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Medieval and Modern Judgement: the Work of Editors

Readers and students of medieval literary texts occasionally lose sight of the fact that the objects of their often strenuous attentions differ from their modern successors not only in terms of content, style and literary intention, but equally in basic form and, for want of a better word, what may be called 'identity'. It is, of course, no hard task to draw up a list of characteristics common, on the one hand, to texts transmitted in the form of printed editions (in England, from 1476 onwards) and, on the other, to the earlier compositions which are the product of manuscript culture. Yet when both are compared, there is one important difference which is immediately noticeable: those medieval texts which were deemed worthy of wide diffusion (and which therefore have been copied) fail quite conspicuously to display the (relative) textual fixity and stability of the multiple copies of texts which ran off the printing presses. The present paper seeks to illustrate the inherent instability of a representative late-medieval prose text in the course of its transmission and, in attempting to account for the nature of this instability, to show how the modern editor of such a text necessarily walks in the shadow of his medieval predecessor, the scribe, who, on inspection, turns out to be something of an editor himself – not an editor in the modern sense of that word, but an editor nonetheless.

The text in question is a mid-to-late fifteenth-century English sermon for the feast of the Epiphany (January 6th). It survives today in two versions. The palaeographically earlier version is extant in

Cambridge, University Library MS Gg.6.16 [C] (ff. 42^r – 43^v),¹ an anthology of sermons and related texts which was most probably put together by a member of the secular clergy for his own use around the middle of the century.² The later version (the date again established on palaeographical grounds) is extant in two manuscripts which, unusually, were written out by the same scribe; they therefore have the same provenance and date. The manuscripts are: Oxford, Bodleian Library, e Musaeo 180 [O] (ff. 211^v – 14^v) and Gloucester, Cathedral Library, 22 [G] (pp. 25-32); a fragment of this text, again written by the same scribe as the one responsible for O and G, is preserved in Lincoln, Cathedral Chapter Library, MS 50 (f. 32^f); because of its fragmentary nature it is here ignored.³ The texts, to which the reader will necessarily have to refer in the course of the present discussion, are printed in full at the end of this paper, thus: the text of C is given first, followed by the text of O, which is accompanied by a small number of substantive variants (those relevant to my purpose) from G. Some of those variants are included to show that, when the manuscript texts are compared, O stands in closer relationship to C than does G. For this reason, quotation from the OG group in what follows is taken from O and, unless otherwise stated, should be understood to be representative of the OG text.

Discussion

A perusal of the sermon in C and in OG reveals that the texts are very similar to each other: the basic structure of the four-fold division in C – one division for each of the miracles recounted, answering to the mention of *iiij...meracles* (1-2) – is carefully reproduced in OG.

¹ Dated to the second half of the century, and more likely to be earlier than later in that half.

² The entire contents of the manuscript have been edited and studied by Ariane Lainé, *Le manuscrit Gg.6.16 de la bibliothèque universitaire de Cambridge: étude de son contenu et de ses filiations manuscrites, avec édition de textes*. Université de Poitiers, doctorat nouveau régime (2000), unpublished.

³ These three manuscripts are thought to belong to the last quarter of s. XV.

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Closely similar, too, is the lexis and phraseology in both versions: C *it is to wete* (1), O *it is to wyt* (1); C *iij crowned kyngis proffecyed* (6-7), O *thre crownyd kyngis prophecyed* (7), etc. However, careful scrutiny of both structural and lexical detail shows that neither C nor O(G) can be a direct copy of each other.

From the point of view of structure, this is proved by the significant additions made by the scribe of O (or by one of the scribes responsible for the transmission of the recension of the text to which O belongs). Thus, where C is content merely to translate the second verse of the gospel account (Matt. 2: 1-11): *Qwher is he borne pat' is kyng of Iues* (10),⁴ OG supply the corresponding Latin and maintain the translation: *Vbi est qui natus est rex Iudeorum* (11-12). In the same vein, where C gives shortened versions of the hymn *Crudelis Herodes* (attributed to the ninth-century Irish scholar Sedulius Scottus), sung at mass (ll. 44-45, 57-58 and 66-67), OG complete the Latin verses on all three occasions, then add (ll. 54-59, 77-82 and 95-98 respectively) an English translation.

