Caxton’s Editing of the *Canterbury Tales*

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In the preface to his second edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, William Caxton made what has become a well-known statement.¹ He declared that a gentleman had told him that his first edition of the *Tales* was inaccurate and that he could provide a better manuscript, one truer to Chaucer’s text. Caxton claimed that he corrected the book based on the manuscript with which he had been provided and printed a second edition:

¹ Caxton’s first edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (STC 5082, referred to in this article as Cx¹) has been dated to either 1476 or 1477. Lotte Hellinga thinks the likely date is the earlier one (*Caxton in Focus: The Beginning of Printing in England* [London: British Library, 1982], 67–8, 80–1), but Paul Needham dates it 1477 (*The Printer & the Pardoner* [Washington, DC: Library of the Congress, 1986], 84), following Norman Francis Blake (*Caxton: England’s First Publisher* [London: Deutsch, 1976], 127–8), who later changed his opinion and stated that the date for Cx¹ was “almost certainly” 1476 (*The Textual Tradition of the Canterbury Tales* [London and Baltimore: Edward Arnold, 1985], 1). The second edition (STC 5088, referred to in this article as Cx²), has been dated to either 1482 or 1483. However the dating of Cx² depends on that of Cx¹, since the book’s second edition was, Caxton declares, printed six years after Cx¹. Thus Needham dates Cx² as 1483 (*The Printer*, 87), while Hellinga’s dating of Cx¹ as 1476 would bring the date of Cx² to 1482, a date also accepted by Blake (*England’s*, 5).
For I fynde many of the sayd bookes, whyche wryters haue abrydgyd it and many thynges left out, And in somme place haue sette certayn versys, that he neuer made ne sette in his booke, of whyche bookes so incorrecte was one brought to me vj yere passyd, whyche I supposed had ben veray true & correcte, And accordyng to the same I dyde do enprynte a certayn nombre of them, whyche anon were sold to many and dyuere gentyl men, of whome one gentylman cam to me, and said that this book was not accordyng in many places vnto the book that Gefferey chaucer had made, To whom I answerd that I had made it accordyng to my copye, and by me was nothyng added ne mynnushyd, Thenne he sayd he knewe a book whyche hys fader had and moche louyd, that was very trewe, and accordyng vnto hys owen first book by hym made, and sayd more yf I wold enprynte it agayn he wold gete me the same book for a copye, how be it he wyst wel, that hys fader wold not gladly departe fro it, To whom I said, in caas that he coude gete me suche a book trewe and correcte, yet I wold ones endeuoyre me to enprynte it again, for to satysfye thauctour, where as to fore by ygnoraunce I erryd in hurtyng and dyffamyng his book in dyuerce places in setting in somme thynges that he neuer sayd ne made, and leuyng out many thynges that he made whyche ben requysite to be sette in it, And thus we fyll at accord, And he ful gentlyly gate of hys fader the said book, and delyuerd it to me, by which I haue corrected my book.

This article shows that Caxton was accurate in his statement about the corrections introduced in his second edition of the Tales, and that he and his compositors were generally far more careful than some modern scholars have acknowledged. Using textual evidence drawn from a direct comparison of the two editions, I demonstrate: that Caxton did more than add and remove lines; that besides those changes, he introduced more than 3,000 alterations that originated in a different manuscript source; and that this manuscript source contained a text closer to the archetype of the tradition (see Appendix A). This evidence is drawn from my own textual research on William Caxton's editions of the Tales, for which completely new collations were carried out.

COMPUTER-AIDED COLLATION OF THE CAXTON EDITIONS

As part of my PhD at De Montfort University, I made complete electronic transcriptions of both of Caxton's editions of the Canterbury Tales. In order to establish the differences between the transcripts, I

2. Cx², a²⁺⁻.

3. Barbara Bordalejo, “Caxton’s Second Edition of the Canterbury Tales and its Place in the Textual Tradition of the Tales” (PhD diss., De Montfort University, 2003). The transcriptions were published electronically in Barbara Bordalejo, ed., Caxton’s “Canterbury Tales”: The British Library Copies (Leicester: Scholarly Digital Editions, 2003), CD-ROM, and can also be found freely available online at http://caxton.dmu.ac.uk/.
used Collate, a program developed in the early 1990s for the collation of large textual traditions. Collate in its default mode shows every difference between transcripts, and makes no distinction between variants that might be significant for the establishment of textual relationships (stemmatically significant variants) and those that are not. Any differences in spelling, in word division, or in the encoding, such as the size of an ornamental capital, are also understood as variation. A typical result of a collation carried out with the help of Collate is, for the first line of the “Miller’s Tale”:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{[wornp]} \text{W[wrornp]} & \text{Hilom } \text{Cx}^2 \\
\text{therwas } & \text{ ther was Cx}^2 \\
\text{dwelling} & \text{ dwellyng Cx}^2
\end{align*}
\]

