Authorial or Scribal? : spelling variation in the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts of The Canterbury Tales

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Introduction

1. Chaucer and his language

In *The Regiment of Princes* (1411) Thomas Hoccleve praises Chaucer for being 'the firste fyndere of our fair langage' (l. 4978). This was a decade after Chaucer's death (1400) and now, more than six hundred years later, we still praise Chaucer's innovative use of the vernacular in his literary works, though we know little about his language, and in particular about his spelling habits. A great deal of research has been devoted to the subject, yet scholars tend to disagree on various features of the poet's spelling (cf. Samuels 1988a, Benson 1992, Horobin 1998). This is due to the fact that none of Chaucer's original manuscripts has come down to us, with the possible but very much contested exception of the *Equatorie of the Planetis*, MS. Peterhouse, Cambridge 75.I, a manuscript which Samuels (1983) believes to be a holograph, while Benson (1982) and Rand Schmidt (1993) think it is a scribal copy. All conclusions drawn about Chaucer's language so far have thus been based upon the language found in a number of Chaucerian manuscripts copied by different scribes, as well as upon the comparison of such manuscripts with a number of non-Chaucerian texts of the same period (see Samuels 1972, 1988a). The extant manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* represent an invaluable source of information for linguistic research. There are more than eighty of them, including both complete manuscripts and fragments of the text, which date from the fifteenth century. In addition, there are four incunabula from the end of the fifteenth century, which can likewise be used for linguistic analysis, since at that time printed versions of texts were mere imitations of manuscripts (see the list of all fifteenth-century witnesses of *The Canterbury Tales* in Appendix 1).

Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* between ca. 1387 and 1400, and many scribes produced numerous copies of it throughout the fifteenth century. This is a period in which English was a patchwork of dialects rather than a single variety of the language, and consequently dialectal variation is found in the language of the extant copies of this work. In spite of the large amount of data that is available, it is very difficult to draw conclusions about the language that was attested in the original version, that is, Chaucer's own language. Blake (1985:167–178) suggests that the author's original draft was the exemplar used for the early manuscripts of

The Canterbury Tales, that is, those copied shortly after Chaucer's death, thus implying that these manuscripts are authoritative versions of the text because they preserve authorial spelling features. Yet the studies conducted on some of these early manuscripts so far have not led scholars to draw the same conclusions about Chaucer's spelling. Horobin (1998), for instance, contradicts Samuels' (1988b) conclusion that Chaucer spelled the word AGAIN(ST) as *ayein*(*s*)/*ayeyn*(*s*), showing instead that the forms *again*(*s*)/*ageyn*(*s*) ought to be considered archetypal, i.e. preserved directly from the author's original copy. In addition, recent studies (e.g. Robinson 1997) have revealed that authorial readings are also found in manuscripts dating from the end of the fifteenth century, as they are either very closely related to the original version or at just one remove from it (cf. the description of the 'O manuscripts' in the next section).

One of the early copies of *The Canterbury Tales*, Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, Peniarth 392D, the Hengwrt manuscript (henceforth referred to as 'Hg'), has received a great deal of attention since 1940, when Manly and Rickert (1940, vol. 1:276) suggested in their edition of *The Canterbury Tales* that it was 'a MS of the highest importance'. More recent studies have confirmed the superiority of Hengwrt over the other manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* by proposing that this 'is the earliest extant manuscript' (Blake 1985:80), and that its exemplar might have been Chaucer's holograph itself (Robinson 1999). Samuels (1988b:25) also argues that the scribe who copied Hengwrt seems to have adopted a spelling system similar to the system used by Chaucer himself. This scribe has long been referred to as 'Scribe B', because, according to Doyle and Parkes (1978), he was the second of the five copyists who collaborated in the production of one manuscript of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, Cambridge, Trinity College, MS R.3.2 (James 581) (henceforth referred to as 'Tr'), of which he copied only three quires (folios 9r–32v). Scribe B was also known as the 'Hengwrt/Ellesmere scribe', because, according to Doyle and Parkes (1978, 1979), he was the main copyist of Hengwrt as well as of another copy of *The Canterbury Tales*: San Marino California, Huntington Library, MS EL 26.C.9, the Ellesmere manuscript (henceforth referred to as 'El'). The hand of Scribe B has also been recognised in the Hatfield House fragment (Cecil Papers, Box S/1) from *Troilus and Criseyde* (Doyle and Parkes 1979:xxxv), and possibly in another fragment, Cambridge University Library, MS Kk 1.3/20, which contains some lines from the *Prioress's Prologue and Prioress's Tale* (Doyle and Parkes 1979:xxxv, Doyle 1995:60). Only very recently, as will be discussed in the next chapter, was this copyist identified as Adam Pinkhurst, and five other manuscripts have so far been attributed to him (see Chapter 2, §1 for the list of the manuscripts presumed to have been copied by this scribe).

