

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Ther will I first ^ be gynne . —^ amende and —
 London, British Library, MS Harley 1758, f. 32^v
 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*, I.3074

A late fourteenth-century scribe of a priest's Manual seems proud of his craft, for at the end he records his name 'Hankok' in red, and he seems proud of correcting that book, for he writes in red adjacent to that '*corrigitur*', a common mark of noting that a book *is corrected*. The book has been checked well: for example, Hankok makes twenty-one corrections, most by erasing and writing on top, in the marriage service alone.¹ Two of those corrections, to English vows of marriage, suggest what the people who correct are worried about:

Ich .N. take þe N. to my wedded wyf .^ for bettere for wors . for richere
 for porere in synesse *and* in hethe til det vs departe 3if holychirch it wole
 ordeyne *and* þerto y plyth þe my truthe .
 Ich .N. take þe .N. to my wedded hosebound ^ for bettere for wors for
 richere for porere in syknesse *and* in helthe to be boneyre and bouxsum in
 bedde *and* at borde til deth us departe 3if holycherch it wole ordeyne and
 þerto y ply3t þe my treuthe.

Hankok adds here two *caret* marks, marks like upward arrows signalling that something *is lacking*, and he then writes at the foot of the page in paler, greyer ink something to be inserted at each *caret*:

^ to hauin *and* to holden from þis day forthward²

How needful is correcting here, or elsewhere? Accurate transmission is not needed for the informational content of these vows. One might quibble

¹ HEHL, MS HM 30986, ff. 12^r–19^v, with 21 corrections, of which 2 differ from the text printed by Jefferies Collins (ed.), *Manuale*, 45–56. See Chapter 5, pp. 123–5 below, on '*corrigitur*'.
² HEHL, MS HM 30986, f. 12^v; Jefferies Collins (ed.), *Manuale*, 47–8. This scribe dots **p** and **y** inconsistently; the transcription instead follows grammatical sense.

that the words restored, *to have and to hold from this day forward*, add nothing to the sense: *have* is implied by *take* and *this day* and *forward* are implied by the present moment of speaking and by the pledge *till death*. Anyway, an experienced priest might not need the vows written in full; a cue might suffice to jog the memory, as is found in some other liturgical books.³ And fourteenth-century people recognized that there could be some error in the words of the sacraments, given the poor Latin of many priests, and that such error would not matter: as John Mirk put it, one need not worry about the exact ‘wordes’ as long as just one ‘syblabul’ is right; when the ‘entent’ is clear, the sacrament will be ‘gode’.⁴ So if the spirit is what matters, why correct the letter? The reverence due to holy books might explain this correction: with Latin, music, handwriting in textura and red ink nearby, this is language in its best attire for the happy occasion. These vows also need correcting as part of the Church’s discipline of the laity: they will speak with ‘the priest teaching’ (‘docente sacerdote’) and the priest will follow a book which is well ordered too. And they need correcting given the customariness, legal force and ecclesiastical sanction of these vows.⁵ Correcting seems designed less to preserve the content than the conventional form of words and to pay respect to them.

An interest in verbal form emerges in another correction which might at first seem to preserve the content. In an extract from a poem listing Macer’s herbal cures, a late fifteenth-century scribe muddles what is needed to cure deafness. As an ingredient that would mix well with the juice of leeks and would improve his hearing, he lists goats’ milk. He is wrong: it is goats’ gall. So he crosses out ‘mylk’ and adds ‘galle’:

Luce of lekys *with* gotys [mylk] galle
 For euyt heryng help it shall
 Too *partys* of þe Luce þe third of gall
 m[a]llyd smal *and* warme *with* all
 In noise or eyn wheþer it be do
 for *grate* hede wark wel it slo⁶

³ E.g., Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3513, f. 94^v (fifteenth-century Pontifical); however, a late fifteenth-century user then wrote the rest of the vows in full in the margin.

⁴ Discussed by Breen, *Imagining an English Reading Public*, 37–8.