In this example, all differences between Caxton’s first edition of the Tales, here used as a base for collation, and his second edition are shown. The first word, “Whilom,” which presents two different spellings and encodings, appears as a variant. The next item, “therwas” appears as a single word in Cx^1 and as two words in Cx^2. The only difference in the word “dwelling” is the tail in the final g in Cx^1. In fact, none of these variants in this first line of the “Miller’s Tale” are stemmatically significant.4 “Stemmatically significant” variants are those that are useful for the establishment of genetic links between different texts. Variations such as those in spelling, encoding, or word division as seen in this first line of the tale are likely to reflect only differences in practice between the compositors of the two editions.

The whole collation had to be read through in order to filter out all instances of variation that were not stemmatically significant. For example, the second line of the “Miller’s Tale” contains the following variant:

\[
\text{chuf } \text{gnof Cx}^2
\]

Here, the change from “chuf” to “gnof” is potentially stemmatically significant. I use the word “potentially” because it is not possible to decide just by looking at the collation of these two witnesses whether these variants contain information about the affiliations of the source manuscripts. There are three possible ways the variant in Cx^2 could appear: it could be the result of a correction based on a different text; it could be a compositorial error; or it could be Caxton’s own invention and likely to

4. Complete collations of the “Miller’s Tale” can be found in Peter M. W. Robinson, ed., *The Miller’s Tale on CD-ROM* (Leicester: Scholarly Digital Editions, 2004), CD-ROM.
be found nowhere else in the tradition. The more variants we find of the first type, the more likely it is that Caxton did as he said and introduced readings from another manuscript. Thus, one has to examine the distribution of these variants in the whole tradition for evidence that might support or deny Caxton’s assertion that he used a manuscript nearer to the archetype in preparing his second edition. If Caxton’s account is to be trusted, we would expect that the reading “gnof” was present in the manuscript given to him by the unnamed gentleman. If we discover that this reading and many others like it are also the readings of manuscripts that are considered to have been close to the archetype of the whole tradition, then we have evidence that Caxton did indeed introduce readings from a manuscript close to the archetype into his second edition.

SAMPLE SECTION: “THE SQUIRE’S TALE”

Ideally, one would present the complete table of variants between Cx1 and Cx2 for evaluation by the reader. However, the amount of data is large, especially if every one of the steps described above is to be followed. Instead of attempting to deal with the complete dataset, I focus on a single tale. Appendix A lists all 132 significant variants between Cx1 and Cx2 in the 664 lines of the “Squire’s Tale.” I give also the occurrence of the Cx2 variants in ten manuscript copies, transcripts of which were made available to me for collation by the Canterbury Tales Project. Of those 132,

5. My research on the manuscript source used by Caxton to correct his first edition required a further set of collations that included other witnesses. The second set of collations was designed to show whether the readings introduced in Cx2 could have been drawn from another witness (as opposed to emendations invented by Caxton himself or those that were the result of chance or accident) and whether it was possible to establish the affiliations of their manuscript source. The list of consulted witnesses and their sigils is in Appendix C to this article.

6. See Bordalejo, “Caxton’s Second Edition,” 117ff, for a full list of the variants in the Canterbury Tales.

7. I chose the “Squire’s Tale” because this is one of the tales that Lotte Hellinga refers to as not having a large number of corrections (see below). The data is representative of the number of variants found in Cx2 and, up to a certain point, it shows the patterns of variant distribution within the textual tradition.

8. For the “Squire’s Tale,” I collated Cx1, Cx2 along with Hg, El, Ad3, Bo2, Ch, Cp, Dd, Gg, Ha4, and La.
twelve are unique. If we discard the twelve unique variants, likely to be compositorial errors, we are left with 120 variants. This represents a significant change every five lines if we count all 132 places of variation, or one every five and one-half lines if we consider 120. Generally we can talk about roughly one significant change every five lines.

THE SOURCE OF THE VARIANTS

The sample variants from the “Squire’s Tale” show that Caxton did do the first part of what he claimed: he introduced a large number of readings into the text of Cx². We can also assess the veracity of the second part of his statement: that he adopted these readings from a text closer to the archetype of the tradition than was Cx¹.