Most studies carried out on the spelling system of Scribe B before the latest discoveries focus on some or all of the texts traditionally ascribed to him: the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts, the three Gowerian quires and the two Chaucerian fragments. Results obtained from the analysis of these texts, and the differences found between Hg and El in particular, have led scholars to make assumptions about this copyist's scribal habits (cf. Burnley 1983, Samuels 1988a,

Doyle 1995), even to the extent of suggesting that Hg and El were copied by different scribes (cf. Ramsey 1982, 1986). Such contrasting opinions are partly due to the fact that different methods of investigation were adopted: some studies were carried out upon selected parts of the texts (cf. Samuels 1988a), while others entailed the analysis of a number of features throughout each manuscript (cf. Ramsey 1982, 1986, Burnley 1983). What has been lacking so far is a comprehensive analysis of Scribe B's language in the manuscripts copied by him, in order to draw even more precise conclusions about his spelling practice and possibly to gain indirect information about Chaucer's language. Such an analysis is now greatly facilitated by the availability of an increasing number of texts copied by Scribe B in computer-readable format, which allows searches that would otherwise have been too time-consuming.

2. The Canterbury Tales Project

The recent application of computer technology to the Humanities in general and to Middle English texts in particular has offered scholars new perspectives on the study of these texts. In the past few decades, this approach has resulted in the emergence of a number of projects that aim to produce digitised versions of Middle English texts, making it possible for scholars to carry out research on the original versions of the texts instead of being forced to use later editions. The Canterbury Tales Project is the leading project as far as the study of Chaucer's *Tales* is concerned and, as its director Peter Robinson (2003:127) explains, its aim is 'to explore the textual history of the *Tales* by transcribing, collating, and analyzing the manuscripts of the *Tales* using computer methods'. The Canterbury Tales Project issues CD-ROMs that contain images and transcriptions of all fifteenth-century witnesses, i.e. manuscripts and printed editions, to *The Canterbury Tales*, word-by-word and line-by-line collations of the text of a tale in all its witnesses, spelling databases in the early productions only and stemmatic commentaries in the more recent ones, thus offering countless possibilities of searching for variants as well as a wealth of information about each and every witness. As of 2008, four CD-ROMs had been issued: *The General Prologue* (GP), *The Miller's Tale* (MI), *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* (WBP) and *The Nun's Priest's Tale* (NP), and several publications have already been based on the data gathered with these new tools.

A precursor of this project was the work started by Manly and Rickert in 1920, culminating in 1940 in the publication of their eight-volume edition of the *Text of The Canterbury Tales; Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*. Manly and Rickert likewise studied the textual tradition of *The Canterbury Tales*, and by collating all extant manuscripts they tried to determine the line of descent of each of them from the archetype, i.e. the manuscript representing the head of the manuscript tradition. They classified most of the manuscripts into four genetic groups, referred to as A, B, C and D, and they observed that the remaining texts formed independent pairs. By discerning authorial from non-authorial variants, Manly and Rickert aimed to reconstruct the archetype of the extant manuscripts, although in their view this

was not Chaucer's original copy, which they believed could not be recovered, but instead the text from which subsequent copies of *The Canterbury Tales* were made. This is at least what can be deduced from the following statement:

