The Limits of Scribal Creativity: Rewriting the *Cook's Tale* in Bodley 686

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Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* exhibits elements of both completeness and incompleteness as a work of literature. Written in England starting *c*. 1387, the text presents a collection of tales told by characters of diverse backgrounds, combining poetry and prose to form a sequence of stories. With some exceptions, the tales themselves appear to be contained and complete, but the collection in its entirety "still bears signs of a work in progress."[1] In the *General Prologue*, the host of the Tabard Inn proposes the structure for the tales told by the travelers on their pilgrimage from London to Canterbury, giving the text its frame. According to the rules outlined by the host, each of the travelers is to tell two tales on the way to Canterbury and two on the way back. The tales that actually appear in the sequence number far fewer than the proposed amount—the clearest sign of the incompleteness inherent in the text.

The fragmented and incomplete nature of *The Canterbury Tales* posed a problem for scribes seeking to construct a manuscript of the text. The tales survive in eighty-two manuscripts, each of which contains variants as a result of scribal error or, in some cases, intentional intervention, and the task of

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1   B. A. Windeatt, "Literary Structures in Chaucer," in *The Cambridge Companion to Chaucer*, ed. Piero Boitani and Jill Mann (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 214.

positioning these relatively finished tales in a seemingly unfinished sequence invites scribal efforts to impose some order onto the text. This editorial exercise produces alternative orderings of the tales within the sequence, added spurious lines, and other bibliographical or interpretive alterations.

The idiosyncratic activities of scribes in manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* call for a careful interrogation, especially as regards their effect on the possible interpretation of Chaucer's writing. A case in point of these problems may be found in the *Cook's Tale*, an uncharacteristically short and seemingly incomplete poem that therefore presented an obvious challenge for scribes who had to incorporate its text into their manuscripts. The textual and thematic brevity of the *Cook's Tale* invites scribal intervention to provide a more satisfactory reading of an otherwise problematic tale. No scribe, however, seems to have gone further than the one who copied Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Bodley 686: this scribe expanded the *Cook's Tale* and adapted its content through the additions of spurious lines, including a unique twelve-line conclusion. Previous attempts to explain this rather ambitious scribal revision fall into two basic categories: a visual or bibliographical explanation, and a purely content-based or thematic one. In isolation, both of these arguments are wanting. A more robust explanation of the Bodley 686 version of the *Cook's Tale* must recognize the scribal intervention to be simultaneously a textual adaptation of the tale to fit into the specific space of the manuscript and also an interpretive move on the part of the scribe to satisfy the problematic themes of this short tale.

This paper proceeds in four parts. The first section will briefly describe the research methods that have produced the collection of variants informing this reading of Bodley 686. The second will analyze arguments for a thematic explanation of the altered *Cook's Tale*. Although this scholarship offers compelling reasons why a scribe may have inserted new moral content into the tale, the lack of reference to the formal, material details of Bodley 686 ignores the possible bibliographical explanations for scribal expansion of the tale. The third section will analyze the existing bibliographical theories of the added lines and conclusion. These arguments, despite their useful insights, ultimately fail to explain the changed moral framework imposed onto the tale by this scribal interpolation. The fourth section will therefore propose an understanding of the altered *Cook's Tale* as necessarily having been influenced by both dissatisfaction with the incomplete thematic trajectory and material concerns.

Research Methods

The research that produced this reading of the *Cook's Tale* took place in the Fall of 2015, in the English 4401 course on the *Canterbury Tales* at Trinity University. As a major project in this course, students assembled a database

which presents all of the variants occurring in Bodley 686, on the basis of John Manly and Edith Rickert's massive critical edition.[2] Manly and Rickert assembled a four-volume listing of all variants in each line in the *Canterbury Tales*, including all the additions or alterations that appear in every known manuscript of the work. A researcher working on the *Canterbury Tales* and interested in a specific moment in the text can therefore consult Manly and Rickert and quickly determine all of the variants occurring in a given line in every copy, but their presentation makes it difficult to focus on one specific manuscript and its unique characteristics across longer portions of the text. Our project concerned only Bodley 686, isolating the variants unique to this manuscript and thereby allowing an exploration of the meaning and significance of these specific changes. These variants (over 3,000 in total) were recorded in a collaborative database, creating an entirely new way to identify the idiosyncrasies of Bodley 686. Reading these added or changed lines in the Bodley version of the *Canterbury Tales* allows for an interpretation that considers the material, linguistic, and thematic changes to the sequence simultaneously. The newly collected information on Bodley 686 also enables an interrogation of the scribal project of creating the document. While this paper focuses on the *Cook's Tale*, therefore, the database could allow for many more explorations of the activities of this particularly intervention-prone scribe.