The result of generations of textual scholarship on the Tales is a broad consensus about which of the extant manuscripts are likely to be closest to the lost archetype of the whole tradition. Key here is the work of John Manly and Edith Rickert,¹⁰ who built on research by Tatlock and other scholars, and who identified the Hengwr (Hg) and Ellesmere (El) manuscripts as nearest to their “O,” the origin of the whole tradition. Recently, the Canterbury Tales Project has elaborated on this work, demonstrating that a small set of other manuscripts represent independent lines of descent from the archetype, from which they are separated by relatively few intervening copies, and so are likely to preserve archetypal readings. The project labeled these the “O” manuscripts, and for the sections so far analyzed by the project, identified them as Ch, Gg, Ha⁴, and Ad₃, together with El and Hg.¹¹ Of these, Ch consistently is closest to El and Hg, effectively forming an “inner three” group.

It lies outside the scope of this article to determine the exact place of the source manuscript used by Caxton relative to the other manuscripts of the Tales and hence to the archetype. It is sufficient for my argument

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⁹. Variants that are present in only one witness are non-classificatory from a stemmatic perspective. However, the unique variants in this collation are only unique in the sense that they are not shared by any other collated witness. Once all the transcriptions of the “Squire’s Tale” become available, it might be that some variants I refer here to as unique are discovered to be present in other witnesses.

¹⁰. John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, eds., The Text of the Canterbury Tales: Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts, 8 vols. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1940).

¹¹. Here I present a simplified version of the textual tradition. The individual publications of the project contain fuller information referring to particular sections of the text.
that again and again, the reading introduced into Cx\(^2\) is also found in the “O” manuscripts, particularly in Hg, El, and Ch, and for this reason it is likely to have been the archetypal reading. Of the 120 readings introduced in Cx\(^2\) and shared with other witnesses, 100 appear in the “inner three” of Hg, El, and Ch. In contrast, the Cx\(^1\) reading replaced in Cx\(^2\) is very often the reading of the small group of manuscripts labeled as “b” by Manly and Rickert: essentially, He, Ne, and Tc2. This group is characterized by many readings introduced below the archetype, with their number and nature suggesting a long line of intervening copies between the archetype and the “b” manuscripts. Thus, we find over and over—in around a hundred cases in the “Squire’s Tale,” in thousands of instances across the whole Tales—that the Cx\(^1\) reading replaced by Caxton is found only in the “b” manuscripts, while the Cx\(^2\) reading replacing it is found in most (or even all) of the “O” manuscripts, and indeed in every other line of descent except “b.”

In the absence of an archetype, one might be hesitant about asserting that one reading is likely to be archetypal or another not, but in these instances, we may be confident that this is the case.

For example, in line 50 of “Squire’s Tale,” the reading “And so this kyng” is replaced in Cx\(^2\) by “Thys Cambuscan,” which is in agreement with eight of the ten collated witnesses, including all of the “inner three.” Something similar occurs in line 202, where “grekis” is substituted by “troye” in all ten collated witnesses. These variants are all stemmatically significant, and the vast majority of them appear to represent the replacement of a non-archetypal reading by an archetypal one. Moreover, many of the introduced changes significantly affect our reading of the text. An extraordinary instance is line 379, where Cx\(^2\) reads “foure” in place of Cx\(^1\) “ten.” The full line as it appears in Cx\(^2\) is:

That in the Ram is foure degrees up ronne

The reading “ten” is found widely in the tradition: in the “b” group (whence it makes its way into Cx\(^1\)), and in the very numerous “cd” group. “Foure,” the reading accepted by all modern editors, is found in just five of the ten witnesses I collated, but that five includes the “inner three”

12. Thus, the Cx\(^1\) reading “chuf” in line 1 of the “Miller’s Tale” discussed above appears also in the “b” manuscripts Ne and Tc2 (and in Ii, Se, and Ld2, apparently by coincidence), while “gnof” is in all six “O” manuscripts, as well as in Manly and Rickert’s “a,” “c,” and “d” groups: a total of forty-three of the fifty-four witnesses and every line of descent except “b.”
along with Dd and Gg. Notable too are nine cases where the Cx² reading agrees with El against Hg, usually with a few other witnesses:

l. 15, “strong” El alone; “and strong” Cx¹ Hg
l. 53, “feste so” El Ad³ Dd En1; “feste” Cx¹ Hg
l. 194, “they demede” El Gg H₄₄ Ht; “demede” Cx¹ Hg
l. 231, “wyth his” El Gg; “for his” Cx¹ Hg
l. 290, “me” El Gg; “you” Cx¹ Hg
l. 419, “and” El Gg; “of” Cx¹ Hg
l. 447, “loue” El Gg; “Ire” Cx¹ Hg
l. 491, “hard day” El Gg; “ilke day” Cx¹
l. 502, “that I ne coude” El Gg; “that no wight wolde” Cx¹