⁵ The text for speaking, rather than the rubrics, in HEHL, MS HM 30986, ff. 12^r–19^v, is identical to that printed by Jefferies Collins (ed.), *Manuale*, 45–56, except in 14 closed-class words or word-order. The only two bigger divergences are written over erasure in HEHL, MS HM 30986, ff. 13^r (Collins, 48), 19^r (Collins, 56).

⁶ HEHL, MS HU 1051, f. 85^r; Robbins (ed.), *Secular Lyrics*, no. 80, lines 1–6. I treat word-final flourishes as otiose strokes, whereas Robbins expands them.

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With the error ‘mylk’, the scribe might have been assuming that the text would be simple and familiar: milk is more commonly drunk and easier to get from a goat than gall is. The goats’ milk might also be eyeskip to a reference to ‘womans mylke’ which appears six lines earlier in the full poem from which this extract comes, so it might betray that this scribe is excerpting for himself from a fuller exemplar.⁷ Whatever thoughtlessness caused the error, though, there is attention to correcting: he too writes ‘*corrigitur*’ at the foot of over half his pages and in only twelve lines of this excerpt makes four corrections. Some reflect the general practices of scribes as they seek to write clearly: for example, he mends an ambiguous spelling of *ought* meaning *anything* (‘or þou tak [out]^{ought} þerof’).⁸ But in turning *milk* to *gall* he attends not only to his own craft of writing; he is attending also to the poem’s craft, to its verse-form. *Milk* does not rhyme with *shall*. Of course, turning *milk* to *gall* might seem like a correction to the essential ingredients of the cure. But (to be honest) the cure would be equally useless either way, and the scribe is not rethinking, like a doctor, how to improve a patient’s hearing; what he is trying to improve is the rhyme – the verbal form of the text – for that verbal artefact is the focus of the scribe’s attention in correcting.

The argument of this book: making and thinking

These moments exemplify the correcting which this book traces in manuscripts in English from the late fourteenth century to the early sixteenth. The scribes of English are craftsmen of words and it is to words that, when correcting, they attend. They seek to reproduce wording exactly, to spell conventionally, communicate unambiguously, be precise in every syllable. Moreover, in the craftsmanship of correcting, these scribes think. The corrections made by scribes, their colleagues and their readers – most being by the scribes – suggest the intelligence developed and exercised in stopping to reflect on one’s own errors, and exercised even in the process of copying accurately in the first place. This intelligence is manifested in a generalized quality of attention or concentration that, extended over long works, is no mean feat. These scribes of course often err, nor do they always catch those errors; but they do recognize that copying is prone to error and think about correcting it. They are invested in the processes of correcting entailed in their craft and its procedures of writing (as is traced especially in

⁷ Cf. BL, MS Sloane 140, ff. 52^r–53^r, the only other extant copy, which lacks two lines from an eyeskip on ‘gall’ (f. 52^v) so cannot be the exemplar for HEHL, MS HU 1051.

⁸ HEHL, MS HU 1051, f. 88^r.

Chapters 5 to 7). Then, their meticulous craftsmanship manifests itself, from time to time, in specific sorts of thinking with considerable intelligence (traced in Chapters 8 to 10). The scribes seem to think that one word is preferable to another, because it is a more accurate transcription – a thought we do not always credit them with; they ponder language and the problems of rendering its sounds; they show respect for the words chosen by writers and their power; they reflect on verse-form and its workings; they imagine the complete form of a work when they have not seen it; and finally, when the scribes are also the composers or deliberate revisers of works, they pursue the creative activity we call authorship by means of correcting. Correcting, then, although it reflects external pressures – cultural expectations; institutional habits of work – is not an automatic or unreflective thing to do; it witnesses processes of thinking consciously about language and texts. That is the argument of this book: that the scribes, and sometimes readers, of English in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries often exercised intelligence in correcting it; and that thereby they contribute to the long history of critical attention to English literature. The craft of correcting is analogous to things we call philology or literary criticism.