As far as significant lexical discrepancy is concerned, the following extracts should be considered:

C One was as it was wrytun in the gossell (3-4)

O The first cawse as Seynt Mathew the euangelist rehersithe in the gospel (3-5)

C In Bedleem Iude xulde be borne a childe (16-17)

O In Bedleem scholde be borne a duke (20)

C thei ffell to ffoote (26)

O they fell downe (31)

C acceptabyll with deuocion (37)

O acceptabyll and ow3te to be done with deuocion (42-43)

C mete and bodele sustenawnce (72)

O mete and refeccion bodily (103-04)

It is inconceivable that such discrepancies should have arisen in the scribal process of copying; what they and the evidence

⁴ The slants surrounding the word *pat* indicate that it has been inserted by the scribe (after omission) in the margin or above the line.

surrounding the expansion of the text point unambiguously to is the existence of an archetype text, common to both C and OG, now presumably lost, from which their respective versions derived and were elaborated independently.

Before examining the question of editorial treatment, a further preliminary hurdle needs to be negotiated: of the two versions of the Epiphany sermon under scrutiny, which precedes the other in time? Since it has been shown that neither group (C as opposed to OG) is directly dependent on the other, the resolution of this question will make possible an analysis of the nature of textual transmission announced at the outset of this paper.

Theoretically, of course, there are only two possible answers to this question: either (a) the version in C precedes that in OG, in which case the latter manuscript version expands on a briefer, primitive text; or (b), O precedes C, the scribe of which has endeavoured to produce a shortened version of the sermon.⁵ Of the two possibilities, (a) is inherently more likely from the general perspective of the ways in which medieval scribes work, and there is textual evidence to support this view. Compare:

C cummyng owte of the eest vnto Ierusalem (7-8)

OG cam owte of Ierusalem (8)

where the two versions are contradictory, and

C þat same deye (56)

⁵ The alert reader will have noticed that to assume that a manuscript earlier in date than another necessarily preserves a less corrupt text than that other is illogical; late manuscripts can and do occasionally furnish texts of much superior quality than some, at least, of their older counterparts. The very remote possibility that the two versions are contemporaneous has to be excluded, not only on palaeographical grounds, but on the observable history of textual transmission; as evidenced in numerous other comparable cases, the detail of which is impossible to convey here. A recent, comprehensive, excellent manual on the subject, suitable both for the novice and the more experienced practitioner in these matters, is D. C. Greetham, *Textual Scholarship*, rev. ed (New York, 1992).

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OG þat same (69)

where the omission is likely to have been preserved through diligent copying, rather than through two scribes independently making the same error.

In both cases the text transmitted in OG is, in the language routinely used by textual critics, corrupt. Textual corruption arises in the course of copying; the more a text, in manuscript culture, is copied, the more – not the less – it will become corrupt. The logic of this fact, and fact it is, requires that one accept that C has undergone copying on fewer occasions than has the OG version. The question whether the actual manuscript is older or more recent than the two others is immaterial: C preserves a more primitive version of the sermon, one closer to the archetype (or to the original) than does the version witnessed in OG. It therefore possesses more ‘authority’ than the other version.⁶

One other, major consideration may now be introduced, a consideration which underpins the main thrust of this paper, that is, that literary texts of the Middle Ages are prone to material change and that, in time, a given text, copied often enough, will emerge from this process of transmission with an identity it did not possess at the moment of its creation. The texts under discussion here will not illustrate fully the truth of this statement, but they will serve to show how the trend towards change has come about.

⁶ This remark neatly exposes the limitations of the method of editing known as recension, for if one wished to confirm its validity, that is that manuscript X is closer to the original than manuscript Y, the only irrefutable proof would necessarily come from an examination of that original which, because it is now lost, has forced editors back on the shaky ground that recension occupies. Editing always involves compromise, and the idea that it proceeds along objective lines is fanciful. No scholar working in the field of medieval textual scholarship (English or otherwise), including editing, should fail to read and ponder pp. 115-72 of George Kane’s edition of *Piers Plowman: the A Version* (London: Athlone, 1960), although the editorial method he adopts is far from common, and has not always met with approval. Further bibliographical references are given in the volume by Greetham, cited in the note immediately above.

