

SPELLING PRACTICES IN THREE MANUSCRIPTS  
OF THE *CANTERBURY TALES*

ALEKSANDRA HANS

*Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań*

1. Introduction

In the present paper an attempt is made to present the various graphic representations of three selected features of the spoken language that have been perpetuated in three Middle English manuscripts of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, i.e., the Ellesmere MS, the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 and the Additional MS 5140. In particular, the spelling representation of the Middle English sounds [x, ɕ], /ʃ/ and /tʃ/ is scrutinised. Furthermore, by examining the language of scribal text it is often possible to isolate a core of linguistic usage characteristic of a given scribe and state whether it is dialectally homogeneous or not. Thus, the present paper shall also attempt to identify this core usage on the basis of the spelling practices employed by the scribes who copied the three texts of the *Canterbury Tales*. Finally, the orthographic analysis of the features in question is assumed to allow for determining its relevance for the dialect differentiation and identification of the Ellesmere MS, the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 and the Additional MS 5140.

The three manuscripts in question were copied in the course of the fifteenth century. It is estimated that the copying of the Ellesmere MS comprised a span of ten years, between 1400 and 1410. Bearing in mind the fact that Chaucer wrote the *General Prologue* and the early *Canterbury Tales* between 1386 and 1400 it seems plausible to claim that this particular manuscript is the closest to the original Chaucerian text. The Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 was probably produced in the year 1420 or, according to Owen (1988: 95), between 1420 and 1430. Finally, the Additional MS 5140 is the latest of the three and its composition dates back to the years 1470-1500.

The Ellesmere manuscript is written in one clear hand by a highly systematic scribe who was well trained in the Anglicana formata script. According to Manly and Rickert (1940: 151) this manuscript is believed to have been copied in London or Westminster. Slight traces of the Northern influence may be only those that might have appeared in London English. The Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 is also the work of a single scribe who copied the text using the bastard Anglicana script. Its language represents the East Midland dialect. It is quite likely that the scribe used the Ellesmere MS as a model for about half of his text and translated it into East Anglian dialect but avoided other editing (cf. Owen 1988: 95; Benson 1992: 4 ff.). The other half of the Cambridge manuscript is independent of the other major manuscripts in the sense of not being derived from any of them (Manly and Rickert 1940: 176). Moreover, one can also find sufficient traces of Northern dialect features that might suggest Norfolk as the place of its provenance. The third manuscript, the Additional MS 5140, was written by two strikingly different scribes. The first one copied folios 2-227 and his type of script can be described as a sprawling bastard Anglicana hand which grows larger and deteriorates towards the end. The second scribe, responsible for the copying of folios 227-423 represents a small, neat cursive Anglicana hand. However, for the purpose of the present paper only the writing system of the first scribe will be analysed. The language of this particular manuscript can also be classified as East Midland, though it must be stated that it is definitely different from the language of the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27. The latter manuscript shows some admixture of Northern features which does not seem surprising as they are also present in the previously described copies of the *Canterbury Tales*.

Finally, it should be noted that the manuscripts discussed here contain a complete Chaucerian text, although occasionally certain folios may be missing.

## 2. [x, ç]

The grapheme ⟨ʒ⟩ was used to represent two palatal fricatives in Middle English. Later in the period a digraph ⟨gh⟩ supplanted the grapheme ⟨ʒ⟩. Other common spellings for [x] and [ç] in Middle English are ⟨g⟩, ⟨h⟩, ⟨gh⟩ and ⟨ch⟩ restricted to the northern area of the country (Fisiak 1996: 15).

The Ellesmere scribe always and without any exception employs the digraph ⟨gh⟩ to represent the Middle English velar or palatal fricatives. Similarly, the Additional scribe is highly systematic and consistent in his spelling although he uses a different letter, i.e., ⟨h⟩. The spelling practices of these two scribes remain in contrast with those of the Cambridge scribe. It can be said that the latter generally favours the ⟨ʒ⟩ grapheme although he sometimes also employs the digraph ⟨gh⟩.