I observed above that 100 of the 120 non-unique Cx² readings were found in Hg, El, and Ch. Here, nine of the twenty not found in the “inner three” are found in El, commonly with Gg, an affiliation that can be observed elsewhere in the Tales. Thus, even where the manuscript source deviates from the “inner three,” it commonly agrees with readings found in other manuscript combinations close to the archetype.

Another striking example in the “Squire’s Tale,” suggesting derivation from a manuscript close to the archetype, is the variant in line 289 (variant 63 in Appendix A), “haue that / soupen al by,” in which the Cx² reading, “supen al by,” is supported by different lines of descent in the manuscript tradition. A similar conclusion can be reached from lines 631 “plastris / salues” (129 in Appendix A) or 277 “lokyngis / lokyng and dysymyngis” (60 in Appendix A).

By examining the distribution of the variants in Cx¹ and Cx² across the whole textual tradition of the Tales, we find similar results in the texts of other verse tales. For example, line 65 of the “Miller’s Tale” in Cx¹ reads “Tarselid with grene,” while Cx² reads “sylk” instead of “grene.” The variant “grene” here is restricted to the “b” group and El. In this case, not only has Caxton replaced the reading in Cx¹ by a very different one in Cx², but there is no doubt that he was following his source manuscript in this instance. It appears that the reading “sylk” was likely to have been present in the archetype of the whole tradition: hence its appearance in Hg, and all of what we call the “O” manuscripts except El, representing an uncertain number of independent lines of descent, and in all other lines of descent except the “b” group.

Occasionally, what are usually regarded as the best witnesses to the text appear to agree in error. This is the case of Hg and El in line 1067.

13. In Appendix A, I have highlighted similar examples.
of the “Clerk’s Tale.” At this point both manuscripts read: “Shal be myn heir, as I haue ay supposed.” The variant distribution in the rest of the witnesses is:

supposed [ Bo2 Cn El En3 Gg Hg Ld1 Mc Mm Pn Ra4 Ry1

disposid [ Bo1 Bw Cx1 Dd Ds1 En1 En2 Hk Lc Ne Ra1 To1

purposed [ Ad3 Ch Cp Cx2 Fi Ht La Ph4 Ra3 Wy

The Hengwrt and Ellesmere readings are the result of eyeskip from line 1065 (“This is thy doghter, which thow hast supposed”). The Cx2 reading, “purposed,” is attested by at least six independent lines of descent. Moreover, it is the lectio difficilior and, for that reason, likely to be trivialized to the more modern form “disposed.” Although the move from “purposed” to “disposed” can be explained as a trivialization, a hypothetical move from “disposed” to “purposed” is very unlikely to have happened. The best explanation here is that “purposed” is the archetypal reading, and might have stood in the exemplar or exemplars copied separately by Scribe B into the Hg and El copies—and both times the scribe made the same mistake and wrote “supposed” not “purposed.”

In line 484 of the “Wife of Bath’s Prologue” we find that a nonsensical reading was introduced in Cx2 (“I made hym of the same wode a troce”), while Cx1 had the word “croce” (which makes complete sense given the context). At this particular point, the variant distribution is:

troce [ Cx2 Hg Ad3 Ch Ad1 Hk Pn Wy

croce [ Bo1 Bo2 Bw Cn Cp Cx1 Dd Ds Dl El En3 Fi Gg Gl Ha2 Ha4 Ha5 He Ht Li La Lc Ld1 Ld2 Lh Ma Mg Mm Ne Ni Ph2 Ph3 Ps Py Ry1 Ry2 Si Se Tc1 Tc2 To

hood [ Mc Ra1

groce [ Ra3

Although the reading “troce” is nonsensical, it is shared among several witnesses—Cx2, Hg, Ad3, Ch, Ad1, Hk, Pn, and Wy, including four manuscripts Hg, Ad3, Ch, and Hk identified as “O.” Peter Robinson has suggested that this reading originated in an error that was present in the archetype.14

The above examples show the changes Caxton introduced derive from a manuscript from a different branch of the tradition than that used for the first edition, a manuscript likely closer to the archetype.