> comparison of the MS readings affords no means of passing beyond the archetype to the author's original except where there is reason to believe that certain variants transmitted by extant MSS have been preserved by direct derivation from the author's original.
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> (Manly and Rickert 1940, vol. 2:40)

Recent studies conducted by the scholars of the Canterbury Tales Project proceed from the assumption that, as suggested by Robinson (2000a:§3.2.3), 'O is Chaucer's working draft'. These studies have shed new light on the relationship between the extant manuscripts by establishing, for instance, the existence of two more genetic groups, referred to as E and F, in the textual tradition of WBP and, more significantly, by isolating the so-called O group, which consists of a number of texts that are very closely related to O, i.e. Chaucer's original text (see Robinson 1997:80, Barbrook et al. 1998:839 for the stemma of WBP). Even though the O manuscripts are referred to as a group, it should be observed that they do not belong to the same genetic group, since they do not descend from a common ancestor below O, as the manuscripts in all the other groups do. Each O manuscript represents an independent line of descent from O, and is a precious source of information about the language that must have been attested in the archetype.

The research carried out so far on the fifteenth-century witnesses of the *General Prologue*, the *Miller's Tale*, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale* has led to the identification of a number of O manuscripts for these tales, although not all manuscripts are classified as O in each tale, as shown in Table 1 below.[1] Only four manuscripts, Ch, El, Ha[4] and Hg, belong to the O group in all of the four tales above. The other manuscripts are classified as O only in the tales that seem to derive directly from the archetype, while in the other tales they belong to different genetic groups. This is probably due to the use of different exemplars for some tales, which therefore show a different affiliation in the same manuscripts. These data should, however, be used with caution, because not all of the tales have been analysed yet. It is expected that further research will shed more light on the relationship among all the witnesses of *The Canterbury Tales*, as well as on their different lines of descent from Chaucer's original version. For the purpose of this study, it must be stressed that Hg and El each descend from O independently (see Robinson 2000a:§3.4.1), which rules out the possibility that El was copied from Hg. The relationship between these two manuscripts is crucial for studies about Chaucer's language because, as Robinson suggests:

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[1] In this study the manuscripts are referred to by their sigils (abbreviated names); a list of all extant witnesses of the *Canterbury Tales* and their sigils is provided in Appendix 1.

these two are among the earliest of all the manuscripts of the Tales, possibly written within a decade of Chaucer's death or even within his lifetime. Hg presents a text of uncommon excellence throughout the *Tales* … but the tale order in El is usually regarded as superior to that in Hg. … Hg and El are excellent copies, and they preserve many readings present in O and lost in other copies.

(Robinson 2000a:§3.4.1)

GP	**MI**	**WBP**	**NP**
	Ad[1]	Ad[1]	Ad[1]
	Ad[3]	Ad[3]	Ad[3]
Bo[2]	Bo[2]	Bo[2]	
Ch	Ch	Ch	Ch
El	El	El	El
	En[3]	En[3]	En[3]
Gg	Gg		Gg
		Gl	
			Ha[3]
Ha[4]	Ha[4]	Ha[4]	Ha[4]
	Ha[5]	Ha[5]	
Hg	Hg	Hg	Hg
	Hk	Hk	
		Ht	
	Ii		
			Ld[1]
Ln			
Ps	Ps	Ps	
	Py	Py	Py
		Ra[2]	
Ra[3]		Ra[3]	
		Tc[1]	
To[1]	To[1]		

Table 1. The O manuscripts in GP, MI, WBP and NP

For the sake of clarity, in this study I will use the terms 'O' and 'archetype' as synonyms for Chaucer's working draft; I will likewise refer to the 'O manuscripts' when discussing those texts which, according to the findings of the Canterbury Tales Project, originate directly from Chaucer's original manuscript in one or more of the four tales mentioned above.