A certain case of an unusual spelling in the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 as represented by the following forms is worth considering:

Ellesmere	Cambridge Gg.4.27	Additional 5140
<i>delit</i>	<i>delyzt</i>	<i>delyte</i>
<i>white</i>	<i>whyzte</i>	<i>wyht</i>
<i>myte</i>	<i>myzte</i>	<i>myte</i>

The existence of such forms can be assigned to the fact that the Middle English spelling ⟨ght⟩ remained when the clusters [xt, çt] lost their fricative components. Thus, assuming that the fricatives were no longer pronounced, the Cambridge scribe encountering the environment characteristic of [x] and [ç] by analogy and hypercorrection inserted the grapheme ⟨ʒ⟩ in a position which was not etymologically justifiable.

The three selected manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales* differ substantially in their orthographic representation of the two fricatives before /t/. According to Kristensson (1995: 147) in Early Middle English the commonest spellings for the velar fricative [x] as well as for the palatal fricative [ç] in this context are ⟨ght⟩, ⟨ht⟩, ⟨gt⟩ and – especially in Suffolk and Norfolk – ⟨th⟩. These spelling conventions are also reflected in the three selected manuscripts. The scribe of the Ellesmere MS consistently employs a sequence ⟨ght⟩, whereas in the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 such spelling can be attested only for 30% of all occurrences. In the Additional MS 5140 the graphic sequence in question may be considered of minor importance because it has been found only in 6% of all words containing [x] or [ç]. Furthermore, such spelling is restricted only to a few folios at the beginning of the manuscript. Later the scribe changes his writing habit and he almost invariably uses the ⟨ht⟩, continuing an Old English tradition.

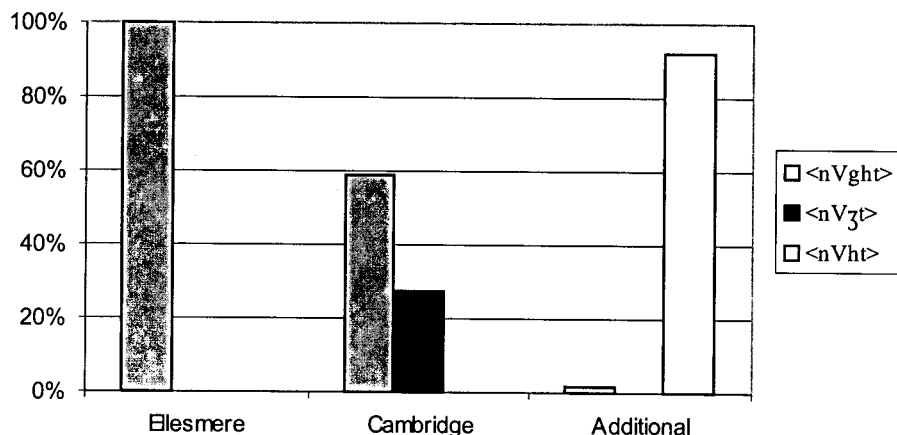
As was mentioned earlier, the scribe who copied the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 relatively often uses the sequence ⟨ʒht⟩ to represent a combination of obstruents such as [xt] and [çt]. However, it should be emphasised that he equally often drops the last consonant in this cluster, hence the resulting sequence is ⟨ʒh⟩. Such a form may be found in Middle English texts from the North in words like *lyght* or *wroght* (Kristensson 1979: 306). The question arises whether ⟨ʒh⟩ reflects a loss of /t/ or is merely due to wrong spelling. In the case of the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 the second assumption seems to be more plausible, because many of these imperfect spellings were later corrected, most probably by a different scribe or scribes. Moreover, this spelling practice supports the claim that the copyist of this manuscript might have been a foreigner or that he had not been properly trained.

The Cambridge scribe uses yet another digraph to represent a cluster of two obstruents such as [xt] and [çt], i.e., ⟨th⟩. Thus, spellings like *knyth*, *cauth*, *outhe* are not isolated and they appear throughout the whole analysed sample. Kristensson (1995: 174) claims that these forms are characteristic of Norfolk and Suffolk. It is also possible that ⟨th⟩ used by this particular scribe to represent

the cluster [xt] or [çt] is a spelling metathesis of the ⟨ht⟩ sequence. Although the process itself is likely to have occurred in Middle English, it does not seem to be the case here, since there is not a single example of the ⟨ht⟩ spelling in the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27.