Thematic Resolution in Bodley 686

At just under one hundred lines of verse, the *Cook's Prologue* and *Tale* is incomplete, and it therefore potentially presented a problem for every would-be scribe of the *Canterbury Tales*. Every scribe had to decide how they would signal (or not) this lack, and how they would effect a transition from the unfinished tale to whichever one they were going to copy next. In one of the most authoritative manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, for example, the scribe has added a note after the ending of the *Cook's Tale*, reading: "Of this Cokes tale maked Chaucer na moore."[3] This marginal note appears to be the scribe's response to the tale's incompleteness, simply informing the reader that Chaucer had not finished it, that the fault was authorial and not scribal. Reacting to this scribal note, and considering why Chaucer would have broken off after

2   *The Text of the Canterbury Tales: Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, ed. John Manly and Edith Rickert, 8 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940). I am indebted to my incredibly talented classmates, with whom I collaborated on this database: Bridget Bey, Cassidy Claar, Ryan Diller, Rocio Guenther, Nicole Lumpkins, Laurel Meister, Katherine Payne, Arianna Payson, Megan Reynolds, Gretchen Schneider, Robert Torres, Gray Twombly, Mariah Wahl, and Emily Wood.

3   See Ralph Hanna, *Pursuing History: Middle English Manuscripts and their Texts* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996), 145.

writing so little, M. C. Seymour claims that the tale, despite its brevity, exhibits "no hint of frailty of purpose or even of a tentative beginning."[4] Still, the tale stands out from the others. It does indeed have a recognizable prologue and the beginnings of a story with some moral content, but that content appears so incomplete that scribes and critics alike are left with a strange outlier in the sequence to interpret. The ending of the *Cook's Tale* finds Perkyn, the lazy apprentice of a food seller, having moved in with his "compeer," whose wife "swyved [i.e., had sex] for hir sustenance" (1.4419 and 4422).[5] Where other tales offer a word of moral guidance to end the story, this one ends abruptly with the seemingly irrelevant focus on the wife and her immoral occupation.

For the scribe of the Bodley 686, the tale obviously required significant alteration to fit with the larger collection, and he therefore provided a unique twelve-line conclusion that seeks to resolve the thematically insufficient ending of the *Cook's Tale*. An analysis of the conclusion's thematic effect on the tale, building on the spurious lines and variants from the body, may provide a content-based reason for the scribal intervention in this manuscript.

One reading of the additions to the Bodley version of the *Cook's Tale* suggests that the scribe is responding to social anxieties of the ruling classes in England, the sort of people who would have read the *Canterbury Tales*. David Boyd interprets the *Cook's Tale* through the lens of a fifteenth-century buyer of the manuscript, and in his view, any scribal intervention has the sole purpose of adapting the tale's problematic themes to appear less threatening to the social status quo. For Boyd, it seems natural that the literature being circulated at the time, which was "patronized largely by empowered groups," would have "addressed social instability in terms of enhancing their authority."[6] This theory explains the moralizing conclusion added in Bodley 686 as a thematic response to problematic subject matter. Perkyn appears as a rowdy, indulgent social transgressor in the tale, and in the added ending in Bodley, the scribe therefore puts Perkyn in jail. He then adds a moralizing passage of advice to warn against taking similar actions:

> And therefore, yonge men, lerne while ye may,
> That with mony dyuers thoghtes beth prycked al þe day.
> Remembre you what myschefe cometh of mysgouernaunce.
> Thus mowe ye lerne worschep & come to substaunce.

4   M. C. Seymour, "Of This Cokes Tale," *Chaucer Review* 24 (1990): 259–62.

5   Unless otherwise noted, all subsequent references to the *Canterbury Tales*, made parenthetically, are taken from Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales: Fifteen Tales and the General Prologue*, ed. V. A. Klove and Glending Olson (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005).

