

A Macron Signifying Nothing: Revisiting *The Canterbury Tales Project* Transcription Guidelines

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Abstract

The original transcription guidelines of *The Canterbury Tales Project* were first developed by Peter Robinson and Elizabeth Solopova in 1993. Since then, the project has evolved and expanded in scope, bringing about numerous changes of varying degrees to the process of transcription. In this article, we revisit those original guidelines and the principles and aims that informed them and offer a rationale for changes in our transcription practice. We build upon Robinson and Solopova's assertion that transcription is a fundamentally interpretive act of translation from one semiotic system to another and explore the implications and biases of our own position (e.g. how our interest in literature prioritizes the minutiae of text over certain features of the document).

We reevaluate the original transcription guidelines in relation to the changes in our practice as a means of clarifying our own position. Changes in our practice illustrate how the project has adapted to accommodate both necessary compromises and more efficient practices that better reflect the original principles and aims first laid down by Robinson and Solopova. We provide practical examples that demonstrate those same principles in action as part of the transcription guidelines followed by transcribers working on *The Canterbury Tales Project*.

Rather than perceiving this project as producing a definitive transcription of *The Canterbury Tales*, we conceptualize our work as an open access resource that will aid others in producing their own editions as we have done the heavy lifting of providing a base text.

Keywords

____ Transcription; *The Canterbury Tales Project*; Chaucer; Semiotics; Scribal Abbreviations; Digital Humanities

Introduction

In 1993, Peter Robinson and Elizabeth Solopova developed and co-wrote *The Canterbury Tales Project's* (CTP) first complete transcription guidelines in preparation for their digital edition of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*. This article was not merely a description of transcription practices, but a declaration of the principles and aims of the project and a rationale of how the project's practices were informed by those principles. Since then, Robinson and project director Barbara Bordalejo have revisited these guidelines throughout the ongoing practice of transcription. Some important transcription decisions have been documented in the project's wiki and the editorial material of related projects that directors have had a hand in (e.g. Bordalejo's contributions to Prue Shaw's edition of Dante's *Commedia*). However, there remains a need to formally revisit and review how the practice of transcription has changed and assess how well those practices continue to align with the principles and aims of the CTP.

In this paper we seek to outline the relatively minor shifts in transcription practice on the CTP and how these practices are informed by the project's own principles and aims. Our goal, however, is not merely a description of the end result; we hope that by describing the process by which we arrived at these new practices, the questions we have had to answer likewise require us to further clarify and challenge our preexisting assumptions about those principles and aims. This article is not precisely an updated version of the project's guidelines, but a genealogy and theoretical justification of the ongoing development of our guidelines and how they have changed in light of problems that arose on the project, compromises for the sake of efficiency, and technological change.

We begin by revisiting Robinson and Solopova's principles of transcription as an interpretative act of translation from one semiotic system to another, exploring how this assertion results in our representations of overlapping hierarchies of the text and document. We then provide a short account of other full text transcription projects such as *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive*, Murray McGillivray's *The Cotton Nero A. x Project*, and *The International Greek New Testament Project*, with a special interest in projects that have informed our own practice.

Throughout this article, we frequently contextualize the work and aims of the CTP in relation to such similar projects to better demonstrate how our transcription guidelines and practices align with the foundational principles of the project. Our own transcription practices based on the principle of transcription as an act of translation are informed by the project's focus on Chaucer's work as English literature and, in some instances, an emphasis on the text of *The Canterbury Tales* rather than on the documents as artifacts. Moreover, we further explore the foundational assertion that the aim of the project is *not* to produce a definitive transcription, but an open access, collatable, electronic transcription, the value of which ought to be judged on its usefulness to other editors and scholars.

Next, we look at how transcription practices have changed over time focussing especially on the major developments of the apparatus tag and how we treat abbreviation and expansion. These improvements allow for greater specificity in our transcription and clarify our interpretive decisions with greater transparency. While these changes provide benefits of clarity, certain adaptations of the transcription guidelines have been made as a practical compromise in light of the herculean task of transcribing such a large corpus. For example, regularizing our treatment of certain abbreviations (e.g. final "e") rather than developing distinct guidelines for specific manuscripts has helped the project to progress in a more consistent and timely way.

Finally, we examine the limitations of guidelines and the need for informed transcribers and flexibility in transcription practice. A set of guidelines that exhaustively anticipates all possible cases is impossible given the complexity and inconsistency of scribal practice. Instead, our guidelines encapsulate the principles and aims of our interpretation and we expect an informed transcriber, in coordination with the rest of the transcription team, to implement adaptive transcriptions in unique circumstances. Reviewing the original transcription guidelines reveals that, while the project has adapted its transcription practice in the last 28 years, each of those changes has been in an attempt to better accomplish our overall task of producing a collatable electronic transcription of *The Canterbury Tales* in a timely manner and in alignment with Robinson and Solopova's original aims—a task that we are closer to accomplishing than ever.

Transcription as Translation and the Advantages of Electronic Transcription

Any project that has carried on for as long as the CTP is bound to experience change. Accordingly, our transcription guidelines and practices have changed considerably over the last twenty-eight years. The project's initial principles, however, grounded in Robinson and Solopova's discourse on semiotics in "Guidelines for Transcription of the Manuscripts of the Wife of Bath's Prologue" have remained much the same.

Robinson and Solopova describe the act of transcription not as the mere keeping of a record, but an interpretive act of translation from one semiotic system to another. When scholars produce a digital edition from medieval manuscript witnesses, they are moving between materially distinct systems of representation:

Any primary textual source then has its own semiotic system within it. As an embodiment of an aspect of a living natural language, it has its own complexities and ambiguities. The computer system with which one seeks to represent this text constitutes a different semiotic system, of electronic signs and distinct logical structure. The two semiotic systems are materially distinct, in that text written by hand is not the same as the text on the computer screen (Robinson and Solopova 1993, 21).