14. Peter Robinson, “A Stemmatic Analysis of Fifteenth-Century Witnesses of Wife of Bath’s Prologue” in Normal F. Blake and Peter M. W. Robinson, eds., The Canterbury Tales Project: Occasional Papers 2 (Oxford: Office for Humanities Communication, 1997), 103.
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The revisions introduced by Caxton amount to almost 3,000 instances of changes at the word level. These can be seen in Appendix B, which presents a summary of changes in each section of the Tales.

My research on Caxton’s editions of the Tales indicates that it is very likely he wrote corrections from this better manuscript into an unbound copy of his first edition\(^{15}\) that then was the copy for the second edition.\(^{16}\) The conflated text that resulted from the corrections made by Caxton remained for years the most widely available text of the Tales.\(^ {17}\) My analysis confirms that Caxton was accurate in his preface. When preparing his second edition, he did have access to a manuscript nearer the archetype than his first edition, which textually belongs to the “b” group. He introduced many readings taken from this manuscript—thousands of them, in every part of the text except the prose—throughout the whole length of the Tales.

**ALTERNATIVE VIEWS ON CAXTON AS A PRINTER**

However, my suggestion that Caxton actually did in his second edition what he said he did in its preface disagrees with several recent studies. Norman Blake edited all Caxton’s prefaces and other original writings and wrote a widely used monograph devoted to Caxton. Here is what Blake says of Caxton’s second edition and the preface to it:

Although he [Caxton] expressed concern for the text of his first edition, this may have been little more than publisher’s talk. He was not sufficiently worried that he felt he had to produce a completely new text. He thought it sufficient to make one or two minor adjustments. This somewhat cavalier attitude has by not means disappeared from the publishing trade today, so we should not be surprised to find it in Caxton. Few people today take a publisher’s “blurb” at its face value, and there is no reason to do so with Caxton’s prologues, which serve the same function.\(^ {18}\)

\(^{15}\) See Norman Blake, *Caxton and His World, The Language Library* (London: Deutsch, 1969), 104; *England’s* , 99; Thomas Dunn, “The Manuscript Source of Caxton’s Second Edition of the *Canterbury Tales*” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1939).

\(^{16}\) Hellinga maintains that only two compositors were at work during the printing of the second edition of the *Canterbury Tales* (Hellinga, *Caxton*, 61). In my edition of Caxton’s *Canterbury Tales*, I put forward an argument for three rather than two compositors.

\(^{17}\) See W. W. Greg, “The Early Printed Editions of The *Canterbury Tales*,” *PMLA* 39 (1924): 737–61, on the matter of how the four fifteenth-century printed editions of the *Canterbury Tales* relate to one another.

\(^{18}\) Blake, *Caxton and His World*, 104.
Two major points can be drawn from this quotation: first, Caxton made only “one or two minor adjustments” to his second edition of the *Tales*; and second, he was not truthful in his prefaces because this is the way in which publishers have always behaved. Blake’s wording (“Few people today”) implies that Caxton was conducting himself like a modern publisher, writing a “blurb” to advertise his books, and thus the current distrust of modern publishers’ claims can be applied to Caxton. One can trace the influence of Blake’s criticism of Caxton in the writings of other scholars. For example, Beverly Boyd seems to be defending Caxton from accusations of lack of knowledge of the text, and she seems to relieve him of any blame when she points out that he never claimed to be a scholar:

His [Caxton’s] knowledge of the texts of Chaucer’s works was not that of an exegete of his own time, much less that of a present-day editor of Chaucer, though the printer himself never claimed such skill. In no case do we have copies or precise records of Caxton’s sources for these books. Within these limitations the evidence is strong that he followed his texts closely except in the second edition of The Canterbury Tales, where he can be faulted for a serious mistake in judgement when he tried to correct the first edition from a manuscript obviously of a different textual tradition, though the circumstances were not altogether his fault.  

When Boyd refers to Cx², she states that “he can be faulted for a serious mistake in judgment when he tried to correct the first edition from a manuscript obviously of a different textual tradition.” It would be unfair to condemn Caxton for conflating texts from different recensions and for not recognizing this fact, given that the genetic groups for the witnesses of the text have been widely accepted as accurate only after Manly and Rickert’s edition published in 1940: to suggest that Caxton should have had this knowledge is imposing an anachronistic judgment on a case that might be better served if approached synchronically.