Where does this drive to close textual attention come from? Whether some interest in the text's words prompts the practical process of correcting or is prompted by it is difficult to say: there is some sort of feedback loop. On the one hand, it looks as though the practical craft makes possible the insights, like those of the critic, into language and form; on the other hand, literary language sometimes influences the scribe's craftsmanship. The craftsman's insights as a reader develop in the material process of writing, while his material process of writing reflects his ideas about literature. Moreover, it might be suggested that by bothering over every nuance of a vow or over rhyme in a medical book, a scribe might betray his inherited sense of the prestige of religious language or of poetry by correcting and being seen to correct the words. Or, indeed, he might conjure that prestige into being, for this is *only* vernacular religion and only doggerel, practical verse.

After all, that somebody should correct the words he copies is not to be taken for granted. Although speakers do 'repair' misunderstanding in conversation, as linguists call it, they do not always do so. Most of us speak sloppily, and careless vagueness can be appropriate when precision would be socially odd. Descriptive linguists observe the regular use of constructions which prescriptive grammars would say are wrong. Moreover, most people speak a variety of English linked to their country, region and class which has been dismissed as incorrect by dictionaries and grammars

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but which works just fine; correcting such speech constitutes snobbery, ‘talking proper’ or hypercorrection. So even modern standardized English only deserves correction when certain conditions apply. Writing might be one such condition: people who speak some non-standard variety switch to standard English – in effect correcting their dialect – when they write; mispronunciations are not committed in English’s fixed spelling; and we are trained by school to write in sentences, whereas we do not always speak in them. Yet we do not always correct our writing either. It is common to write e-mails without capitals or with typos and to find errors of grammar or punctuation in internet journalism or printed ephemera. Contemporary novelists worry about the decline of proofreading: Jonathan Franzen, author of a novel called *The Corrections*, withdrew another novel because there were uncorrected typographical errors.⁹ But mostly we put up with these slips in print and online without confusion. (Were you confused by the misspelling of *punctuation*?) Printed and digital media are not always, nor always need to be, corrected.¹⁰

That makes it all the more striking that correcting has long been part of the making of books. The methods and inspirations for correcting printed books are well known. Proofreading and press-correcting became more professionalized over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There were many distinctive procedures for correcting print, such as the provision of errata sheets or humanist textual criticism; annotations of early printed books often include corrections, such as those which schoolboys entered into their textbooks before studying them. Of course, early printed books were still riddled with errors, and attempts to remove them often failed or even compounded the mess. Nonetheless, the early makers and users of printed books sometimes seem to have dreamed that they could make them creditable, accurate and stable.¹¹ Though early printed books were incorrect, people sought to correct them.

What happens in manuscripts, before and just as printing is introduced in England? This book argues that correcting is ubiquitous in manuscripts in English from the late fourteenth century to the very early sixteenth. The frequent correcting in manuscripts is worth noting because it has been less studied than correcting in print. This is despite the fact that correcting

⁹ Davis and Flood, ‘Jonathan Franzen’s Book’.

¹⁰ Though Horobin, *Does Spelling Matter?*, 4–5, reports evidence of intolerance for error online.

¹¹ For these processes and their problems, see Grafton, *Culture of Correction*, 23, 212–13; Simpson, *Proof-Reading*; Blair, ‘Errata Lists’, 36; [Alcorn Baron, Lindquist and Shevlin], ‘A Conversation with Elizabeth L. Eisenstein’, 414–16; Chartier, *Inscription and Erasure*, 29–33, 37–40; McKitterick, *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order*, 97–144; Lerer, *Error and the Academic Self*, 17–29.