Finally, one of the words containing the graphemic sequence ⟨ght⟩ requires separate explanation, i.e., ME *nought*. The Ellesmere scribe consistently spells the word as ⟨no(u)ght⟩ (see Fig. 1). This particular form is well attested in the East and West Midlands, as well as in London (see Map 1). Furthermore, ME *nought* is also the prevailing form in Chancery writings (Fisher – Richardson – Fisher 1984: 30).

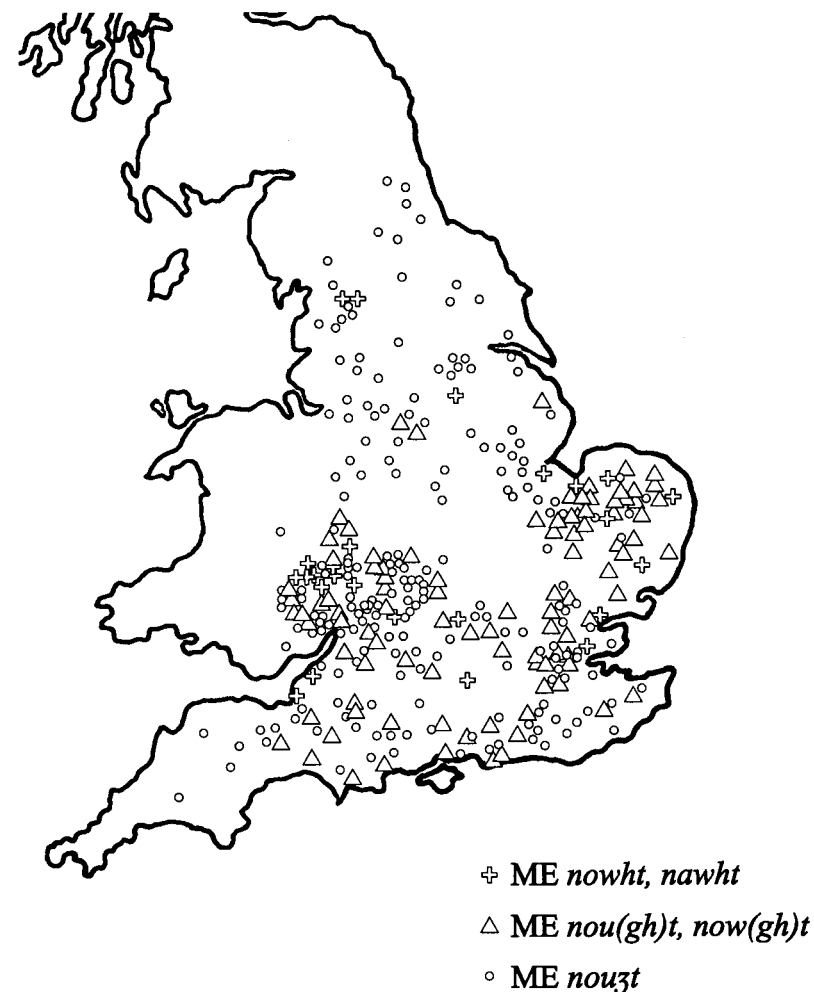
Figure 1. The distribution of ME ⟨nVght⟩, ⟨nVzt⟩ and ⟨nVht⟩.



The Cambridge scribe demonstrates a significant degree of variation in the ME *nought*. His prevailing spelling, as in the previously discussed manuscript, is *nought* (59.1%), the occurrence of which may be related to the ongoing standardisation of written English. The Cambridge scribe's second variant is ⟨no(u)zt⟩. This form, in turn, seems to be particularly common in the West Midlands, though single occurrences are also recorded in East Anglia (see Map 1). Finally, the Additional scribe shows a definite tendency (92%) to spell the ME *nought* as ⟨nowht⟩. Such spelling is mainly confined to East Anglia and parts of the West Midlands (see Map 1).

The analysis of the ME *nought* seems to confirm the earlier assumption as to the localisation of the three manuscripts, i.e., the Ellesmere MS may have been written in London whereas the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 and the Additional MS 5140 may have been copied in the East Anglian area.

Map 1. ME ⟨nVht⟩, ⟨nVght⟩ and ⟨nVzt⟩ (after LALME 1986, 1: 374, 375, 376).