Lotte Hellinga continues the same line of observations in her description of Caxton’s second edition. Hellinga’s assertion that Caxton made only a small number of textual corrections in thirteen of the *Tales* and virtually none at all in ten of the verse *Tales* appears to support Blake’s argument:

Caxton’s main concern when editing the text was to add lines of verse that had been omitted in his first edition (to a total of 277 lines) and to take out or replace

19. Beverley Boyd, “William Caxton,” in *Editing Chaucer: The Great Tradition*, ed. Paul G. Ruggiers (Norman, OK: Pilgrim Books, 1984), 13–34.
lines which he now rejected as spurious (to a total of 89 lines . . . ). He made a small number of textual corrections, partly derived from his manuscript source and partly independent, in 13 of the Tales: Knight, Miller, Man of Law, Merchant, Franklin, Wife of Bath, Clerk, Canon’s Yeoman, Pardoner, Shipman, Prioress, Monk and Nun’s Priest. Ten Tales in verse and the two prose sections remained practically untouched: Reeve, Cook, Squire, Friar, Summoner, Second Nun, Physician, Sir Thopas, Melibee and Parson, with very little interference in the Tales of the Nun’s Priest [sic] and the Manciple.20

Indeed, Hellinga’s argument appears the more forceful because of the detail she presents: most of the changes (she suggests) were to add or remove whole lines (adding 277, removing 89),21 with few other changes. Included in her list of tales left “practically untouched” is the “Squire’s Tale.” Yet, my analysis of the “Squire’s Tale” suggests that Caxton introduced some 120 changes into the second edition, drawn from the “better manuscript”: approximately one change every five lines. Indeed, my analysis of Caxton’s changes over the whole edition, presented in Appendix B, suggests that Caxton made some 2,900 changes in the 19,000 verse lines of the Tales, or a rate of one change every six lines.

Hellinga does not state from where she derived the account of the changes made by Caxton in Cx², and particularly the apparently convincing listing of exactly which tales were and were not changed, which goes beyond anything said by either of the two scholars Hellinga here cites, Norman Blake or Thomas Dunn. However, it appears that her opinion derives from a misreading of Dunn. Dunn devotes his entire third chapter to listing all cases of “unique variants” in the second edition in the each tale, showing that there are rather few unique readings in the thirteen tales that Hellinga says had “a small number of textual corrections” and very few or none in the ten tales that she says “remained practically untouched.” Instead of tales that have very few variants, Dunn is listing only the tales where there are very few or no “unique variants” (variants found only in Cx²). The great majority of variants indeed do also appear in other witnesses to the Tales, and we expect this, given Caxton’s declaration that he took the variants from another manuscript and thus were current in the tradition. Dunn is fully aware of this, and goes on to report and analyze in Chapter 4 all the variants between the two

20. Lotte Hellinga, Catalogue of Books Printed in the XVth Century Now in the British Library (London: HES & DeGraaf Publishers, 2007), 11:132.

21. The total number of lines present in Cx² but not in Cx¹ is 324, not 277: it appears that Hellinga is here following Dunn, who gives the number 277.
editions that appear in other selected witnesses (Hellinga does not refer to this chapter). Both Dunn’s Chapter 4 and my own work show clearly that, contrary to Hellinga’s opinion, every verse tale was substantially corrected.22

My research shows that in the 2,909 lines (counting only the short version of link 30) that were present in Cx¹, at least 19,105 changes were introduced that significantly altered words; this means there were changes in about 15 percent of lines. No addition or deletion or substitution of complete lines has been taken into account here.23 If we add to this the fact that there are 244 “added” lines, with another eighty lines replacing eighty-two in Cx¹, that thirty-one lines were deleted, and that there are fourteen instances of line rearrangement, it could hardly be said that Caxton did not revise his first edition. Whether these changes were the result of a business plan to sell more books or whether they were made to oblige a rich patron is not as important here as establishing that Caxton was truthful in his preface and demonstrating that the variants introduced in the second edition are the only extant evidence of what must have been a text extremely close to the archetype of the textual tradition.