This remains a fundamental distinction for our transcription practice. If one believes that transcription is a matter of objectively recording "what's on the page", one ignores the fundamentally interpretive nature of transcription and fails to recognize that an absolutely objective transcription is an impossibility. But once we acknowledge transcription as an act of interpretation (i.e. translation), our priorities are directed towards finding the optimal way of representing the semantic meaning present in the manuscript within the new semiotic system of the computer and maintaining transparency for that interpretive act of representation. Of course, what counts as an optimal representation depends largely on the project's aim. From the outset of the project, the decision was made that "our transcripts are best judged on how useful they will be for others, rather than as an attempt to achieve a definitive transcription of these manuscripts" (Robinson and

Solopova 1993, 20). Moreover, because interested parties will always have slightly different values and priorities in a transcription, our own transcription “[l]ike all acts of translation... must be seen as fundamentally incomplete and fundamentally interpretative” (Robinson and Solopova 21). It still comes as a surprise to many who hear about the CTP that our aim is not a definitive transcription but instead to be as transparent as possible in providing a base transcription and to make our work accessible so that others can build upon it to form new transcriptions that better serve readers who have different priorities. This is one of the great advantages of electronic transcription. As D. C. Parker explains in his discussion on transcription of the New Testament, “[o]nce a transcription has been made, it can be made available as open source, for new editors to use as they choose. They can check it and add features to it without having to do it all again” (2008, 101). Just as Parker has achieved in partnership with different New Testament editors and projects, we hope that our transcriptions of the CTP will help other scholars to “be able to spend more time studying the data and less time doing the preliminary work” (Parker 2008, 102).

Nevertheless, the project possesses its own biases and priorities when it comes to transcription. For instance, our focus on *The Canterbury Tales* as literature and our disciplinary framework as part of an English department prioritizes Chaucer’s text over the document as an artifact. Moreover, ever since members of the CTP first collaborated with evolutionary biologists in 1998 to produce “The Phylogeny of *The Canterbury Tales*”, we have aimed to produce a collatable electronic transcription compatible with phylogenetic software and techniques (Barbrook et al. 1998). As we discuss below, such prioritization results in a transcription that pays greater attention to the minutiae of textual signifiers while forgoing entire aesthetic and artistic features of the manuscripts (e.g. illustration and illumination). Just as our interest in *The Canterbury Tales* as literature determines that we examine and transcribe every significant manuscript witness containing the *Tales*, it also determines which content in those manuscripts we record. If, for example, editors with an interest in a particular manuscript should come along in the future, however, they could quite easily adapt our transcription to their own principles and choose to prioritize different features of the manuscript (e.g. glosses, marginalia, illustrations) while benefiting from what we have already supplied. Our transcriptions are by no means a definitive

iteration of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, but technological developments allow us to make them freely accessible in a way that is useful to others and brings future editors significantly closer to developing their own transcription with the use of our substantial base text.

An Account of Other Full Text Transcription Projects

There are projects in medieval studies that involve similar work but have very different circumstances and goals than our own. For instance, our project differs greatly in scope and precision from *The Cotton Nero A.x. Project*. Given that Cotton Nero A.x. is the only extant witness for the 14th century poems it contains (i.e. *Pearl*, *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*), the transcription team does not concern itself with producing a collatable transcription because there is nothing to collate their text against. Instead they examine this manuscript in great detail and even encode distinct letter forms (we do not) and, as discussed in relation to our own practice below, provide examples for each different abbreviation of *nomina sacra* that occurs in the manuscript (see p. 26-7).

Likewise, *The Piers Plowman Electronic Archive* (PPEA), which aims to transcribe the witnesses of *Piers Plowman* in some fifty manuscripts, is somewhat smaller in scope than our own project—the B-text of the poem is approximately 7,200 lines compared to *The Canterbury Tales*' 17,000. Moreover, the PPEA's self-identification as an archive and its "long-term goal... of a complete archive of the medieval and early modern textual tradition of Langland's poem" belies a completionist attitude of objectivism not present in our own project, which emphasizes interpretation (PPEA "Home"). The PPEA's interest in producing critical editions of version archetypes of the poem along with documentary editions of each manuscript witness is not entirely different from the CTP's own editions of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* (1996) or *The Hengwrt Chaucer* (2000). However, their principles beget differences in practice that are not insignificant. For instance, while the PPEA's editions clearly indicate where editors have expanded abbreviations, its transcriptions rarely record the original abbreviation. As an example, PPEA transcriptional protocols record the example of "p^{pt}" (i.e. *propter*) as, "p<expan>ro</expan>p<expan>ter</expan>", retaining nothing of the original scribe's marks of

abbreviation (PPEA “Transcriptional Protocols”). Our own transcriptions, in the interest of transparency and accessibility, encode abbreviations markers in the <am> element and our interpretation of their corresponding expansions in the <ex> element. Our treatment of the same example would render as “<am>p</am><ex>pro</ex>pt<am>’</am><ex>er</ex>” allowing the reader to see how we arrived at our interpretation of the text.

The CTP has also developed many facets of its transcription practice from the innovations of other full text transcription projects. Our use of the apparatus (<app>) tag is explicitly modelled on, and extends from, the system used by *The International Greek New Testament Project* and its collaborators (see p. 13-14). We also borrow from Prue Shaw’s edition of Dante’s *Commedia* for our version of the <app> tag and draw inspiration from the same for many of our decisions regarding abbreviations (see p. 17).

Encoding Physical Features in Addition to our own Hierarchical Structures

As we translate from one semiotic system to another through the process of transcription we sometimes create redundancies and doubly encode hierarchies present in the primary source witness. This is the result of needing to encode divisions between sections (e.g. tales and links) in machine-readable language while still recording the textual signifiers (e.g. rubrics) meant to convey those same divisions to human readers. For instance, our transcription encodes boundaries between sections of the text through the use of the <div> tag but also retains rubrics that serve the same purpose in manuscript witnesses.