3. Varieties of English and Chaucer's London English

The problem of reconstructing the language of the lost archetype of *The Canterbury Tales* is further complicated by the fact that several manuscripts that have come

down to us are written in different varieties of Middle English. In fifteenth-century England a standard variety of the language had not yet developed and, as I will explain below, scribes often translated their exemplars into their own dialects, thus introducing dialectal variants into their manuscripts. A large number of Middle English dialects have been identified through the survey that resulted in the publication of the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (*LALME*) (McIntosh et al. 1986). An important contribution of this survey is the identification of four types of written incipient standard, which Samuels (1963) calls Types I to IV. Type I is mostly associated with the language of the majority of Wycliffite manuscripts of the second half of the fourteenth century, and is the standard literary language, which was found in texts from the Central Midlands, and survived until 1430. The other three types are more strictly speaking varieties of London English. Type II is the dialect of seven mid-fourteenth-century texts, e.g. the Auchinleck manuscript, which are from the greater London area; Type III is the language recorded in London in a number of documents written between 1385 and 1425 (Chambers and Daunt 1931), as well as in literary texts such as Hoccleve's holographs, the text of *Piers Plowman* in Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17, and the Hengwrt and Ellesmere manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales*. Type IV, also known as 'Chancery Standard', is considered to be the precursor of Standard English, and is the language of the numerous government documents that were written after 1430. As this study primarily focuses on the language of Hengwrt and Ellesmere, I will often allude to features of the London dialect Type III. In addition, references to the two other varieties of London dialect, Types II and IV, will be inevitable when discussing old-fashioned and probably authorial variants found in Hengwrt and Ellesmere, or when comparing the literary language of these manuscripts with the bureaucratic language with which Scribe B was very likely to be familiar.

4. Aims and methodology

This study aims to analyse the language of the manuscripts that have traditionally been attributed to Scribe B, namely Hengwrt, Ellesmere, Trinity, the Hatfield fragment (henceforth referred to as 'Hatfield') and the Kk fragment (henceforth referred to as 'Kk'). I have decided to leave out of consideration five further texts that have recently been ascribed to this copyist (see Chapter 2, §1), first and foremost because my research was already well underway when the articles that reported the new discoveries were published (Horobin and Mooney 2004, Mooney 2006). Furthermore and perhaps more importantly, having examined some images of the new manuscripts I was not entirely sure whether all of them were indeed copied by the same scribe. Although it would have been very interesting to look further into this matter, this would have gone far beyond the scope of my research.

Through an analysis of the language of the texts that form my corpus, I intend to shed more light on Scribe B's spelling practice, in order to find out why he often used different variants in Hg and El, and to what extent the language of either of these two manuscripts can be evidence of the language that was in the exemplar.

Since it is possible that Hg in particular was either copied directly from Chaucer's original drafts or from the first exemplar of *The Canterbury Tales* produced from them (Robinson 1999:203), and since El is closely related to Hg, any new findings about the language of these two manuscripts are relevant to current research on Chaucer's language. By investigating Scribe B's orthographic practice, I also aim to determine what kind of copyist he was. To do so, I will make use of McIntosh's classification of Middle English scribes into different types depending on how faithful they were to their exemplar, a classification which is further discussed in Chapter 2. I therefore hope to be able to explain the differences between the spelling of Hg and El, which in the past have been justified either by arguing that El is an edited text (cf. Manly and Rickert 1940, vol. 1:150, Pearsall 1985:10, Mann 2001:73 n.11), or by considering the spelling in El as the adaptation of the scribe's practice to the ongoing spelling changes in London English (Samuels 1988a:40), or even by claiming that Hg and El were the work of two different scribes (Ramsey 1982, 1986). This study entails an extensive survey of the copyist's written production in order to isolate significant spelling variants and then to define which of these variants are scribal and which are or might be authorial. I chose to approach the vast amount of data at my disposal selectively, and consequently I have carried out my research according to the following methodology.