### 3. /ʃ/

The palato-alveolar fricative /ʃ/ was most often represented in writing by the Middle English scribes as ⟨sh⟩ or ⟨sch⟩ and these two digraphs can be found in texts all over England. On the other hand, sequences like ⟨ssh⟩, ⟨ssch⟩, ⟨ss⟩, ⟨ch⟩, ⟨s⟩ or ⟨schch⟩, though not so numerous as the previous examples, can often be indicative of the dialect differences among the Middle English texts.

In the Ellesmere MS and the Additional MS 5140 the scribes almost exclusively write ⟨sh⟩ to represent the phoneme /ʃ/, whereas the copyist of the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 is fairly consistent in using the sequence ⟨sch⟩. However,

there are a few instances (3% of all occurrences) when he also uses the digraph ⟨sh⟩. If it is assumed that he translated the exemplar into his own East Anglian dialect (see Owen 1988: 14), then the ⟨sh⟩ spellings may represent relict forms, i.e., they were not part of the scribe's own dialect. Furthermore, it should be noted that the occurrence of ⟨sh⟩ forms in all the three manuscripts is limited only to the word-initial position.

Another spelling for /ʃ/ that appears in the three manuscripts is ⟨ssh⟩. However, its use varies and is restricted to certain positions in the word. In the Ellesmere MS this is the only orthographic representation of /ʃ/ which occurs at the end and in the middle of a word. Thus, ⟨sh⟩ and ⟨ssh⟩ are clearly in complementary distribution, i.e., the former occurs only initially, and the latter occurs medially and finally. Additionally, ⟨sh⟩ also appears in the non-initial and non-final position, for example:

Ellesmere	Cambridge Gg.4.27	Additional 5140
<i>felowship</i>	<i>felauschep</i>	<i>felawshepe</i>
<i>lordshipe</i>	<i>lordschep</i>	<i>lordshipe</i>
<i>frendshipe</i>	<i>frenschepe</i>	<i>frenshepe</i>
<i>ashamed</i>	<i>a schamyd</i>	<i>a shamed</i>

This does not seem to support the above assumption. However, all the words presented above consist of at least two morphemes and the digraph in question always occurs immediately after a morpheme boundary. In other words, ⟨sh⟩ is initial in a morpheme, e.g., *felow* # *ship* or *a* # *shamed*. Summarising, it can be said that the digraph ⟨sh⟩ occurs initially in the word and after a morpheme boundary. This assumption – at least to a certain degree – holds true also for the Additional MS 5140, but here the scribe is not so consistent. He sometimes does not make any distinction between ⟨sh⟩ and ⟨ssh⟩ according to their position in the word. Thus, many times (30% of all occurrences) he writes ⟨sh⟩ initially and also medially instead of the expected ⟨ssh⟩.

The scribe of the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 in most cases uses the sequence ⟨sch⟩ to represent the ME /ʃ/, regardless of its position in the word. Only once in the whole analysed sample did the copyist of the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 employ the sequence ⟨ssh⟩ to represent /ʃ/, i.e., in the word *assh*. Furthermore, the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 is unique with respect to yet another aspect connected with the orthographic representation of the phoneme /ʃ/. Its scribe sometimes uses a digraph ⟨ch⟩ alternating it with ⟨sch⟩. The same word is sometimes spelled both ways, i.e., using ⟨sch⟩ and ⟨ch⟩. For example, the word 'parish' is spelled as *parysch* (3 times) and as *parich* (5 times). This spelling variation, i.e., ⟨sh⟩ ~ ⟨ch⟩ seems to have its roots on the Continent. During the thirteenth century there was the LOFr. /ʃ/ > /f/ but in Anglo-Norman speech the change may have progressed much more slowly (McLaughlin 1963: 121; Jordan 1974: 35)

resulting in doublets such as the ones cited above. Consequently, scribes of French descent or trained in France may have used the digraph ⟨ch⟩ long after /ʃ/ had become /f/.

#### 4. /ʃ/

The sequences ⟨ch⟩ and ⟨cch⟩ were used to represent the affricate /ʃ/. It should be also added that the latter occurred especially in the middle of a word. The copyists of the Ellesmere MS and the Additional MS 5140 generally follow this pattern, whereas the scribe of the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 makes no distinction in writing between the initial and medial /ʃ/, and both are written as ⟨ch⟩.