6   David Lorenzo Boyd, "Social Texts: Bodley 686 and the Politics of the Cook's Tale," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58 (1995): 81–97.

> Thenke how grace and governaunce hath broght hem a boune,
> Many pore mannys sonn, chefe state of þe towne.
> Euer rewle the after þe beste man of name,
> And God may grace þe to come to þe same. (Bodley 686, f. 55v)

Social anxiety does indeed seem to emerge from this added passage. The unique lines condemn those who would (like Perkyn) indulge in dice, dancing, and womanizing. Authority is reestablished over the unruly character who threatens the livelihood of his master, and the new message crafted by the scribe appeals to elites in similar positions. When imagining Bodley 686 as needing to conform to the moral expectations of an elite readership, this tidy ending offers a view of the scribe as altering the text for thematic acceptability.

However, this interpretation of the *Cook's Tale* in Bodley 686 ignores the fact that the other tales in the sequence exhibit similar, if not more serious social transgressions that the scribe does not so extensively censor. If the scribe did in fact copy this manuscript with a desire to make the text more palatable for an elite readership, then the *Miller's* and *Reeve's Tales*, which immediately precede the *Cook's*, should both have been significantly edited for content as well, and yet the Bodley scribe has not intervened as dramatically in his copying of these tales. The *Miller's Tale* tells the story of Nicholas, a lusty student who devises a way to sleep with the wife of his landlord, John the Carpenter. A humorous story told at the expense of the authority figure in the tale, this narrative would certainly exhibit the kind of rebellious activity that Boyd claims has been specifically taken out of the *Cook's Tale* in Bodley. Likewise, the *Reeve's Tale*, coming between the *Miller's* and *Cook's*, similarly contains instances of revenge, sexual impropriety, and theft that blatantly disregard centralized authority. Boyd's reading of the scribal intervention in the Bodley version of the *Cook's Tale* does not sufficiently explain why such active censorship would only appear in this short tale and not in the similarly provocative tales preceding it.

Additionally, this analysis completely ignores the role that material, bibliographical details would have played in determining the scribe's treatment of the tale. Such a purely thematic explanation of an extended *Cook's Tale* in Bodley 686 imposes an overly rigid interpretation of the scribal intervention onto the text. A scribe responding specifically to social anxieties of his time may simply be responding to the incompleteness of the text overall. Boyd does not mention the fact that the expanded *Cook's Tale* in the manuscript conveniently completes a verso, quire, and the first fragment of the text as copied in Bodley 686 (see Fig. 1). The scribe is obviously responding to Chaucer's text with his own intervention, but the explanation could easily be a formal-material one (i.e., involving incompleteness or the desire to fill space) and not necessarily related to an anticipated reader response. By em-
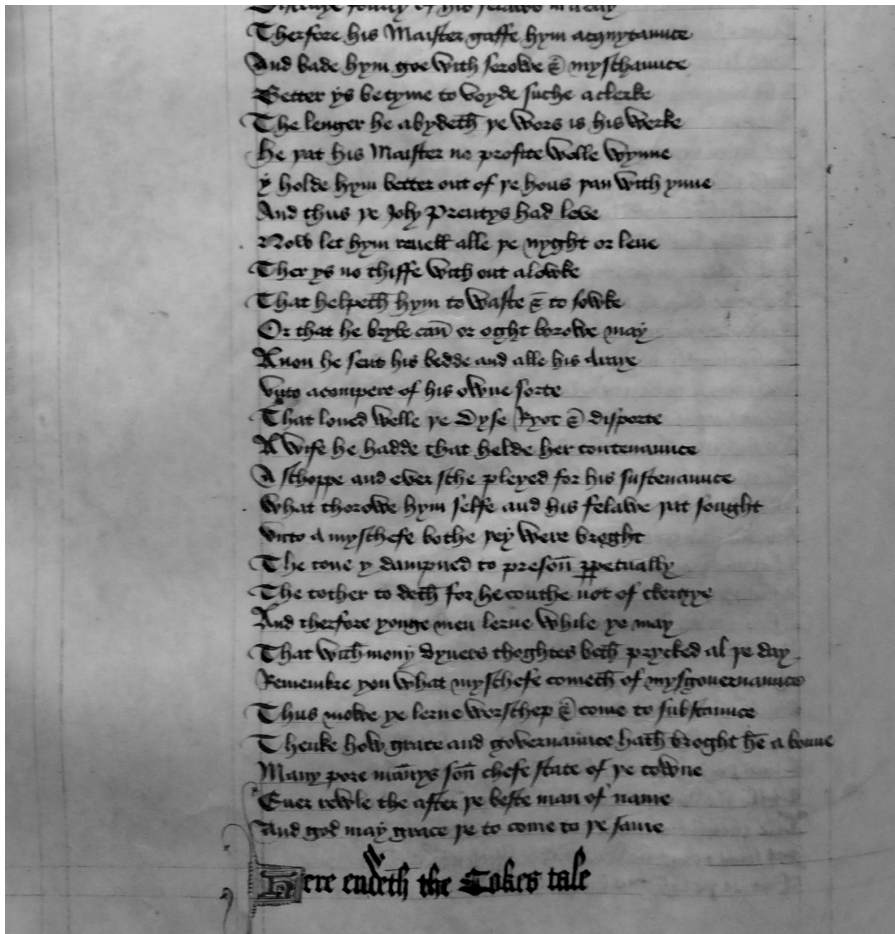
Figure 1.   Bodley 686, f. 55v (selection): Non-authorial lines written by the Bodley scribe at the end of the Cook's Tale, as quoted in this essay (the first quoted passage occurs at the bottom of the selection, and the second at the top). Note that the added material fills exactly the number of lines originally ruled on the page.