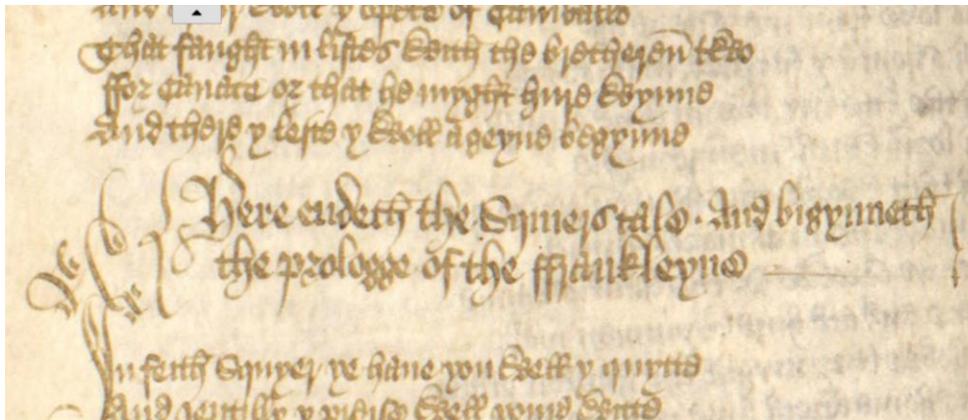


Figure 1: A Rubric separating *The Squire Tale* and *The Franklin's Tale*. 136v in Cn. Austin, University of Texas, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center HRC Pre-1700 MS 143.

In Figure 1, we can see the rubric clearly denoting a separation between the end of *The Squire's Tale* and the beginning of *The Franklin's Prologue*. However, even if this rubric were not present, we would still need a machine-readable way to record this transition for the sake of our collation. As a result, we record this transition as the end of one division (`</div>`) and the beginning of another in machine-readable XML (in this case, `<div n="L20">`, to denote the beginning of Link 20).

```

22 <lb/><l n="660">That faught in listes with the bretheren two </l>
23 <lb/><l n="661">For Canace or that he myght hure wyne </l>
24 <lb/><l n="662">And there y lefte y woll ageyne begynne </l>
25 <lb/><l n="FRE">Here endeth the Squiers tale . </l></div>
26 <div n="L20" type="G">
27 <l n="IRE">And bigynneth
28 <lb/>the prologe of the Frankleyne </l>
29 <lb/><l n="1"><hi rend="orncp1">I</hi>n feith Squyer ye haue you well y quytte </l>
30 <lb/><l n="2">And Ientilly y preise well youre witte </l>
31 <lb/><l n="3">Quod the Frankeleyn considryng youre youthe </l>
32 <lb/><l n="4">So felyngly ye speke sir y a low . the </l>

```

Figure 2: A transcription of the same passage as the previous figure in *Textual Communities*. 136v in Cn.

However, we want to retain that the scribe's own practice in the primary document also noted this separation, not only because it informs the medieval reader of distinct sections of the text but

because such rubrics can indicate the relationships between textual witnesses. To this end, our transcription (Figure 2) also encodes portions of the single rubric as present as an *explicit* at the end of the Squire's tale and as an *incipit* at the beginning of *The Franklin's Prologue*.

This constitutes encoding the same information—that one section ends and another begins—in two distinct ways: at the level of the text and the level of the document. One explicitly captures this division as machine-readable while the other is a human-readable representation of the semantic statement of the division in the primary source document.

Our system offers readers “diplomatic” and “edited” views of our digital transcriptions, but our use of these terms requires some qualification. We do not use “diplomatic” in the strict sense Elena Pierazzo puts forward, where a transcription is diplomatic which:

reproduces as many characteristics of the transcribed document (the diploma) as allowed by the characters used in modern print. It includes features like line breaks, page breaks, abbreviations and differentiated letter shapes (2011, 463–4).

We use “diplomatic” in a more qualified sense. Although our transcriptions include line breaks, page breaks, and abbreviations, our aim is not to reproduce the characteristics of the document as nearly as our medium allows. In our practice, a certain degree of regularization takes place at the level of transcription so that, for instance, we do not differentiate between distinct letter forms (excepting capitalization, discussed below). Similarly, we use only a limited set of abbreviation marks rather than all characters potentially available for the sake of an economy of effort in handling the inconsistency of scribal practice. Our use of “diplomatic” is perhaps best understood, therefore, in contrast with “edited” in the context of the viewer in our *Textual Communities* platform; the principal difference is that in our “diplomatic” view, abbreviations are represented by abbreviation marks, while in our “edited” view those marks are replaced by their expansions shown in italics.

Another example of incorporating physical features of the document into our encoding involves marginalia of various sorts. We use distinct tags for different types of marginalia so that we

both record marginal text and encode its perceived function on the manuscript page. The most common example is the running header. A running header indicates (usually in the upper margin) what part of the *Tales* a page contains. Consider the header found in folio 172v of Bo2 (Figure 3):



Figure 3: Running header in Bo2, 172v. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodl. 686 [s.c. 2527].

Here, “¶ Chawcer” signals that the text below belongs to Chaucer-the-character’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*, which we encode as: <fw type="header" place="tm">¶ Chawcer</fw>. Here the type “header” indicates that the contained text functions as the page’s header and “tm” signifies its location at the top middle of the page.

In addition to headers, we encode footers, catchwords, manuscript signatures, and page numbers, each with its unique tag. Marginalia that does not fit these types we record in a <note> element with an indication of its location. One exception is the paraph mark ¶ which we encode at the beginning of the line, rather than as marginalia.