I first collected facsimiles of the manuscripts known to have been copied by Scribe B when I started my research, that is, Hg, El, Tr, Hatfield and Kk. For reasons already explained, the other five manuscripts attributed to this scribe were left out of consideration here. For the purpose of this study, I needed to be able to consult the manuscript itself as well as a computer-readable and searchable version of all five texts in my corpus. Although I did not have direct access to any of the manuscripts, I was able to make use of the *Hengwrt Chaucer Digital Facsimile* (Stubbs 2000), and the electronic transcriptions of *The Canterbury Tales* in Hg and El, which were made available to me by the Canterbury Tales Project researchers. Whenever I needed to check images of Hg and El, I referred to the *Hengwrt Digital Facsimile* as well as to the facsimile edition of Hg (Ruggiers 1979) and to the *Ellesmere Chaucer Monochromatic Facsimile* (Woodward and Stevens 1997). For Tr, I had digital images of the manuscript at my disposal; on the basis of these I transcribed quires 2–4, which represent Scribe B's stint, i.e. the portion of the text copied by him, in this manuscript. I transcribed the Hatfield and Kk fragments as well, although for these texts I had to rely on the images provided in Campbell (1958:307) and Doyle (1995:61), respectively. Following the example of most transcriptions of Hg and El made by the Canterbury Tales Project, I used the program BBEdit® to transcribe Tr, Hatfield and Kk. BBEdit® is a commercial computer program that, among other things, is suitable for making quick searches through large sections of written text. It also allows users to store the results of multiple searches in files that can be saved and consulted at different stages of the research. I did this for all of the lexical items that I deal with in my study. Throughout this study, I will refer to Chaucer's tales by means of the same abbreviations used in the publications issued by the Canterbury Tales Project (see

Appendix 2). Likewise, I adopt in my text the same lineation system used in the CD-ROMs, which starts with line 1 at the beginning of each tale and link (see Blake 1997c, for the correspondences with the traditional lineation system).

The corpus on which this study is based consists of five manuscripts of different length. Hg and El are the longest texts, but while El contains the entire text of *The Canterbury Tales*, Hg lacks the *Merchant's Prologue* (Link 15), the *Canon's Yeoman's Prologue* (Link 33) and the *Canon's Yeoman's Tale*. A whole quire of possibly ten leaves has been lost at the end of the manuscript; it probably contained half of the *Pardoner's Tale*, from paragraph 477 to the end as well as Chaucer's *Retraction*. In addition, other lines are also missing throughout the text, either because they were not copied, e.g. some passages of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, or because they were on leaves that were damaged, as shown by the lower section of folios 210–212, which was probably gnawed by mice or rats (Doyle and Parkes 1979:xxii). For the present study, I compared only the variants occurring in the texts that are present in both Hg and El, even though I did not exclude the variants attested in those sections that are in El but not in Hg. I believe that even if they do not have a counterpart in Hg, variants that are found only in El are qualitatively significant, as they represent part of Scribe B's production, and as such can give information about his writing practice. Variants from El that belong to sections that are missing from Hg are thus acknowledged in this study, but they are distinguished from the others by being presented separately in the tables as numbers that follow a plus sign, as shown in the example below.

		Hengwrt	**Ellesmere**
REASON	reson	57	13+2
	resoun	24	70+17

Table 2. Example of variants in El that are missing from Hg

The texts of Tr, Hatfield and Kk are much shorter than those of Hg and El, because Tr consists of three quires of eight leaves, whereas the Hatfield and Kk fragments are specimens of just one leaf each. Nevertheless, Tr provided enough material for comparison, and variants from Scribe B's quires are therefore frequently put side by side with those from Hg and El. Variants from Hatfield and Kk, by contrast, are taken into consideration less often, as these two manuscripts represent just a small contribution to the corpus, and only a few lexical items in them reveal significant spelling variation. In a previous study by Samuels (1988a) on the development of Scribe B's spelling practice through time, the Kk fragment in particular was not even taken into account, probably because Doyle and Parkes (1979) had attributed this manuscript to Scribe B with some reservations (see Chapter 2). However, Doyle (1995:64–65) suggested in a later study that the feature which made this fragment somewhat different from the other four manuscripts copied by Scribe B, i.e. the broad differences of the appearance of his handwriting in Kk, was due to

modernisation of the scribe's writing style. I thus decided to include this fragment in my study, because I believe that, where possible, the comparison of the language of Kk with the language of the other manuscripts can be a means to assess palaeographical evidence.