It has been convincingly argued that scribes, in the course of their work, manifest a concern (or a desire) to render what they are copying in as clear and as accessible a form as is possible for the reader.⁷ One way of ensuring this is to explicate narrative situations by making them more concrete, as is the case with the following utterance:

O ...and bad þem go to the place þere as they my3te fynde this chylde, and dilygently that they scholde inquire of hem (22-23)

which expands on a less precise, terser:

C He bad them goo and dilygently enqwere off that chylde (19-20).

Concern with narrative realism is apparent, too, in this addition in O:

these thre kyngis toke forthe theire iorney. And anon as they were past owte of the cite, the schynyng sterre before þem schone

while the more primitive version in C is less specific:

C Soo thye kyngis toke fforthe þer iurneye and the schynyng sterre beffore them schone (23-24).

An even more striking example of this concern for transparency is afforded by the reference in OG to *Architicyne, preste in Cana* (83), absent from C, and lacking any biblical authority. To judge from this and other texts, the precise meaning of Latin *architriclinus* (Ioan. 2: 8-9) in the gospel text being commented on here, proved troublesome. The word is clearly interpreted in the sermon as a personal name,⁸ in both C and OG, although it designates not a person's identity, but his function: he is the chief steward of the feast or, as the Authorised Version has it: 'the ruler of the feast'. A scribe responsible for the transmission of the text now witnessed by OG

⁷ Barry Windeatt, "The Scribes as Chaucer's Early Critics", *Studies in the Age of Chaucer*, 1 (1979), 119-41.

⁸ Other instances of this interpretation include *Ælfred of Rievaulx's De Institutione Inclusarum*, ed. John Ayto and Alexandra Barratt, EETS 287 (London, 1984), p. 19, and *The Pilgrimage of the Lyfe of the Manhode*, ed. Avril Henry, 2 vols, EETS 288, 292 (London, 1985-8), I. 392. Cf. the remark made by the compiler of the sermon for the second Sunday in the Octave of Epiphany extant in MS Longleat 4: *Archidriclyn was he þat set or lay princepal in þe feste, and it was non propre name but a name of worschepe at a feste* (f. 18^{ra}). The sermons of the Longleat manuscript are inedited.

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evidently felt it necessary to offer something by way of explanation. He may simply have guessed in his attribution of 'prest'; if so, his shot fell wide of the mark.

Thus, by these simple and obvious observations one may conclude that the notion of textual integrity is not one with which medieval scribes were concerned. On the contrary, their preoccupation was more with the message than the medium, a circumstance which has an inevitable bearing on the procedures a modern editor of such a text will adopt. Whatever those procedures will be – and they will tend to vary according to the type of text being edited – the modern editor, walking in the shadow of his anonymous predecessor, will be at pains not to imitate the latter in his worthy, but potentially textually disastrous, rearrangements made to the object of his attentions.

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**C /42^r/IN DIE EIPHANIE DOMINI NOSTRI IHESU
CHRISTI**

Worscipull ffrendys, it is to wete þat ffor iiij grete
 ande mervelous meraclis þat wer schewed vpon xij^{te} dey,
 thee holy ffeste off the Epiphanye gretly awethe to be
 worchepyd. One was as it is wrytun in the gospell of Sent
 5 Mathewe þat is redde in holy chyrche the same dey, Mathei
 [2°]: qwhan owre soffereyn Lorde Criste Ihesu was born in
 Bedlem Iude in the deys off Herode the kyng, iij crownyd
 kyngis proffecyed off Crystis natiuyte, cummynge owte off
 þe eest vnto Ierusalem; to the qwych place ane orient sterre
 10 brogh3t them to Bedlem. Bot qwhan thei com to sytee /42^r/
 off Ierusalem, thei askyd: 'Qwher is he borne `þat` is kyng
 off Iues. We haue se,' quod þei, 'ane orient sterre in the eest
 and we cum to worchep hym.'