Similar issues arise when editing *The Tale of Sir Thopas* where an encoded version of its tail rhymes can hardly reflect the cues expressed in the document. In many manuscripts, this tale is written with offset tail rhymes linked together by brackets as can be seen below in Figure 4:

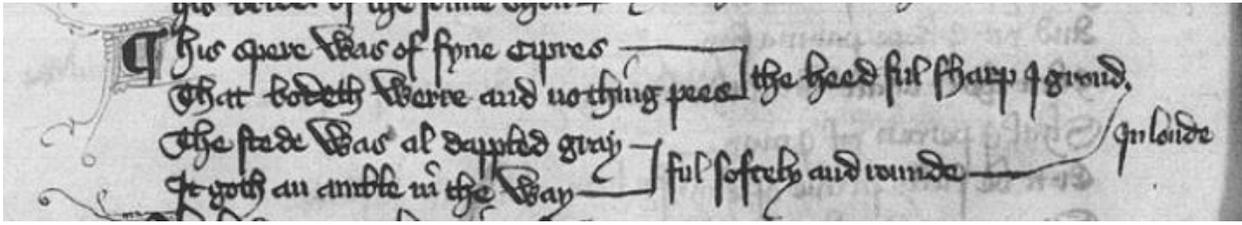


Figure 4: Tail rhymes in *The Tale of Sir Thopas*, Ad3, folio 190v, lines 169–75. London, British Library, Additional MS 35286.

Here, the brackets act as a visual cue to inform the order in which one reads the text. Our intention, however, is not to reproduce the visual effect of the document but rather to encode our interpretation of it and to translate its hierarchical structure into our digital system. Accordingly, we encode these passages as if they were written in consecutive order from top to bottom. In this instance, therefore, the line beginning with “His spere” is recorded first, that beginning with “The heed” is third, while “In londe” is seventh. We freely admit that something of this complex visual structure is necessarily lost when translated into our digital form, but what is lost is incidental to our primary aim of collation.

Transcription as an Ongoing Process

Many of our transcription practices have changed since the original guidelines were documented in the early stages of the project. Some of these have come about through an organic process of refinement (we hope) resulting from an accumulation of experience and, especially, from being forced to find solutions for an abundance of unforeseen challenges. Others, however, are directly related to changes in our technological capabilities. Still others have been changed for more pragmatic reasons in our aim to achieve an economy of effort. The following discussion will address a number of these changes and offer our rationale for employing them.

One particularly significant change to our transcription practice involves the development of the apparatus (app) tag, which will require some background to illustrate. First, there is the problem that the app tag is meant to solve, namely, “how do we encode scribal alterations?” Here

the *Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) P5 Guidelines* offer a number of options. The *TEI Guidelines* principally suggest using a combination of the elements <choice>, <add>, and (TEI Consortium 2020, 3.4; 11.3.1.4). The <choice> element signals that the text contained within it can have multiple interpretations which may be due to the presence of, for instance, abbreviations or scribal alterations, or it can be used to introduce editorial emendations. The <add> and elements signify that the transcriber understands the contained text to be either added or deleted. Scribal markers such as interlinear, marginal, or overwriting text often signal additions, just as underdotted, struckthrough, or scraped text commonly do deletion. All of these, however, were problematic for our purposes; on the one hand, the <choice> element tends to be redundant in our circumstances while on the other, using <add> and conflates the text of the document with its interpretation, which is precisely what the app tag allows us to keep distinct.

The historical development of the app tag can be traced across several earlier projects, here summarized from Barbara Bordalejo's account in "The Commedia Project Encoding System" (2013). Its beginnings lie in the Società Dantesca's Dante Online website. There, scribal alterations were encoded within a single element as in, e.g. <di +i0 del >, where "di" is the original reading and "del" is the scribal correction. Further, the "+" symbol indicates an addition that is "i" for interlinear, which is made in the hand of the main scribe, "0." This system, however, fails to report certain details regarding how scribal corrections are indicated in the document such as whether or how deletion is marked and whether the correction is written out in its entirety or only partially.

A second source in the app tag's development is to be found in a pair of contemporary Greek New Testament projects (*The International Greek New Testament Project* and *Codex Sinaiticus Project*). These projects used an encoding that more closely resembles our own as it abandons the <add> and tags and instead employs an <app> containing multiple <rdg> elements that denote different readings. Thus, for example, a correction in Codex Sinaiticus, quire 66, folio 5r, first column, line 5 is encoded as follows:

<app>

```

<rdg type="main-corr"><w n="11">εἰδῶξαι</w></rdg>
<rdg type="corr" n="ca"><w n="11">εἰδῶσκει</w></rdg>
</app>

```

The primary advantage of this method is how it permits editors to collate each reading separately. These readings, however, are editorial interpretations of the text and no clue is offered to the reader to judge how these interpretations were made. In other words, as Bordalejo notes, this method “makes no attempt to represent the document” (2013, 3).

The *Commedia Project* editors resolved this ambiguity of interpretation within the <app> tag by modifying their use of the <rdg> tag (Shaw 2010). The crucial innovation here is the <lit> element, meaning “literal.” Within the <lit> tag, the transcriber encodes all the relevant text of the document in a manner that is as interpretation-free as possible while the interpretive act of understanding the distinct readings of that text is treated separately in <orig> and <c1> elements, where the number indicates which scribe is responsible for the correction (Bordalejo 2013). This system has been only slightly adjusted for the CTP in that we use the more clearer <mod> (modified) element, while most of the time it is not possible to distinguish between multiple correcting hands.

A particularly interesting example of an <app> tag in our project is given in Figure 5, below and is encoded as follows:

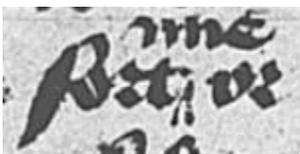


Figure 5: Scribal correction in Ne, folio 12v, line 844 of *The General Prologue*. Oxford, Bodleian Library New College, Oxford MS 314.