phasizing the social ripples sent out by the *Canterbury Tales*, Boyd moves too far away from the significant bibliographical neatness of the *Cook's Tale* in Bodley. The interpretation of the added lines and text is certainly legitimate, but asserting that the expanded text arises solely from thematic concerns rooted in class anxiety discounts the possible textual explanation.

Another possible explanation for the added lines in the Bodley version of the *Cook's Tale* suggests that the scribe may be commenting on the incomplete

nature of the text itself. Daniel Pinti proposes that the scribe seeks to "create a role for himself as both a commentator on Chaucer's text and a follower in Chaucer's poetic footsteps."[7] According to this reading of the expanded text, the scribe assumes a purposefully unique poetic voice, operating in concert with Chaucer himself. Pinti relies in particular on the alliterative quality of the added lines in the body of the text, as in the following passage (the scribe's added lines are given in italics to set them apart from Chaucer's original):

> Therefore his Maister gaffe hym acquytaunce
> And bade hym goe with sorowe and meschaunce:
> *Better ys betyme to voyde such a clerke;*
> *The lenger he abydeth, the wors is his werke.*
> *He that his maister no profite wolle wynne,*
> *Y holde hym better out of the hous than with-ynne.* (f. 55v)

The moments of alliteration stand out as recognizably un–Chaucerian, and Pinti argues that this move purposefully calls attention to itself. In these added lines, Perkyn as a character seems to stand in symbolically for the *Cook's Tale* itself, since, much like the undisciplined Perkyn, the incomplete version of the tale poses a threat to the order of the *Canterbury* sequence. The twelve added concluding lines, in which Perkyn is locked away in prison, symbolize the scribal practice of completing the tale and imposing some order onto an otherwise order–less text. For Pinti, the lines added into the *Cook's Tale* "imply just how necessary and even authoritative this poet's complementary verses are to the stability of Chaucer's literary presence."[8] The added lines not only supplement Chaucer's writing, but according to Pinti, they seem to legitimate an otherwise useless tale.

Although Pinti presents a compelling reading of the additional lines, the scribe's intervention still appears too close to Chaucer's writing to warrant claims of bold attempts at scribal authorship. The scribe's added lines do display alliteration that Chaucer applies less frequently, but this literary device may have simply been the most readily available to the scribe, who was presumably not a professional poet, rather than some calculated attempt at creating a distinct voice. The rhyme scheme is also maintained to closely mirror Chaucer's. Although the additional lines thus contain some unique qualities, Pinti seems to ascribe these choices too much merit in establishing a boldly unique authorial voice on the part of the scribe. The question of why this voice only appears so distinctly in this tale and not the preceding ones also problematizes Pinti's

7   Daniel J. Pinti, "Governing the *Cook's Tale* in Bodley 686," *Chaucer Review* 30 (1996): 382–83.
8   Pinti, "Governing the *Cook's Tale*," 384.

assertions. The *Cook's Tale* does present a uniquely inviting unfinished tale for the scribe to supplement with his own verse, but a scribe capable of this level of intervention would almost surely have made similar attempts to establish his voice in other places. No comparable intervention exists in the Bodley manuscript.