Qwhan kyng Herode herde off þise wordys, he was
 15 gretly turbylde, and all Ierusalem with hym. Than Herode
 gaderde togedur all the princes of prestis and scribes off the
 pepyll and he axed off them qwher thei red by prophecye
 þat Criste xulde be borne. And thei seyde: 'In Bedleem
 Iude, ffor it wreten in prophecye,' quod thei, 'þat in
 20 Bedleem xulde be borne a chylde þat xulde gyde and
 gouerne the pepull off Israel.' Than qwhan kyng Herode
 herde off thys prophecye, he called vnto hym thyse iij
 crownyd kyngis. He bad them goo and diligently enqwere
 off that chylde, 'And quan 3e have ffunden hym, cum agen
 25 by me' quod Herode 'and I wyll worchep and reuerence
 hym.'

Soo thyse kyngis toke fforthe þer iurneye, and the
 schynynge sterre beffore them [schone] vnto thei com to
 Bedleem. And qwhan thei com to þat place qwher þat
 30 soffereyne Lorde was with hys modyr Maria, anon thei ffell
 to ffoote and reuerently worchepyd hym with golde, mirre
 and ensence. And as thei xuld returne home a3en, ane
 awngell in heyr sleppe monysched hem þat þei xulde not
 goo by Herode. And as it was the wyll off God, thei toke

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35 anodyr wey into theyr region and cuntree. Thys is the
litterall sence off thee gospell off þat deye.

Thus thyse iij kyngis offerde golde, encence and
mirre. First þei offerd golde, ffor lyche as golde is most
precious off metallis so is he Kyng off all kyngis and Lorde
40 off all lordys. þe secunde, thei offerde encence. Encence is a
swete smellynge thyng qwyche is vsed in chyrches /43^r/ to
diuine seruis and worchep off God, and it is acceptabyll
with diuocion and preyer in the sygh3t off God. Therffore
offerd thei encence, tokunnyng þat he was verre God. Thei
45 also presentyd myrre qwyche is a precious vntment þat
conservythe and kepythe a dede body ffrome corrupcion.
Therffore offerde thei myrre in tokun þat he xulde dye and
suffur peynffull dethe for manys redempcion. This grete
miracull is growndyd in scripture, red in holy chyrche the
50 same deye:

*Ibant magi quam viderant,
Stellam sequentes previam, et cetera.*

Anodyr miracull was schewyd the same deye by the
revolucion off the 3ere. Qwhan Cryste was xxx^{ti} 3ere off
55 age, he com ffrom Galalye into ffloom Iordane vnto Sent
Ion, Mathei 3°, to be baptizd off hym, qwher was schewde
the verre vision off the blissyd Trinyte: God the Ffadyr in
heven was herde in voyce seyng: *Hic est ffilius meus
dilectus*; 'This is my wele belovyd son.' God the secunde
60 persone in Trinyte was ther in fflesche and bodye, and God
þe Holy Goste, iij^{de} persawne in Trinyte, was ther present
in the similitude off a dowe, *Luce*. Thus ther was the Ffadyr,
the Son and the Holy Goste, iij persawnes and one God at
that blyssed bapty m off Cryste to wasche away owre
65 synnes. Qwherffore holy chyrche syngythe þat same deye:

*Lauacra puri gurgitis,
Celestis agnus attigit, et cetera.*

The iij^{de} marvelous meracull was by the reuolucion
off the 3ere þat same dey þat Criste was xxxj 3ers and xiiij

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70 deys off age, qwher owre soffereyn Lorde Crist Ihesu was at
 a maryage at the ffest off archedecline in Chana Galilee
 qwher þei ffeyled /43^v/ wyne. And ffor as myche as he
 wolde be knawe þat he was verre God, ther he turnyd the
 water into wyne thoroow mygh3t off hys godhed. Therffore
 75 holy chyrche redythe that dey:

*Novum genus potencie,
 Aque rubescunt ydrie.*

þe iiij^{te} meracull was schewde the same dey as by
 thee revolucion off the 3ere, as Ianuensis wyttensythe.
 80 Qwhan Criste was xxxij^{te} 3eris of age and xiij deys, grete
 multitude off pepull ffoloed hym in deserte as the gossell of
 Sent Mathewe [makethe] mencyon, Mathei [14^o]. Qwhan
 thei ffeyled mete and bodele sustenawnce, he ffed v `Me´
 pepull with v loves so þat euery man and woman
 85 sufficiently was saciate and reffresched. And afftur mete
 and ffedyng, ther were borne vp xij lepffull off releffe and
 broke mete. Ther schewyd þat gracious Lorde a grete my3t
 off hys godhed.