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<app>

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```
<rdg type="lit">sort<seg rend="int">une</seg></rdg>
```

```
<rdg type="orig">sort</rdg>
```

```
<rdg type="mod">fortune</rdg>
```

```
</app>
```

Here, the <lit> element represents the text of the document regardless of which reading it is judged to belong to, while the <orig> (original) and <mod> (modified) elements contain the transcriber’s interpretation of the variant states of the text, namely, what the scribe originally wrote (<orig>) and what the transcriber understands the correction to signify (<mod>). One complicating factor in the example above is the initial letter which, although it undergoes no physical alteration, is nevertheless understood to change in meaning. The modified reading of the line in our transcription question renders as: “Were it by auenture, fortune, or caas” (Textual Communities, Ne 12v). The context of the line informs our interpretation of both readings. The Middle English word “sort”, meaning “fortune” or “lot”, makes far more sense than “fort” in the original reading and corresponds logically with the scribal modification to “fortune” (“Sort, n.1” 2020). The reading “fortune” is also a much more likely reading in general than the awkward “sortune”—if the final “une” were not an interlinear addition, most readers would doubtless not hesitate in understanding “fortune.” The judgment to understand “fortune” here is further corroborated by the scribe’s occasional inconsistency in crossing the letters “f” and long “s.” Indeed, on the very next line we see evidence of this in Figure 6, where the initial “s” of “soth” has a more emphatic cross than many instances of the scribe’s “f.”

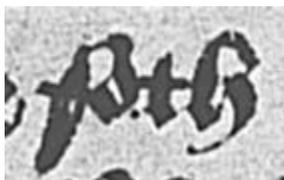


Figure 6: Crossed “s” in Ne, folio 12v, line 845 of the *General Prologue*. Oxford, Bodleian Library New College, Oxford MS 314.

Whether or not one agrees with our judgments concerning the readings “sort” and “fortune,” the example above highlights the advantage of using our form of the <app> tag. Rather than merely offering a set of interpretive judgments in isolation, the <app> tag instantiates our value of transparency. It provides readers with the information our judgments are based on as well as the means to evaluate those judgments—and to disagree should they see fit to do so. The <app> tag signals to the reader that something interesting is happening in the document and emphasizes that what we transcribe is an interpretation (Bordalejo 2013).

We do not use <app> tags in all cases of scribal alteration, but only for those which introduce a substantially variant reading or in cases where we wish to highlight instances of variation. This is done for the sake of an economy of effort and to avoid potential complications during collation, but most importantly because doing otherwise could constitute a misunderstanding of the text. For example, an underdotted false start of a single letter is clearly not to be understood as an alternate reading of the following word. Therefore, it is simply encoded within a <hi rend=“ud”> tag, which is easily recognizable during collation. The following (Figure 7) is an example taken from the Lansdowne manuscript:

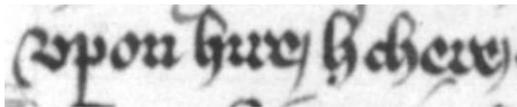


Figure 7: False start in La, 116r, line 238 of the *Clerk’s Tale*. London, British Library, Lansdowne MS 851.

This passage is transcribed: Vpon hire <hi rend=“ud”>h</hi> chere—without an <app> tag. To use an <app> tag in such a case would be to treat the underdotted “h” as a variant reading of “chere” or as an altogether separate word which the scribe began to write, but never fully executed.

Despite its strengths, we recognize that the <app> tag is not perfect. One issue is that in our system nothing binds together all examples of specific types of scribal alteration. For example, though we record the physical marks of underdotting, overwriting, erasure, and strikethrough—with specific tags within the <lit> element, these activities are not explicitly categorized together as

deletions within our transcription. As a result, there is no direct way to search for all instances of deletion; one would instead need to search separately for instances of underdotting, strikethrough, etc. This would not be the case if we followed the TEI recommendation of using the <add> and elements, but we maintain that addition and deletion are construed by the reader and not features of the document. It is therefore fitting that they should remain at the level of interpretation for our readers as well and not be features of our transcription. Each <app> tag is to be individually interpreted in order to understand the change it encodes.

A second particularly significant change since the original transcription guidelines involves our treatment of abbreviations. Many abbreviations in the original guidelines were not expanded at all (Robinson and Solopova 1993, 31–2). Instead, special characters resembling those employed by the scribes were used to represent marks of abbreviation. This approach was adopted because the inconsistency of scribes posed too great a challenge to the system of encoding. In the original guidelines, Robinson and Solopova explain:

...the ambiguities and inconsistencies of scribal usage seen just in the comparatively brief section of *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* transcribed forbade certain assignment of any one phonetic value to any one sign. Across the forty-eight manuscripts, it was found that in different manuscripts the one brevigraph could have different phonetic values and could even have more than one phonetic value in the same manuscript (Robinson and Solopova 1993, 31).

This reasoning is sound, but it reflects a reliance on a particular feature of the TEI guidelines that we no longer strictly adhere to. The statement that scribal inconsistency “forbade certain assignment of any one phonetic value to any one sign” is particularly telling. It points to the recommendation in the TEI guidelines to create a list of character definitions for each brevigraph (TEI Consortium, 11.3.1.2), but it is precisely this fundamental step that is impossible to achieve for such a multivarious and inconsistently used set of brevigraphs. If this task was unmanageable for transcribing only *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, how much more problematic would it be when

tackling the entirety of *The Tales*? If we were to include not only abbreviation marks but their expansions as well, it was clear that a more flexible approach was needed.

Our system uses a combination of the <am> (abbreviation mark) and <ex> (expansion) elements. Within the <am> element is transcribed the mark of abbreviation using a set of Junicode characters that resemble scribal usage, while the <ex> element contains the transcriber's interpretation of what that abbreviation signifies. Although only a limited set of symbols is available to us (see our "Full Transcription Guidelines" for this list), the value of each is not predetermined. Of course, many abbreviation marks commonly signify a particular combination of letters, but our system allows for unusual cases and, critically, for various possible expansions of a single mark. For instance, while "P" might nearly always signify the letters "let," abbreviation marks like the macron " " have multiple possible significations, such as "n" or "m" or even nothing at all, as discussed further below.