This argument, despite its interesting notion of a self-aware scribe, also allows the thematic analysis to eclipse a thorough bibliographical explanation of the tale in Bodley 686. Ignoring the carefully crafted ending of the tale to fit the exact parameters of the final verso in the first fragment discounts the scribe's awareness of his book's material form in crafting Bodley 686 as he did. Pinti argues for a scribal project of thematic resolution, but this resolution does not account for textual choices. Equally significant in the manuscript itself, as we will now see, are the completion of the verso and the visual reasons for filling this space.

Filling Space in Bodley 686

The presence of a convenient conclusion to the *Cook's Tale*, added into the manuscript to neatly finish the tale at the bottom of a verso and thus end Fragment I, suggests an awareness on the part of the scribe of the visual appearance of the tale in his manuscript. Stephen Partridge proposes a theory for the presence of an elaborate conclusion unique to Bodley 686 that advances this bibliographical and visual explanation. Partridge asserts that the insertion of the added lines arises from a "desire for codicological neatness, a need to avoid either a blank space between the tales or an inserted leaf."[9] Importantly, Partridge proposes that the conclusion was simply added into the manuscript later by the same scribe after he had already moved on to other tales in the sequence. The *Cook's Tale* in Bodley 686 fills the bottom of the last verso of Fragment I (see Fig. 1, above), and the absence of the concluding paragraph would have left considerable empty space in the manuscript. Without the added conclusion found in this version of the *Cook's Tale*, roughly a third of the page would have been left blank. The top of the very next page begins the *Man of Law's Tale*, which means that any space left at the bottom of the preceding page would have to have been filled by an extension of the *Cook's Tale*. Partridge takes this conveniently arranged ending of the tale to mean that the scribe was primarily concerned with the visual nature of the text, extending its content to fill blank space. He briefly mentions that scribal interpolation may have served to solve thematic difficulties in the tale, but

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9   Stephen Partridge, "Minding the Gaps: Interpreting the Manuscript Evidence of the *Cook's Tale* and the *Squire's Tale*," in T*he English Medieval Book: Studies in Memory of Jeremy Griffiths*, ed. A. S. G. Edwards, Vincent Gillespie, and Ralph Hanna (London: British Library, 2000), 58.

his emphasis remains on the material explanation.

This argument is certainly important for understanding the existence of the twelve-line conclusion in Bodley, but a purely bibliographical account ignores the significant number of variants that appear throughout the entirety of the *Cook's Tale*, not simply at the end. The added conclusion is a clearly unique addition to the text, but the heavily edited body of the tale itself seems to suggest broader scribal intervention throughout the whole of the *Cook's Tale*, not just a hasty addition of concluding lines. Partridge does acknowledge the many variations in the body of the Bodley 686 version of the tale, but he marks these differences as insignificant, calling them "a few minor variants of commonplace kinds, which probably do not result from any conscious intervention by the scribe."[10] A comparative examination of the *Reeve's Tale*, however, which precedes the *Cook's Tale* in Bodley 686, shows that the rate of occurrence of variants increases dramatically in the *Cook's Tale*. Since one scribe is responsible for copying at least this section of the manuscript, as Partridge observes, then any negligible carelessness should appear in similar measure across the consecutive tales. Yet this is not the case. According to my count, the *Reeve's Tale* has 0.27 variants per line, while the *Cook's Tale* has 0.75 variants per line. Of the 73 total variants that appear in the *Cook's Tale* in Bodley 686, 43 are unique to this manuscript, firmly attributable to the work of its scribe.[11] Since one scribe is responsible for copying at least this section of the manuscript, as Partridge observes, then any negligible carelessness should appear in similar measure across the consecutive tales, but the scribe of Bodley clearly intervenes more aggressively in the *Cook's Tale* than in the other tales.