The studies by Blake, Boyd, and Hellinga present a view of Caxton as careless and unreliable. If widely accepted, this would have a powerful effect on scholarship: one thinks particularly of the debate over the merits of Caxton’s edition of Malory against the Winchester manuscript. In the most recent comprehensive survey of the Winchester and Caxton Malory texts, William Matthews accepts Blake’s characterization of Caxton as driven by commercial imperatives but rejects (as does this study) Blake’s assertion that Caxton made only “haphazard and minor changes,” according to his own analysis of the changes made by Cax-

22. Joseph J. Gwara, in his review of Wykyn de Worde, Father of Fleet Street by James Moran (reprinted with an introduction by Lotte Hellinga and Mary Elder), has pointed out that she failed to call attention to the flagrant plagiarism carried out by Moran (“James Moran, Wykyn de Worde, Father of Fleet Street,” Variants 4 [2005]: 340–351).

23. This number is the result of my initially computer-aided but ultimately manual collation. I have checked these results with VBase for the “Miller’s Tale” and link 1 and discovered that I had the tendency to underestimate variants by around 20 percent; that is, the completely automated collation detected more variants than my manual one. At least in part, this can be attributed to the thorough correction that the collations and transcriptions underwent before finally being published.
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In his introduction to the posthumous publication of Matthews’s analysis, Robert L. Kindrick concludes that “We are forced by the evidence to assume Caxton was serious in his interest in a good text and that he told the truth in his prologues.” My research reinforces these conclusions. This study of the agreements between the readings introduced in the Caxton second edition and their consistent occurrence in manuscripts believed close to the archetype of the Tales affirms that Caxton did not just make many changes (as Matthews shows) but that he did have access to a “trewe and correcte” copy of the Tales, and that he made extensive and consistent use of this copy as the source for the revisions in his second edition. Unequivocally, Caxton was not careless in his preparation of his second edition of the Tales and we should take his claims in its prologue as truthful.

24. William Matthews, “Caxton and Chaucer: A Re-View,” in The Malory Debate: Essays on the Texts of Le Morte Darthur, ed. Bonnie G. Wheeler, Robert L. Kindrick, and Michael Norman Salda (Cambridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2000), 1–34.
25. Robert L. Kindrick, introduction, The Malory Debate, xxvii.
Variants in bold are instances that show that Caxton was using a different manuscript source. These variants could not have been introduced by conjecture, and the support of the tradition shows that they are present in manuscripts that are considered to be close to the archetype (such as Hg, El and Ch) and other independent lines of descent (Ad3, Bo2, Dd, and Ha4, for example).