I have developed the following method for searching the texts. Since words were going to be the object of my investigation, I started off by conducting a thorough analysis of the spelling variants of adverbial forms. I selected adverbs because they form a large word class, through which I could study other word classes as well, as exemplified by the word *right*, which is an adverb as well as an adjective and a noun. Another reason for starting with the adverbs is that according to Samuels (1988a:39), the linguistic profiles of Hg and El agree on most variables in spelling, while disagreeing on eleven items, five of which can behave like adverbs, i.e. *agayn*/*ayeyn*, *heighe*/*hye*, *murye*/*myrie*, *neigh*/*ny* and *noght*/*nought*/*nat*. I expected that a thorough analysis of the class of adverbs would provide me with relevant data about Scribe B's spelling practice and especially about possible changes in his habits through time. Hence, by using adverbs as a window on other word classes, I collected data which would be useful for an extensive analysis of my corpus.

My first observations about Scribe B's orthographic practice were thus based on the selection and descriptions of those adverbs that exhibited different spelling variants in my corpus, which I performed as follows. First, I selected the adverbs to be studied by consulting both the CD-ROM of the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* (Robinson 1996) and *A Chaucer Glossary* (Davis et al. 1981). These resources provided me with spelling databases in which words occurring in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* as well as in the whole *Canterbury Tales* were labelled according to the word class they belonged to. I excluded *a priori* from my analysis those adverbs that occur fewer than six times in *The Canterbury Tales*, such as *forby* meaning 'by, past', as they were too few to provide significant evidence unless they presented relevant spelling variation, as shown, for instance, by the words STEEP (Chapter 3) and APART (Chapter 5). Subsequently, I looked for all occurrences and different spelling variants of the adverbs thus selected in the three longest texts, Hg, El and Tr, and collected all occurrences of the more significant ones; these were stored in a document bearing the name of the relative adverb. Hence, all instances of *again(s)*, *ageyn(s)* and *ayeyn(s)* in Hg, Tr and El were saved in a file called AGAIN. The adverbs that I considered relevant for the present analysis were those that exhibited spelling differences in the three texts, such as Hg *her(e)* vs. El *heer(e)*, or those that were spelled as two words in Hg, e.g. *(n)euere mo(ore)*, but as one word in El and Tr, e.g. *(n)eueremo(ore)*. By contrast, adverbs like *soone*, which were spelled in the same way in all manuscripts, were not relevant and were thus excluded. Finally, I described all data collected in this way. In doing so, I compared the relevant spelling variants found in Hg, El and Tr among themselves and, when necessary, also against the spelling forms in the Hatfield and the Kk fragments. These two manuscripts were not included in the main search for spelling variants, because they are very short texts in which all relevant spelling variants could be easily identified.

The analysis of the adverbial class described here revealed that some spelling variants appeared more frequently in one or more manuscripts, or in one or more sections of the same manuscript. Examples of this are the preference for *-o-* and *-ow-* in Hg and *-ou-* in El in words like *ynogh* and *down* in Hg and *ynough* and *doun* in El, as well as the clustering of the variants *muchil* and *mychel* only in the *Tale of Melibee* in Hg, while *muche* and *muchel* are used throughout in Hg, El and Tr. These findings are important for various reasons. The presence in two manuscripts of spelling variants that may with hindsight be considered as either old-fashioned (*ynogh*, *mychel*) or modern (*ynough*, *muche*) could be a sign that some years had passed between the copying of these texts. Likewise, the occurrence of both old and modern variants in the same manuscript could indicate that some tales were older than others. However, the inconsistent use of such variants in the same manuscript raises questions about the scribe's spelling system as well as about his faithfulness to the original text. In order to cast light on the significance of the variation in Scribe B's spelling practice, I first isolated the following five groups of spelling variants, which I noticed recurred constantly in the adverbs that I analysed:

(1) a. Variants characterised by a variable use of the vowels. To this group belong:
   i. words in which the vowel may be spelled with a single or a double graph, as in *anon* vs. *anoon*.
   ii. words displaying a shift from Hg *-o-*, *-u-* and *-ow-* to El *-ou-*.

   b. Variants characterised by a number of different spellings. These are words that primarily occur with a default spelling, e.g. *werke*, but which also exhibit one or more alternative variants, e.g. *wirke*, *werche*, *wirche*.

   c. Variants characterised by a one-word spelling, a two-word spelling or both, as in *moreouer* vs. *more ouer*.

   d. Variants whose spelling is determined by the rhyme constraint because they are placed at the end of the line, as in *alwey* within the line vs. *alway* in rhyming position.

   e. Variants characterised by a different form for a different function, in which the grammatical function of the word therefore seems to influence the spelling of the word, as in the case of *first* (adverb) vs. *firste* (adjective).

I then extended the search for such spelling variations to all words in the corpus at my disposal, so as to determine whether the findings obtained from the analysis of the adverbs were also confirmed by items belonging to the other word classes, and thus whether these variants were the results of an overall change in the scribe's spelling practice or whether there were other reasons for them. The decision to select these features as representative examples of spelling variation was made for practical reasons; it was soon clear that the original plan of dealing with all instances of spelling variation in the manuscripts copied by Scribe B was too ambitious. In addition, such an extensive study would have resulted in a lengthy work

characterised by repetition, as different features, regardless of their number, would ultimately lead to the same conclusion.

The present study therefore consists of an analysis of the above-mentioned spelling features in a considerable number of lexical items in the corpus; the criteria applied are outlined in what follows. First of all, words were selected as representative samples of each feature they exemplify. Thus, for the variants characterised by a variable use of the vowels in (1a.i.) above, for instance, several lexical items were collected, first by looking for words spelled with a double graph in the entire Hg and El manuscripts, and then by selecting only those items that presented variation between Hg and El. Items that were spelled in the same way in Hg and El were disregarded. These words were then compared with the same items in Tr, Hatfield and Kk. The search for more words was halted when the new data clearly did not add any new information, but simply constituted further evidence of what had already been found. In addition, the analysis was limited to words containing *-e-*, *-o-*, as in *gre(e)ne* and *ano(o)n*, and a few examples containing *-a-*, such as *la(a)te*, because the other two vowels, *-i-* and *-u-*, did not show any significant variation between the two largest manuscripts. The data gathered in this way are displayed in tables like Table 3 below, which show only the data obtained from Hg, El and Tr, while the data found in Hatfield and Kk are discussed in the text only when relevant.

		Hengwrt	**Ellesmere**	**Trinity**
CLEAN	clene	20	22+3 (L33, CY, PA)	4
	cleene	2 (GP)	–	–
LESSON	lesson	1 (GP)	–	1
	lessoū	1 (L29)	2	–
	lessoun	–	–	1
STEEP	stepe	1 (GP)	2 (GP)	–
	steepe	1 (GP)	–	–

Table 3. Frequency of variants in Hg, El and Tr

In the tables, words in Middle English are arranged in alphabetical order, and each of them is preceded by its closest translation into Modern English in small capitals, although the meaning may sometimes be old-fashioned or have grown to differ, as shown below by STEEP for *stepe*, an adjective occurring in *The Canterbury Tales* with the meaning of 'staring', as in (2):

(2) A large man he was with eyen stepe Hengwrt GP l. 753

The number that follows each Middle English variant in the tables indicates the number of occurrences of that form; when significant, the abbreviated name of the tale or tales in which the variant occurs is also given in brackets (see Appendix 2 for

the list of abbreviations for the tales). As already mentioned above, the numbers that follow a plus sign refer to the occurrences in El that are attested in those sections which are missing from Hg. Hence, the data provided in Table 3 above show that Middle English *clene*, as a variant of CLEAN, occurs twenty times in Hg, twenty-two times in the text of El that is also present in Hg, three times in the sections that are missing from Hg and four times in Tr. *Cleene*, by contrast occurs only twice in Hg, in the *General Prologue*.