might be more visible – to us and to the earliest readers – in manuscripts than in print: in printed books many corrections are invisible, unless a rare proof-sheet survives; by contrast, most corrections made in manuscripts can be seen by the naked eye. Nonetheless, most handbooks of palaeography mention it only briefly, and most editors say little about corrections in the manuscripts they study.¹² Two of the greatest palaeographers remark that we tend not to believe ‘that medievals had either the desire or the capacity to engage in such wholesale, disciplined pursuit of textual accuracy’.¹³ But the presence of correcting has been recognized in manuscripts of English before.¹⁴ Several shorter studies have identified how individual scribes and readers tried their best to correct the errors they made or met. They included Wycliffite scribes, who had a devout deference to certain texts, and members of holy orders copying religious poetry; they included authors such as John Capgrave or people working close to authors such as John Trevisa; London clerks copying books for money, or other professional scribes; and even provincial laymen copying books as amateurs for their own delight.¹⁵ This book places those individual stories within a widespread habit of correcting English from the late fourteenth to the early sixteenth century.

That widespread habit complicates the argument that scribes did not consider English to have qualities which would merit correction or accurate transcription. That is often now assumed to be the case. The argument for it is most thoroughly and powerfully made by Tim William Machan in his wide and deep study *Textual Criticism and Middle English Texts*. In this view, there were linguistic disincentives to correcting: the English language did not yet have standardized rules for spelling, grammar or metre, or even one dialect as its preferred standard; nor were there institutions, people or books which would disseminate standard versions of texts. Therefore, it ‘lacked the grammatical and rhetorical regularity that was used to assess the quality and correctness of any piece of writing’; and nor, ‘without a sense of linguistic correctness and incorrectness’, could people ‘evaluate’ the style of a piece of writing. While people recognized in Latin ‘the possibility of textual correctness or incorrectness’, for they studied it from

¹² Exceptions are Petti, *English Literary Hands*, 28–31; Clemens and Graham, *Introduction to Manuscript Studies*, 35–8, 76; Kerby-Fulton, Hilmo and Olson, *Opening Up Middle English Manuscripts*, xxv, 28, 32, 37, 93–4, 209, 214, 235–6, 329, 339.

¹³ Rouse and Rouse, ‘Correction and Emendation’, 334.

¹⁴ Pearsall, ‘Editing Medieval Texts’, 93–5.

¹⁵ E.g., Hudson (ed.), *English Wycliffite Sermons*, 138–51, 189–95; Lucas, *From Author to Audience*, 75–89; Briggs, ‘MS Digby 233’; Hanna, ‘Scribe of Huntington HM 114’; Da Rold, ‘Significance of Scribal Corrections’; Kato, ‘Corrected Mistakes’; Turville-Petre, ‘Putting It Right’. Most thorough will be the forthcoming study of the ‘Winchester’ manuscript of Malory’s works by Takako Kato, previewed in Kato, ‘Corrected Mistakes in the Winchester Manuscript’.

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books in schools, by contrast there were ‘no medieval linguistic contexts that would have fostered similar expectations for Middle English’.¹⁶ That is, there was little sense of correct grammar, spelling or style, nor any authoritative literary institutions, which could motivate correcting literary works in English for textual fixity or stylistic distinction.¹⁷ Machan argues that it was only the Italian humanists and later textual critics who fetishized ‘the *correct* form of the text’ in a way quite unlike users’ attitudes to ‘the vernacular during the *medium aevum*’ or Middle Ages.¹⁸

Machan’s brilliant history offers the fullest explanation of the textual variation which is very common in English books of the fourteenth and fifteenth century. That variation must not be forgotten, yet I have two qualms about defining English manuscripts by it. The first is the risk of ‘periodization’, of seeing the textual attitudes of these years as somehow incorrigibly different from those of others. If we seek to discover ‘the textual and cultural factors that characterize Middle English works as Middle English’, as Machan searchingly does, there is a risk that we isolate and reify a period as being distinct in some way. Machan worries that if nothing were characteristic of this period, then a ‘label like *Middle English*’ would be ‘problematic’.¹⁹ But this label is as problematic as *medieval* is; both were developed with hindsight and historical condescension; it seems dangerous to presume that a culture and its attitudes to texts are completely unified in themselves, and that they are completely distinct from those of other ages. We might instead wonder whether the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in particular, when the making of books in English altered in scale, kind and motive, might have different textual practices from earlier centuries of ‘Middle English’, or whether the scribes of these years might share attitudes with people of later centuries. Then, my second qualm is that alongside all the variance – *alongside* it and not *instead of* it – there is indeed some ‘recognition and expectation of the possibility of textual correctness or incorrectness’ in English in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. There are frequent corrections in English manuscripts, and behind those processes it is possible to infer some interest in correctness. This interest did not eclipse or eliminate variance – by no means – but it did complement it. That makes correcting not more important than variance necessarily