Clearly, the scribal interpolation cannot be explained as mere carelessness or a clumsy expansion of the tale to fit the visual parameters of the page. The argument that an added conclusion to the tale was inspired only by the final appearance of the manuscript ignores the consistent editing of the entire segment. The scribal intervention spans the whole tale, suggesting that the uniqueness of the *Cook's Tale* in Bodley 686 is the result of a conscious decision to manipulate the text from beginning to end. The willing scribal interventionism in this version of the tale requires an explanation that addresses the greater continuity of the editorial moves.

A New Approach

A more productive reading of the *Cook's Tale* in Bodley 686 must reconcile the completed appearance of the text on the page with the clear interpretive moves present throughout the entire tale. The choices made by the scribe in compil-

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10   Partridge, "Minding the Gaps," 58.
11   These numbers are based on the course database, described above.

f. 54r: *Cook's Prologue*
f. 54v: *Cook's Tale*

f. 55r: intermittent interpolations begin
f. 55v: *Cook's Tale* ends

f. 56r: *Man of Law's Tale*

Figure 2.   Diagram of Bodley 686, quires 7 and 8 (ff. 48-63), noting the scribe's progress in copying the Cook's Prologue and Tale at the end of one quire and the an of Law's Tale at the beginning of the next. Change in the scribe's hand suggests some delay between ending f. 54v and copying f. 55rv, while f. 56r appears to be part of the earlier stint.

ing the Bodley manuscript support such a reading of both formal and thematic concerns shaping the appearance of this unique *Cook's Tale*. In Bodley, the *Cook's Tale* begins in quire seven on f. 54r. However, the alterations to the text only begin at the top of f. 55r, signaling a distinct starting point of the more intense scribal intervention as the scribe moved on to a new page (see Fig. 2). Some revelation about the *Cook's Tale* seems to have forced the scribe to adapt the remaining portion of the tale to fit the space that he had left, and discovering that the *Cook's Tale* is incomplete could easily have prompted this decision. The scribe may have temporarily ended his work of copying the tale at the end of f. 54v, seeking a more complete version of the ending in another copy of the *Canterbury Tales*. Finding no such copies, the scribe presumably returned to his own work with the *Cook's Tale*, finishing it to fit the available space of the last folio in the quire. The scribe was faced with the bibliographical issue of neatly ending the *Cook's Tale*, but by realizing this at the top of the final folio, he was able to expand the tale in a thematically consistent way to match the parameters of the quire. Put another way, a formal concern prompted a thematic response. The scribe expands the tale with spurious and altered lines that engage Chaucer's original content in a meaningful way, resulting in a version of the tale that appears thematically unique as well. The placement of the variants in the Bodley 686 version of the *Cook's Tale* suggests that the scribe necessarily considered both material *and* thematic, content-based factors in expanding and adapting the tale as he did.

The important point here is not so much what the scribe was accomplishing thematically, but rather that he was engaged with the thematic content at all. Boyd and Pinti both have their relevance here. But ultimately, the interpolation in the Bodley 686 version of the *Cook's Tale* must be explained as serving the dual function of resolving the incompleteness of the subject matter, while simultaneously addressing a material and formal concern in the manuscript. It

seems that the scribe had both of these objectives in mind when confronted with the incompleteness of the *Cook's Tale* in the entire collection of *Canterbury Tales* manuscripts.

Evaluating scribal intervention in the *Canterbury Tales* offers some insight into the reception of the tales and how certain problems were addressed. Especially in the *Cook's Tale*, an anomaly in the body of the *Canterbury Tales*, the problems of incorporating the strange poem into the sequence produces interesting editorial choices that may offer some insight into manuscript culture and interpretive proclivities of various scribes. The unique appearance of the *Cook's Tale* in Bodley 686 suggests that the scribe was purposefully adapting the text to his own understanding of its place in the manuscript. The alterations necessarily imply a textual modification to fit the parameters of the manuscript, while also suggesting a unique thematic resolution to the difficult tale. Understanding this scribal intervention as both textual and interpretive demonstrates the considerable complexity of Chaucer's writing and the challenge that the text presents for scribes and readers alike.

Franz Liebster is a senior majoring in English and political science. He prepared this essay as part of Dr. Andrew Kraebel's seminar on Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales (ENGL 4401, Fall 2015).