The examples below illustrate our system of encoding abbreviations. The first example (Figure 8) is taken from the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and is transcribed as follows:



Figure 8: Abbreviation in Bw, folio 216v, line 97 of *The Tale of Sir Thopas*. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Barlow 20 [s.c. 6420].

<am>p</am><ex>per</ex>ilous

Here, the abbreviation mark "p" is expanded to "per" rendering the reading, "perilous." Note, however, that in the expanded version, the stroke through the "p" is not reproduced so that in our edited view, it will appear in italics, i.e. "*perilous*."

Readers familiar with medieval manuscripts will be aware that the symbol "p" may stand for either "per" or "par" (Capelli 1960, xxx). Our system allows for the discretion of individual transcribers and editors to judge between possible expansions in such cases as these where it is not

always possible to interpret the scribe’s intent. Occasionally, a word written with an abbreviation is also spelled out in full nearby in the same manuscript, in which case we adopt that spelling for the expansion. In ideal circumstances, we might do the same in all cases regardless of where that full spelling may be. Scanning entire manuscripts for particular spellings in the page viewer during the initial transcription process, however, requires an enormous amount of time and effort which we do not think would be justified. Moreover, it often happens that all instances of a particular word in a manuscript are abbreviated or the scribe uses variant spellings—in either case it remains impossible to reliably reconstruct the scribe’s intended spelling. Accordingly, in cases of abbreviation where multiple expansions may be equally justified, we use the expedient of adopting whatever spelling is most commonly found in Hengwrt, one of the earliest manuscript witnesses. This does not necessarily mean we will use this spelling in our final transcription, but clarifies and streamlines the process in the guidelines for our transcribers.

A second example (Figure 9) comes from the same manuscript and is transcribed as follows:

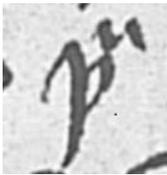


Figure 9: Abbreviation in Bw, folio 58v, line 314 of *The Reeve’s Tale*. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Barlow 20 [s.c. 6420].

p^uou

Here, we understand the superscript “u” to abbreviate “ou” since “pou” is the most common spelling of this form of the second person singular pronoun in the subject case. It is nevertheless possible that the scribe did not intend the superscript “u” as an abbreviation, but rather as a customary way of writing this particular word—superscript letters and other marks that may commonly be used for abbreviation do not always signify abbreviation. The spelling “p^u” does very occasionally occur in some manuscripts of *The Tales*, but we understand these as outliers and choose to treat the superscript “u” as an abbreviation for the sake of consistency.

Besides these major shifts in transcription practice there are several smaller changes we have made since the original guidelines were formulated that bear mentioning. Some of these are simple character replacements made possible by the development of Junicode. For instance, we now use an updated list of abbreviation marks, including: “j” for “sir” or “ser” and “J” for final “-es” or “-is.” We also now have available abbreviation marks that combine with the preceding character, such as the combining macron “̄” and the “er” or “re” abbreviation, “er”, which enable us to be more flexible when encountering unusual uses of these symbols. The development of Junicode has also allowed us to make certain changes to our punctuation marks. Accordingly, we now include in our transcription guidelines both the mid dot “.” and the punctus elevatus “ꝑ”, as well as the rarer trifinium “.:” and wedge “∇”. We also now use a simple slash “/” to represent virgules, though when these are attached to the preceding word, we treat them as ornamental flourishes and do not record them. We no longer transcribe initial double “f” as “ff,” but understand it as how most scribes formed the capital letter and so transcribe it as a capital “F” (Robinson and Solopova 1993, 42). Similarly, we understand the crossing of double “l” (ll) simply as customary or ornamental and only record and interpret it as an abbreviation of final “e” when its rhyming pair likewise ends with an “e”. An example of this occurs in *The Franklin’s Tale* (Figure 10):

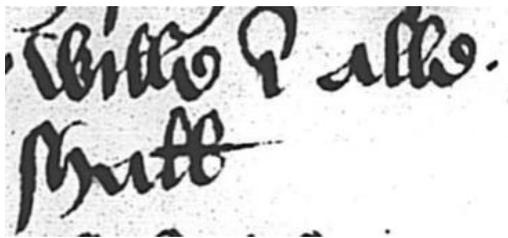


Figure 10: Final “e” abbreviation in Ld2, folio 178r, lines 41–2 of *The Franklin’s Tale*. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 739 [SC. 1234].

Here, we encode “sha<am>H</am><ex>lle</ex>” in order to correspond with the spelling “alle” in the preceding line with which it rhymes. We have also added a number of abbreviation marks which tend to occur only in Latin words, such as: “z” for “rum,” “3” for final “ue” or sometimes “us,” and “oiii” for “omnium.” Finally, note that we also interpret the Tironian et “j” as

abbreviating “et” in Latin contexts, such as in the commonplace “j ċ” for “et cetera.” The rest of the time (i.e. in a Middle English context) we expand the same symbol to “and.”

Resource Optimization

While some questions of abbreviation deal with issues of consistency, there have been other instances where adhering to our original guidelines would require a tremendous amount of time and effort for the project with little payoff. Instead, we have tried to maintain a balance of clarity and economy of effort while keeping in mind our ultimate aims of a collatable, accessible, electronic transcription.

In the original transcription guidelines, Robinson and Solopova distinguished between a macron and a flourish as different strokes by a scribe, but had a tendency to record both even in cases where the macron or flourish might signify nothing such as in “mañ, certeyñ or in spellings like douñ” (Robinson and Solopova 1993, 37). Their discussion of macron “n” resulted in the following decisions:

- where there is no mark of abbreviation, we interpret the minims as n;
- where there is a mark of abbreviation, we interpret the minims as u, with the mark representing abbreviation of the final n (Robinson and Solopova 38).

Both acknowledge that this is not a perfect solution and many problems and inconsistencies arise but they “feel that following this rule leaves less scope for interpretation and decision-making by every transcriber in each individual case” (Robinson and Solopova 38). Our guidelines on this issue continued to develop with this principle in mind, attempting to streamline the decision-making process for the transcriber for both economy of effort and consistency.

Later, in our “Full Transcription Guidelines”, Bordalejo and Robinson identify the category of “Marks which might or might not be abbreviations” (Bordalejo and Robinson). In general, the guidelines for such marks advised that we “record the mark, but do not give an expansion” (Bordalejo and Robinson). That is, we are providing the literal marks in the manuscript but not

expanding them with an interpretation (i.e. we do not implement the <am> and <ex> tags in these cases). They acknowledge there are cases where a macron may be ambiguous because it appears over a final “n” that could potentially be a “u”. In these cases, they propose merely recording it with “ñ”. However, they conclude the section with somewhat of a catchall: “If it appears the stroke is simply ornamental, ignore” (Bordalejo and Robinson). These practices depended greatly on transcriber interpretation and could lead to a great degree of inconsistency. So, the project team developed a system based on the observation of minim strokes expressed in the “Quick Start Guide.”