¹⁶ Machan, *Textual Criticism*, 153, 149. I argue with it here because it is extensive and thoughtful enough to merit argument – to merit correction.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 14, 39. Machan (42–4) rightly links humanist textual scholarship and Caxton’s editions. My own article ‘Scholarly Scribes’, 42, suggests that humanism might have influenced some fifteenth-century manuscripts with many corrections and overlooks longstanding traditions of correcting.

¹⁹ Machan, *Textual Criticism*, 3–4.

and not even more common (for this book has not measured variance enough to argue that point quantitatively) but makes it intriguing: if the scribes could choose to write ‘incorrectly’ or to tolerate changes during textual transmission, just as people in speech and e-mail do, why did they sometimes choose to correct?

Their corrections seem to reflect their attitudes to two things: to their own craft as copyists and to ‘textuality’ and literature. The first half of this book suggests that scribes strove to do a good job. As well as meeting the patrons’ demands or cultural expectations, craftsmanship has its own internal logic and autotelic reward of doing something well. (The terms *craft* and *craftsmanship* are used in this sense throughout this book to refer simply to the process of copying; they make no claim that this activity is pursued as employment in a craft guild after an apprenticeship, though sometimes it might be.) Yet the second half of this book suggests that care for the craft of copying exists in synergy with the scribes’ attitudes to the works they copy. Correcting manuscripts nurtures intelligent responses to literary works and, in a knot that cannot be untied, is also nurtured by these responses. Thereby, the craft of correcting becomes a little like literary criticism. That is of course a loose analogy: the scribes and earliest readers did not follow our definitions of literature nor conceive of our practice of criticism. Yet correcting requires the scribes to attend closely to what they copy, as though every word matters, and to think about style, form and structure. They do not explain their close reading or general thinking in works of their own; we can, though, infer their attitudes from their corrections. The study of manuscripts has before been recognized as offering evidence for these ‘interpretative possibilities’ open to early scribes and readers.²⁰ In particular, Barry Windeatt recognized the scribes of *Troilus and Criseyde* as Chaucer’s ‘early critics’, who revealed their responses to poetry in the things they varied and got wrong.²¹ This book suggests, in complementary fashion, that the things they put right might also involve critical insight. Indeed, the consciousness needed for correcting, as opposed to unwittingly erring, perhaps makes the craft of correcting even more akin to literary criticism. For this reason the corrections are important not only for palaeography but for the history of English literature.

Yet identifying critical thinking does not require us to assume what the category of *literature* is for these scribes. The word had a quite different meaning for them.²² The scribes exercise their skilled writing and reading

²⁰ Meyer-Lee, ‘Manuscript Studies’, 13–14; Brantley, ‘Prehistory of the Book’, 637.

²¹ Windeatt, ‘Scribes as Chaucer’s Early Critics’.

²² Revealed by *MED*, *lettrure* (n.), and *litterature* (n.); *OED*, *literature* (n.).