Ffor thyse iiij cawses and meraculls tat God schewed
 90 tat dey, tat holy ffest off the Epiphanye awethe to be hadde
 in reverens and worchep as Cristis awne deye. Graunt vs, tu
 mercyffull Lorde, so to worchep and reuerence thee in thys
 deserte lyvyng þat we mey cum to þat blys þat neuer schall
 have endyng, *Amen*.

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Frendys, it is to wyt þat for iiij grete cawses and marvelous myrakyls that were schewed vpon þe xij day, the holy feste of þe Epiphany ow3te to be had in grete reuerence and worschipe. The firste cawse is as seynt Mathew the euangeliste rehersithe in þe gospell that same day and seythe: when owre
 5 soveren sauowre Criste Ihesu was borne in Bedlem Iude, in the dayes of Herowde þe kyng, thre crownd kyngis prophecyed of Cristis natiuite. And they cam owte of [þe est vnto] Ierusalem bryngyng withe hem precius presentis. To þe whiche place an oryent and a bryzte stere, schynyng before þem, brow3t them to Bedlem. And when they com to /212^r/ the cite of Ierusalem they axt þe
 10 pepyl, seyng thus: *Vbi est qui natus est rex Iudeorum?* ‘Where is he borne’, seyde they, ‘þat is kyng of Iewys? We haue seen an orient ster and a bryzte’, seyde they, ‘in þe est, and we ben com withe presentis to worschipe hym.’

When Kyng [Herode] herde these wordis he was gretely trowbylde, and so was all Ierusalem. Anon Herode gaderd togedyr all the princis of prestis and
 15 scribis of the pepyll and axyd of þem where they rede be prophecy þat Crist schold be borne. And they answerde and seyde: *‘In Bedleem Iude.’* For so it is wreton in prophecy that in Bedleem scholde be borne a duke þat scholde gouerne the pepyll of Israell. When Kyng Herowde herde of þis prophecy, he calde vnto hym þese thre kyngis and bad þem go to the place þere as they my3te
 20 fynde this chylde, and dilygently that they scholde inquere of hym. ‘And when 3e haue fownde hym’, seyde Herode, ‘come a3ene to me and then wyll I go and worschipe hym.’

Then these thre kyngis toke forthe their iorney. And anon /212^v/ as they were past owte of the cite, the schyn[yn]g sterre before þem schone still till they
 25 cam to þat cite of Bedleem. And when they com to that place where that owre sauowre Ihesu was withe his moder Mary, anon they fell downe and reuerently worschepyd hym, and presentid to hym, iche of them, withe a present: withe gold and myrre and encence. And as they scholde returne homwarde a3ene, an aungell monyssched them in there slepe that they scholde not go a3ene be
 30 Herowde. So they toke another wey into þeire owne regyons.

These thre kyngis, they offyrde that day to owre soueren sauowre Criste Ihesu golde, and myrre, and encence. First they offyrde gold, for lyke as golde is moste precius of all metalls, so is Criste Ihesu moste worthieste and grettest soueren of all kyngis and lordis. Encence is a swete smellyng thyng þe whiche is
 35 vsid in holy chyrche to the worschipe of God, and it is acceptabyll and ow3te to be done withe deuocion and prayer in the /213^r/ presens of almy3ti God and of all his aungells. Therefore they offerde encence in tokenyng and schewyng þat he was and is very God. Myr is a precius oynement that conseruithe and kepythe a

ded body frome corrupcion. In tokenyng whereof, þei off[er]yd myrre that Criste
40 scholde suffyr peynefull dethe for mans redempcion.