Here, the guidelines depend not upon a transcriber’s judgment of whether strokes are ornamental, but a simple decision about whether or not we deem an abbreviation possible. Where abbreviation is not possible, the macron signifying nothing, we now simply record “ñ”. Where we do interpret abbreviation as possible, we record a different abbreviation based on what letter the minims appear to be:

ñ: this requires special treatment

- No abbreviation ñ (iñ upon ñ douñ gypouñ -- prepositions adverbs nouns in -ouñ)
- Where abbreviation u+n is possible (condicioñ; nouns in oñ):
 - appears u: <am rend="ü">iī</am><ex>un</ex>
 - appears n: <am rend="ñ">iī</am><ex>un</ex>
 - appears neither n nor u: <am>iī</am><ex>un</ex> (“Quick Start Guide” Robinson).

These distinctions allow us to record certain nuances of scribal abbreviation. Rather than obfuscate what is actually present in the text by supplying our own interpretation or excising significant marks entirely, we allow readers to judge between possible interpretations of the macron and minims for themselves. Moreover, transcribers save time because they are not expected to distinguish between essentially indistinguishable letters (i.e. the minim pair). They can defer judgment to the reader by simply recording the minim pair and macron rather than deciding between their possible interpretations.

Another instance where we have changed our transcription practice in favour of an economy of effort is how the project negotiates the use of the hook abbreviation ($\acute{\text{}}$) denoting a final “e”. Originally, the transcription guidelines were primarily concerned with a single instance of this abbreviation, the flourish or hook that occurs after a final “r”. Because it looked indistinguishable from such a flourish occurring over a final “u”, which usually abbreviated an “n”, we encoded both instances of the flourish as a macron over their respective letters: \bar{u} , \bar{r} (Robinson and Solopova). However, the complexities of representation of a macron over two minims (see above, 14–15) and the stark realization that we could not always guarantee that a flourish at the end of a word abbreviated anything, let alone a particular letter, caused us to change our practice so that we now record these symbols as distinct markings. We record flourishes over a final “r” where we are reasonably confident of an abbreviation with the hook mentioned above ($\acute{\text{}}$), and expand it to “e”. We treat flourishes over a “u” as macrons.

The original transcription guidelines paid particular attention to flourishes at the end of words but, as we do now, advised one not to record a flourish if it was merely decorative. It also became apparent that it would be difficult to establish consistent practices across manuscripts as even the use of a flourish after a single word such as “well” could require extensive discussion (Robinson and Solopova 35). By and large, the original guidelines more freely attributed meaning to a final flourish than our current practice.

In our current practice, we emphasize that one should transcribe a flourish at the end of a word as an abbreviation only—as is our general practice with all marks on the manuscript—when one can be reasonably certain it carries semantic value. For instance, we are not confident that a final “e” should always be recorded simply because a flourish is present at the end of the last word of a line which might resolve the metre. Nor should the final “e” be added simply to regularize a spelling or make it match modern convention. As a result, the transcription of such an abbreviation is rarer. Where we do encounter the abbreviation of final “e”, we record it as follows:

final r with abbreviation: normally -e, i ei: eg hir̄ for hire: hir<am̄></am><ex>e</ex>
(Bordalejo, Full Transcription Guidelines)

This change in convention is the result of both our change in the treatment of macron “u” as well as the availability of more specific and accurate symbols through the advent of Junicode. Emphasizing the need for certainty when choosing to interpret the flourish at the end of a word as an abbreviation for final “e” reduces the amount of time a transcriber spends agonizing over minutiae that they may not be sufficiently informed to discern for in the first place.

Another case is our shift in practice concerning the capitalization of initial letters in each line of verse. At first, the project leaders took great pains to determine a convention for each manuscript on a case by case basis:

Some scribes (e.g. Hg) clearly intend to use the emphatic form always at line beginnings, but this intention is obscured by the lack of distinct upper-case forms. In the face of this uncertainty, consistency and accuracy are very difficult to achieve. We discriminate in our transcription between emphatic forms at line beginnings and within the line. Where the scribe’s practice shows that he uses separate upper-case forms at the line beginnings for all letters which have such distinct forms, then we elect to transcribe as emphatic all first letters of lines, including those letters for which the scribe has no distinct emphatic form (Robinson and Solopova 42).

Even in 1993, Robinson and Solopova had already developed descriptions of capitalization for some half a dozen manuscripts that included specific best practices for transcription in each and this is the same practice still executed by the editors of the PPEA, who insist that in their own project, “[p]olicy decisions with regard to capitalization can be made only after analysis of each individual manuscript” (“Transcriptional Protocols”). Beyond a decision on how to represent the first letter of each line, descriptions in our original guidelines went so far as to include the specific variations in emphatic and unemphatic forms of individual letters (Robinson and Solopova 42–3). While this valuable work can help answer important questions as in Ha4, where “the closeness of the practice

of Cp and Ha4 supports the argument that the two manuscripts are written by the one scribe,” carrying out such detailed work for the entire corpus of witnesses is a monumental task (Robinson and Solopova 42).

Developing such descriptions and guidelines for each manuscript takes valuable time and resources, especially in light of how little such a distinction matters during the process of collation itself. As a result, the current project guidelines regarding capitalization in verse have been streamlined:

We transcribe capitals when the letter form in the manuscript is emphatic, that is, different from the regular lower case letter. However, we always transcribe a capital at the beginning of the line, whether the letter is upper or lower case (“Capitalization” Bordalejo and Robinson).

While this might seem an extreme change, it clearly benefits the economy of effort on the project. First, there is little to no practical change to the outcome of collation, a primary end of our transcription. Second, not only do project leaders not have to expend time and energy on these guidelines, transcribers (whether paid or volunteer) no longer need to learn the practices for each manuscript. The confusion of manuscript-specific guidelines almost certainly costs the project in errors as well as time.