A discussion of the lexical items thus presented follows each table; the variants in question are not always considered in the alphabetical order in which they are listed in the tables, however, because items sharing the same characteristics are often dealt with together. Finally, images from manuscript pages of Hg, El and Tr are often provided in this study to illustrate relevant points discussed. The source of most images is the *Hengwrt Digital Facsimile*; for illustrating details of the Trinity College R.3.2 manuscript of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, I copied some of the digital images that I used for my transcription of the three quires copied by Scribe B, while images from El were copied from the *The Nun's Priest's Tale on CD-ROM*, (Thomas 2006) or they were downloaded from the website of the B. Davis Schwartz Memorial Library, Special Collections and Archives, at Long Island University. Finally, several lines of Hg and El were copied from the *Hengwrt Digital Facsimile* and used as examples in this study; punctuation marks have usually been removed, unless they were necessary to the discussion of the examples in question.

The discussion is primarily based on the data collected in the manuscripts that form my corpus, but I will regularly refer to other texts. First of all, the variants of a given item in the table will often be compared with the occurrences of the same word in the other extant fifteenth-century witnesses of the *General Prologue*, the *Miller's Tale*, the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, collected in the respective CD-ROMs. In particular cases I will also collate the witnesses of *The Tale of Melibee* (TM), which I received as separate files from the Canterbury Tales Project. Some early manuscripts and some late but authoritative manuscripts of these tales in particular will be checked for orthographic features that may derive directly from Chaucer's original draft. In addition, comparison will be made with variants recorded in *An Anthology of Chancery English* (*ACE*) (Fisher et al. 1984), which I also consulted in its online version. The *Anthology* consists of a collection of documents written by the scribes of the Signet, Privy Seal and Chancery offices mostly between 1417 and 1462; only a few letters and indentures are dated between 1384 and 1408, i.e. around the period during which Chaucer wrote his *Tales*. These texts are therefore of particular interest for my analysis, and I consulted them when I needed to know whether a certain form in my corpus was also typical of the bureaucratic language, thus assuming it would be scribal rather than authorial. Although most of these documents postdate the manuscripts copied by Scribe B, I do not exclude the possibility that the language recorded in them was very similar to the language that Scribe B was accustomed to through his work as a professional scrivener at court (see Chapter 2). Finally, I will make use of the *Middle English*

Dictionary (*MED*), which I mainly consulted for information about the use of words in Middle English in general.

The results of my investigation of Scribe B's relevant spelling variants described here represent the central part of this book, which is structured in the following way. Chapter 2 provides general information about Scribe B and his manuscripts. Chapter 3 deals with variants characterised by a variable spelling for the long vowels (variants in 1a.i. above). Chapter 4 considers the shift from Hg *-o-*, (*-u-*) and *-ow-* to El *-ou-* (variants in 1a.ii. above). Chapter 5 describes variants that show different degrees of spelling variation, as well as the presence or absence of word division (variants in 1b–1c above). Chapter 6 is devoted to general issues related to spelling variation in Hg and El, including the relations between spelling and rhyme constraint and between the spelling and form and function of words (variants in 1d–1e above). Chapter 7 contains my conclusions and relates my work to previous studies on the same subject.

Through the analysis of the spelling variants in Hg and El, I will proceed to show that the differences between these two manuscripts are not due to changes in the scribe's orthographic practice, but to the scribe's different attitude towards the two texts.