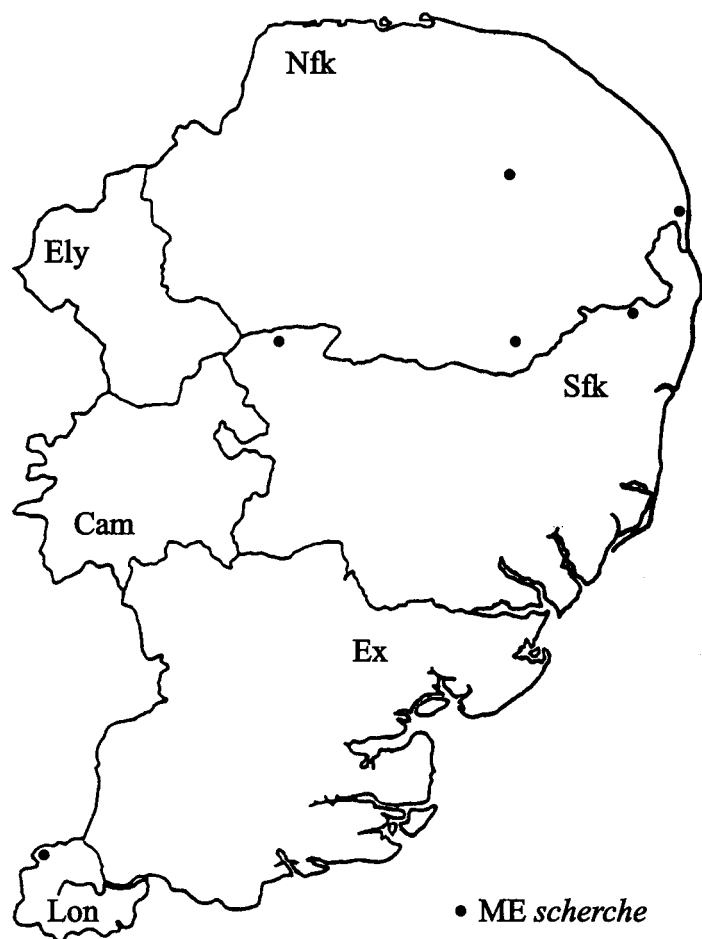
In the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 and – to some degree – in the Additional MS 5140 ⟨sch⟩, ⟨sh⟩ or ⟨ssh⟩ are sometimes used to render /ʃ/. As has been mentioned before they are likely to be reverse spellings under the influence of French, for example:

Ellesmere	Cambridge Gg.4.27	Additional 5140
<i>chaunce</i>	<i>schaunce</i>	<i>chaunce</i>
<i>chastite</i>	<i>schastite</i>	<i>chastite</i>
<i>chirche</i>	<i>scherche</i>	<i>chirch</i>

The same use of ⟨s(c)h⟩ to render /ʃ/ in the place-names recorded in the Lay Subsidy Rolls for the East Midlands, e.g., *Shildrous* (OE *scildrahūs*), *Schategraue* (ModE *Chedgrave*) and *Schapman* (OE *cēapmann*) (Kristensson 1995: 136) provides additional evidence. It is worth mentioning that such spellings are attested primarily in Norfolk.

The variation in question is mainly restricted to those words of French origin and most likely connected with the Old French change of /ʃ/ > /f/ (discussed above). Hence, it is justifiable to treat forms such as *schaunce* or *schastite* as reverse spellings produced by the Cambridge scribe under the influence of French. However, occasionally the occurrence of ⟨sch⟩ for the correct digraph ⟨ch⟩ can also be attested in native words and the best example of such spelling perpetuated in the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 would be *scherche*. A geographical distribution of this word reveals an interesting pattern and it is represented in the following map:

Map 2. CHURCH: 'sch-' type (after LALME 1986, 2)



It can be concluded from the map presented above that the initial <sch-> in *chirche* is rather rare, but it does appear in Middle English and its occurrence is restricted mainly to Norfolk. This fact provides another piece of evidence to confirm the assumption that the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 may have originated from this particular county.

