ The stemma and discussion of manuscript groupings in *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* are found in Peter Robinson's 'Stemmatic Analysis of the Fifteenth-Century Witnesses to *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*,' in this volume. It also contains a table with a more detailed account of the distribution of the added passages, p. 119. In this article, the labelling of certain manuscript groupings as AB CD derives from Manly and Rickert; the labelling of others as E F and O derives from Robinson.

⁴ The renumbering of the husbands occurs in ll. 452, 480, 503 and 525. This renumbering is characteristic of the AB manuscripts and Dd, but also occurs (almost certainly due to contamination) in manuscripts from other groups: thus Ry₁ Se Si Ad₁ En₃.

⁵ The version of the added passages in Ha₂ is particularly close to Ii, but contains numerous idiosyncrasies, whereas the version of the fourth passage found in Ld₁ is close to Ry₁ (cf. Manly and Rickert, 1940, II, pp. 191-192.)

⁶ Metrical regularity is important for determining the value of the readings, because none of the manuscripts here discussed appear to have been edited for the sake of regularising the metre. This increases the likelihood that metrically more regular lines are of authorial origin. It will be shown later that most of the spurious lines are metrically defective and that scribal attempts at producing iambic pentameter verse are usually easily recognisable.

⁷ It is unlikely that the passages were imported by the scribe of Christ Church 152 itself. There are no signs of the uncertainty or editorial activity in this manuscript which one would expect if the producers of Ch itself were responsible for the incorporation of the passages. In an unpublished essay on the 'added passages,' Dan Mosser points out that Ch draws on the text of the AB tradition in parts of the *Tales* outside *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*.

⁸ Robinson, p. 90-93.

⁹ Manly and Rickert, 1940, II, 193.

¹⁰ Cx₂ though based on Cx₁, an AB witness, contains corrections introduced from a lost manuscript of superior quality which was not an AB witness.

¹¹ Cf. Manly and Rickert, II, 194.

¹² Manly and Rickert, 1940, II, 192: 'Clearly Gg picked up only three of the five passages; it visibly lacks 717-20, and we may be sure that the lost folio did not contain the six lines of 44a-f, as lines 1-76, which are missing, would entirely fill the two pages (Gg runs 36-38 lines to a page).'

¹³ Robinson, p. 124.

¹⁴ Thus, San Marino, Huntington Library, HM 114 and related to it manuscripts of *Troilus and Criseyde*, have a number of readings closer to Chaucer's Italian source, than the corresponding readings in other manuscripts. It has been argued that both readings are authorial. See Windeatt, 1984, 43 and 1979.

¹⁵ Robinson, p. 113.

¹⁶ See OED entries for 'experiment' and 'experience'; 'experientia' and 'experimentum' in the *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*. Chaucer's usual word and the only word registered by the Tatlock and Kennedy concordance of all Chaucer's works (1927) and the Okayama concordance of Blake's text of the *Tales* (1994) is 'experience.'

¹⁷ 'Editor's Introduction,' Robinson 1996. See also Kennedy in this volume, p. 25-26.

¹⁸ Robinson, p. 126.

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