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on works of quite varied quality or prestige, beyond the obviously literary. As Ralph Hanna has explained, studying manuscripts often upsets our sense of a literary canon or of a distinct sphere of literary interest in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.²³ Studying correcting debunks any reverence for literature not by finding it nowhere but by uncovering it everywhere (so to speak), as the scribes attentively and intelligently correct things from *The Canterbury Tales* to practical texts such as the versified list of cures, in ways which make no distinction between ‘literary’ and ‘ordinary’ language but treat all sorts of writing as extraordinary. As Robert Meyer-Lee argues, an important element of the history of literature is the history of the ‘articulation’ of the ‘possibility of literature’: points where people strive to define what would be valuable, what would be worth attention, what would be literary among the writing they see.²⁴ The history of the book can show us how cultures come to treat some sorts of writing differently as ‘literature’.²⁵ Some such points are the corrections: people’s attention to certain works or elements of works reflects their sense of the possibility that they were worth such attention – the ‘possibility of literature’. Their craftsmanship forges not a fixed canon of good writing but a practice of responding to writing with care and skill as if it were good; and literature looks like something in the eye of these beholders, emerging from the practice of artisans and not only of authors.

Even somebody sceptical of literary distinction still needs to explain how literature first came to earn the attention and distinction which people give it.²⁶ What made the scribes pay attention to this writing? The corrections in the end reveal that some works invite the scribes’ attention and correction, implicitly by their various properties and explicitly by what they say. While literature depends on the hard work of artisans and on material conditions – on shaping letter-forms, scraping parchment, finding exemplars – conversely the labour of artisans is shaped by literature’s qualities of style, form and structure, and by the scribes’ thinking about those qualities. In this conclusion, the book diverges slightly from some studies of the ‘material text’ which have urged us to consider the life of books as material things ‘far beyond the literary or even the linguistic’, as Leah Price has put it.²⁷ Instead, this book stresses the power of the text and of ideas

²³ Hanna, *Pursuing History*, 8–9, 12–13. Meyer-Lee, ‘Manuscript Studies’, 2–3, is sceptical of this avoidance of literature.

²⁴ Meyer-Lee, ‘Emergence of the Literary’, 323, ‘Conception is a Blessing’, 133–4.

²⁵ Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff*, 22.

²⁶ Noted by Greenblatt, ‘What is the History of Literature?’, 470.

²⁷ E.g., Price, ‘From *The History of a Book*’, 120.

about it – ‘the literary or even the linguistic’ – to direct the physical work of scribes and their handling of materials.

Incidentally, the book might thereby avoid technological determinism, which could in theory be a problem in studies of material culture.²⁸ Palaeographers sometimes risk such determinism, when they make the production and use of books seem influenced by materials and physical processes – the arduousness of manual labour, the supply of red ink, the amount of space on pages – almost unthinkingly, or with thinking only of reductive economic sorts about supply, profit or efficiency. This book can avoid that reductiveness because of two distinct qualities in corrections. First, the corrections are produced not only by users of books but more often by their makers, and while many users of artefacts do not understand them – how many people who can word-process know how a laptop works? – far more makers of them *do*.²⁹ Scribes understand the books they correct especially well. Secondly, corrections are not, or not only, made from materials with physical properties which challenge human comprehension, such as metal for scraping-knives or galls for ink; they are ‘made’ from man-made words which scribes and readers can comprehend. In corrections, then, we see not only the importance of material things for shaping human thought but also the importance of literary thinking for shaping the material text.³⁰

The methods of this book: counting and close reading

This argument, though, is the conclusion rather than the origin of this study (and is summarized here in rather abstract terms). This study began with the simple recording of material phenomena – scraped pages, ink splodges, extra leaves – and reconstructing how they were produced. It began with a wide survey of manuscripts, in order to see which techniques and which concerns were common in correcting. The models for this larger survey were the ‘bibliometry’ associated with studies of printed books and the ‘quantitative codicology’ of Continental Europe; but this survey was pursued with less scientific rigour and statistical nous than those traditions, and with scepticism about the value of numbers and with methodological eclecticism.

First, I surveyed a variety of manuscripts which are direct copies or cognate copies of other surviving manuscripts, in order to understand scribes’ ordinary copying which would throw their correcting into relief.

²⁸ Boivin, *Material Cultures*, 148–53, 165–6, traces this danger.

²⁹ An example from *ibid.*, 160. ³⁰ For a similar feedback loop, see *ibid.*, 23, 47–50.