Some native words alternating the two spellings, i.e., <ch> and <sh/sch> appear solely in the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27, for instance:

Ellesmere	Cambridge Gg. 4.27	Additional 5140
<i>chyn</i>	<i>schyn</i>	<i>chyn</i>
<i>chosen</i>	<i>schosyn</i>	<i>chosen</i>
<i>chirche</i>	<i>scherche</i>	<i>chirche</i>

## 5. Conclusions

On comparing the orthographic practices of the Ellesmere, Cambridge and Additional scribes the following differences have been noted:

- (1) the three scribes employ different letters to represent both the ME [x] and the ME [ç], i.e., the Ellesmere copyist uses the standard digraph <gh>, and the Cambridge scribe generally writes <ȝ>, whereas the most typical spelling of the sounds in question in the Additional MS 5140 is <h>;
- (2) the Middle English clusters [xt] and [çt] are sometimes represented in the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27 as <th>. This graphemic sequence is particularly frequent in those texts originating from Norfolk and Suffolk;
- (3) the Cambridge copyist is the only one to use the sequence <sch> in all positions, the others invariably use <sh> in the word initial and final position and <ssh> medially;
- (4) the forms with <sch> instead of <ch> are encountered exclusively in the Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27.

Furthermore, the written representation of English spoken in the first half of the fifteenth century recorded by the Ellesmere scribe reveals a strong tendency towards the standardisation of spelling. Most forms employed by the copyist can be classified as belonging to the Chancery Standard. Thus, due to the regular presence of such forms throughout the text of the Ellesmere MS, it seems justified to claim that its scribe is likely to originate from London.

The spelling habits of the Cambridge scribe are inconsistent and some of them may point to his foreign origin, e.g., his occasional use of <sch> instead of <ch>. Furthermore, the occurrence of certain graphemes, e.g., <th> alongside <ght> restricts the scribal origin of the text to East Anglia, most probably to Norfolk.

Finally, the Additional copyist is more consistent than the Cambridge scribe but he did not reach the Ellesmere scribe's level of perfection. It must be emphasised, however, that the spelling practices of the Additional copyist are also influenced by the ongoing standardisation of the language. However, by examining the written language of the Additional MS 5140, it is possible to identify some spellings characteristic of the East Anglian area, e.g., *nowht*.

## TEXT SOURCES

Chaucer, Geoffrey

- 1989 *The Ellesmere manuscript of Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales'. A working facsimile.*  
Cambridge: D.S. Brewer.

*The Additional MS 5140.* [Original copy]*The Cambridge MS Gg. 4.27.* [Facsimile]

## OTHER WORKS

Benskin, Michael (ed.)

- 1981 *So meny people longages and tonges: Philological essays in Scots and Medieval English presented to Angus McIntosh.* Edinburgh: Michael Benskin & Michael L. Samuels.

Benskin, Michael – Margaret Laing

- 1981 "Translations and mischsprachen in Middle English manuscripts", in: Michael Benskin (ed.), 69-89.

Benson, Larry

- 1992 "Chaucer's spelling reconsidered", *English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700* 3: 1-28.

Fisher, John H. – Malcolm Richardson – Jane L. Fisher (eds.)

- 1984 *An anthology of Chancery English.* Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press.

Fisiak, Jacek

- 1996 *A short grammar of Middle English. Orthography, phonology and morphology.* Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.

Jordan, Richard

- 1974 *Handbook of Middle English grammar. Phonology.* The Hague: Mouton.

Kristensson, Gillis

- 1979 "On the evidence for phonemic change", *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 80: 304-307.

- 1995 *A survey of Middle English dialects 1290-1350. The East Midland counties.* Lund: Lund University Press.

Manly, John M. – Edith Rickert

- 1940 *The text of the Canterbury Tales studied on the basis of all known manuscripts. Volume I: Descriptions of the manuscripts.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

McIntosh, Angus – Michael L. Samuels – Michael Benskin

- 1986 *A linguistic atlas of late medieval English.* Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press.

McLaughlin, John

- 1963 *A graphemic-phonemic study of a Middle English manuscript.* Forth Worth: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Owen, Charles A. Jr.

- 1988 "Pre-1450 manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*: Relationships and significance", *The Chaucer Review: A Journal of Medieval Studies and Literary Criticism* 23: 1-29; 95-116.

- 1991 *The manuscripts of the 'Canterbury Tales'.* Cambridge: Brewer.