These misterius myrakyls is growndyd vpon þis vers:

Ibant magi, quam viderant,

Stellam sequentes preuiam:

Lumen requirunt lumine,

45 *Deum fatentur munere.*

‘Thre kyngis went folowyng þe sterre, the whiche ster went be þem. They
sowzte lyzte, þat is to sey, owre Lorde Ihesu Criste, the whiche lyztenethe bothe
aungels and men withe the lyzt of the ster; þei knolechid God withe there 3iftis.’
þat is to vndyrstonde, everychone of hem offyrd golde, encence and myr in
50 tokenyng þat owre Lord Ihesu Criste is God and man and Kyng of kyngis.

Another myrakyll was schewyd that same day be the revolucion of þe
3ere. When almy3ti God was xxx^{ti} 3ere of age, he cam frome Galile vnto the
water of Flom Iordan to be baptised of /213^v/ seynt Iohn, as it is wreton, *Mathei*
tercio capitulo, where was schewed the very vision of the blissed Trinite. God
55 the Fader in heuen was herde there in voyce seyng: *Hic est filius meus dilectus*.
‘This is my wel-beloved sone’, Godis Sonne, secunde persone in Trinite. [And
God þe Holy Goste, þe þerd persone in Trinite] was present in þe similytude of a
whyzte dowue. Thus þer was þe Fader, þe Sonne and the Holy Goste, thre
persons and oo God, at þat blyssedful baptyrm of Criste to wassche away owre
60 synnes. Wherefore holy chyrche syngethe þat same [day] in þer diuine seruice,
acordyng to þat fest, this verse:

Lauacra puri gurgitis

Celestis agnus attigit:

Peccata, que non detulit,

65 *nos abluendo sustulit.*

‘The heuenly lombe Criste Ihesu hathe sufferde þe grete peyne for owre
synnes, the whiche synne he neuer dyd ne neuer myzte do, be þe plentefull
schedyng of his pure blood þat past and was powryd owte, and ranne frome the
fyve woundys and other placis of hys pure and blyssed body for oure lufe,
70 wherby we were wasschyd and made clene frome endles dampnacion.’

The therde my /214^v/ rakyll, wro3te and schewyd on [the] xijth day be
the reuolucion of þe 3ere, was when our soueren sauowre Criste Ihesu was
xxx^{ti}j 3ere and xiij dayes of age, where owre blissed Lord was at þe mariage at
þe feste of Architiclyne, preste in Cana Galilee, where they feyled wynne. And
75 for Criste wolde be knowen very God, þere he turned water into wynne thorow
þe myzte of his godhed. Wherefore holy chyrche syngethe þat day þis verse:

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*Nouum genus potencie:
 Aque rubescunt idrie,
 Vinu[m]que iussa fundere,
 80 Mutauit vnda originem.*

'Owre Lord Ihesu Criste schewed a new maner of his powere: þe water of the potis waxyd red, þat is to sey, they turned to wyne; þer [þe] water chawngid his begynnyng when Criste commawndyd the water to turne to wyne.'

85 The fowrte myrakyll that was schewyd þe same day as be the reuolucion of the 3ere, as Ianuens, þat famus clerke and doctur, in his sermons witnessithe: when Criste was xxx^{iiij} 3ere of age, there folowyd hym grete multitude of pepyll in deserte, as the /214^v/ gospels of seynt Mathew makethe mencion. When they feyld mete and refeccion bodily, he fed v thowsande pepyll withe [v] 90 lovyng and two fysschis, so þat every man, woman and childe was sufficiently fede, replete and fulfilled withe naturrall sustinauns. And after þis fedyng, there was born vp xij lepefull of relefe and brokyn mete. There schewid þat mercifull Lorde a grete my3te of his godhed.

95 So for þese foure maruelus mysterijs and grete myrakyls therfore, the holy feste of the Epiphany owithe to be had in grete reuerence and worschipe as Cristis owne day in þis desert lyvyng, þat we may com to þat blys þat never schall haue ende, *et cetera. Amen.*

Selected variants from G (*om.* = omitted)

2 were] almy3tty God

7 þe est vnto C, *om.* OG

24 schynyng] C, schyng, bry3t G

24 before þem schone] schone before þem

38 God] God and man

60 day] C, *om.* O

74 feyled] wantid