The more straightforward and consistent we can make our transcription practices, the better chance we have to make fewer errors and to spend less time clarifying those rules to transcribers. Incorporating an economy of effort into our transcription guidelines, though it may sometimes require us to give up a particular level of specificity, better serves the project as a whole without compromising the transcription and collation processes. Difficult as it may be, we have to determine what is practically best for the project in terms of time and resources. This entails aiming for a sound base transcription that sets the stage for many potentially interesting projects and making our transcription freely accessible for others to pick up the project’s work and adapt it for research of a greater specificity.

Improvisation and the Need for Flexibility

While we do our best to provide clear instructions for the treatment of uncommon circumstances in transcription, there are certain cases where we must depend on the transcriber's ability to discern and interpret the manuscript without relying upon rigid guidelines. Sometimes, this is because we cannot anticipate every permutation of an abbreviation or the inconsistent ways in which particular scribes adapt conventions of abbreviation. For instance, there are relatively standard expansions for macrons such as an "m" or "n". However, a scribe might use a macron to abbreviate many different letters and often context is the best way to interpret the appropriate transcription. The same is true with how scribes record sacred names. It is often quite clear that the intended name is "Jesus" or "Jerusalem" but the abbreviated forms scribes might use vary.

Rather than develop rigid and byzantine guidelines on every question of interpretation specific to each manuscript, we instead rely upon the transcriber to interpret the manuscript based upon their own experience with that manuscript and others, the context of the particular passage they are transcribing, and their knowledge of the guidelines we *do* have in place. If a transcriber still cannot make a decision on a unique case, they can raise the problem with the project leaders, who will make a judgment based on our transcription principles and aims. The structure of our transcription team also ensures that senior transcribers and project leaders review these unique cases, and indeed all transcriptions. The following examples demonstrate certain instances where relying upon improvisation is preferable to a more complete guideline structure.

Perhaps one of the best instances of this need for flexibility and improvisation is the abbreviation of sacred names. The ubiquity of *nomina sacra* such as "Jesus", "Christ", or "Jerusalem", and perhaps the fact that they do not look particularly similar to other names, results in various configurations of their abbreviation.

For example, the name of Jesus, often rendered as "Ihesu" by medieval scribes, can have a number of spellings and abbreviations. Originally, our guidelines recorded the many instances we found because of Robinson and Solopova's interest in the use of the macron in abbreviated forms

of “Ihesu”. Thus, abbreviations such as “Ihus”, “Ihu “, “ihu”, and “ihc” are explicitly mentioned in the original guidelines (Robinson and Solopova 32). Abbreviations can even feature Greek letters, as in “x̄hu” for Ihesu or “x̄p̄” as an abbreviation for Christ. In our current full transcription guidelines, we record instances such as these in a section of “more complex abbreviations” (Bordalejo and Robinson). We also record some of the most common forms of sacred names in our “Quick Start Guide.” This includes “Ihu”, “Ierlm̄”, “x̄p̄o”, “eccliāste”, and “dd” as abbreviations for “Ihesu”, “Ierusalem”, “Christo”, “ecclesiaste”, and “Dauid”. However, unlike *The Cotton Nero A.x. Project* that documents every instance of a unique abbreviation of a *nomina sacra*—for instance, they encode seven distinct abbreviated forms of “Jerusalem”—that appears in the manuscript, we opt to record only the most common instances and trust that our transcribers can interpret distinct abbreviated forms without an comprehensive list of examples in our guidelines to rely upon (Olsen and McGillivray 2011).

Our aim is to give the transcriber a large enough sample of the abbreviations so that they might recognize any new formulations a scribe presents and understand how to correctly encode them. The guidelines do not record every iteration or permutation of even the most common *nomina sacra*. Instead, they rely upon the transcriber to discern the best way to encode these commonly abbreviated words when the scribe has recorded them in an unorthodox manner.

Conclusion

The many changes in the CTP’s transcription practices detailed above are both a reinvestment in its foundational principles and a perspective on the continuing development the project has experienced over the last twenty-eight years. But it is important to acknowledge that even the work of a project as long-standing as the CTP is only a stepping stone to further scholarship. In fact, Robinson reinforced this fundamental principle of the guidelines again and again. In his article, “What Text Really is Not”, he frames the goals of the project as a means to give readers access to new texts that they can make themselves:

Our aim over the next decades is to transform the way people read the Canterbury Tales. We want readers to understand just what it is they are reading, so that they can make texts for themselves with new intelligence. If they do this, then our text will be outdated: and frankly, it will not matter then if people can no longer read our text, and I will not care if they cannot. The great promise of electronic editions, to me, is not that we will find new ways of storing vast amounts of information. It is that we will find new ways of presenting this to readers, so that they may be better readers (Robinson 1997, 50).

Robinson acknowledges the ephemerality of our text and freely gives it up as something that will quickly become outdated once others have access to the CTP's transcriptions. Yet even these transcriptions are not safe, as Robinson predicts an interest in greater levels of specificity and the obsolescence even of the monumental task and resource of the CTP's transcription:

In 100 years time, scholars will be interested in these different letter forms, and will want transcriptions which record them. Our transcripts will be outdated and of no interest to anyone except the occasional digger into archives (Robinson 1997, 50).

And yet, the contribution of the project remains clear: the transcription is a means to more informed texts, better quality editions, and, eventually, more detailed transcriptions. It has been and continues to be a task that requires tremendous collaboration and effort in service to a wider community of Chaucer scholars and editors. Paradoxically, our task is to be overcome: the ideal end of our entire project is its own obsolescence in the wake of future projects made by those who have become better readers.

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Author Contributions

Authors are listed in alphabetical order as equal contributions were made in all roles.

- **Conceptualization:** kb, kd;
- **Writing – Original Draft Preparation:** kb, kd;
- **Writing – Review & Editing:** kb, kd;

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