| Var | Line | Cx1       | Cx2       | Witnesses agreeing with Cx2 |
|-----|------|-----------|-----------|-----------------------------|
| 1   | 2    | on russy  | russy     | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Ha4 La |
| 2   | 14   | tentir    | center    | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Ha4 La   |
| 3   | 15   | and strong| strong    | El                           |
| 4   | 15   | & in      | in        | Hg Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Ha4 La   |
| 5   | 18   | a         | so wel    | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Ha4 La |
| 6   | 30   | I         | It        | Hg Ad3 Ch Cp Dd Gg La        |
| 7   | 32   | I         | he        | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 8   | 41   | in        | nyghe     | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Ha4 La |
| 9   | 46   | That      | What      | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Ha4 La |
| 10  | 47   | Wel       | Full      | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Ha4 La |
| 11  | 48   | ayen here | them      | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Ha4 La |
| 12  | 50   | And so this kyng | Thys Cambuscan | Hg Ed Ad3 Ch Cp Dd Ha4 La |
| 13  | 53   | feste     | holte     | Hg Ed Ad3 Ch Cp Dd Ha4 La |
| 14  | 53   | feste     | feste so  | El Ad3 Dd En1                |
| 15  | 69   | that this | thys      | Unique in Cx2               |
| 16  | 69   | in his high| thus in his | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 17  | 70   | thing     | thynge    | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 18  | 72   | sodeynly | all sodeynly | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 19  | 73   | bras      | of bras   | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 20  | 75   | And on his| Vpon hys  | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 21  | 83   | He saluyd | Saluyth   | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 22  | 83   | the kyng  | kynge     | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 23  | 88   | com       | were come | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Dd Gg        |
| 24  | 90   | lord      | bord      | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 25  | 93   | faylle    | vye       | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 26  | 95   | Accordyng| Accordant | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 27  | 95   | word      | wordys    | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 28  | 98   | hille     | style     | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 29  | 100  | that      | al that   | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 30  | 101  | I         | that I    | Hg Ed Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 31  | 111  | to        | in to     | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 32  | 113  | thorough out| thorough | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 33  | 120  | knoweth   | couthe    | Cp Ha4 La                    |
| 34  | 123  | skyl      | seal      | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 35  | 130  | Hath      | Had       | Unique in Cx2               |
| 36  | 130  | in        | on        | Hg Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 37  | 152  | it woundith| is wounded | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 38  | 157  | hem       | hym      | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 39  | 166  | kept      | fette     | Hg Ed Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| Var | Line | \text{Cx}^1 | \text{Cx}^2 | Witnesses agreeing with \text{Cx}^2 |
|-----|------|------------|------------|-------------------------------------|
| 40  | 168  | the tour   | the hygh tour | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 41  | 175  | may hit    | may hyt not  | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Dd Gg Ha4 La     |
| 42  | 186  | of         | at          | El Gg Ha4 Ht                        |
| 43  | 193  | of         | a           | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Dd En1            |
| 44  | 194  | demede     | they demed  | El Gg Ha4 Ht                        |
| 45  | 202  | grekis     | troye       | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 46  | 212  | thoughtis  | doubts      | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Dd Gg Ha4 La      |
| 47  | 215  | boundis    | lewdnes     | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 48  | 224  | alleon     | alocen      | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Dd Gg La    |
| 49  | 231  | for his    | wyth hys    | El Gg                              |
| 50  | 239  | speke      | speke they  | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 51  | 242  | be moyes   | he moyes    | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 52  | 242  | be kyng    | kyng        | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 53  | 246  | fern glas  | fern asshes glas | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 54  | 250  | be         | on          | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Ht           |
| 55  | 270  | There      | Here        | {none}                              |
| 56  | 273  | as festliche | a festliche | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 57  | 273  | as fresh may | as fressh as may | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 58  | 275  | Who        | Hou         | Unique in \text{Cx}^2             |
| 59  | 277  | And therto suche | Suche            | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 60  | 277  | lokyngis   | lokyng and dyssymlyngis | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La |
| 61  | 278  | preysinges | perseuyngis | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 62  | 285  | squiers    | squireye    | Dd En1                              |
| 63  | 289  | haue that  | soupen al by | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 64  | 290  | you        | me          | El Gg                               |
| 65  | 300  | suche a    | suche       | Unique in \text{Cx}^2             |
| 66  | 307  | if yow     | whan you    | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 67  | 311  | contre     | contre that | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg La       |
| 68  | 315  | wol        | wold        | Unique in \text{Cx}^2             |
| 69  | 315  | al your    | your        | Hg El Ad3 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La       |
| 70  | 316  | wolde      | wol         | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 Ht   |
| 71  | 317  | hadde      | hath        | Unique in \text{Cx}^2             |
| 72  | 322  | in to      | to          | Unique in \text{Cx}^2             |
| 73  | 339  | digestiouns | dygestion  | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 74  | 345  | Cherisshed | Cherisshe   | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 Ht   |
| 75  | 350  | where      | were        | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 76  | 355  | hadde      | hath        | Ha4                                 |
| 77  | 360  | ioye       | a Ioye      | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 78  | 362  | chaungith  | chaungyd    | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 79  | 363  | for here   | rght for    | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La   |
| 80  | 363  | impression | the impression | En1                                 |
| 81  | 378  | ten        | four        | Hg El Ch Dd Gg                       |
| 82  | 379  | higher was she  | hygher was he | Hg El Ad3 Ch Cp Dd Gg               |
| 83  | 383  | but        | but wyrth   | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Dd Gg Ha4 Ht         |
| 84  | 384  | ferre      | forth       | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Dd Gg Ht          |
| 85  | 394  | lust       | the lust    | Dd En1                              |
| 86  | 397  | prolixite  | hys prolixye | Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Cp Dd Gg Ht          |
Var Line Cx1 Cx2 Witnesses agreeing with Cx2
87 400 an ende sone an ende Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
88 408 tre tre there Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
89 410 she pyght to twyght Unique in Cx2 [but Dd “so twight”]
90 411 cruel so cruel Hg El Ad3 Ch Dd Gg Ht
91 413 wolde nold Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
92 417 Or That Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
93 419 of and Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
94 429 She hath Hath Hg El Ch Cp Dd Gg La
95 430 routhe the routhe Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
96 430 she almost she Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
97 436 where there Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
98 442 ellis losse Hg El Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg La
99 444 causith causen Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
100 446 For ye For ye Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
101 446 wolde wreke ye wreke Hg El Ad3 Ch Cp Dd Ha4 Ht
102 447 Whiche that Whyche Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Dd Gg Ha4 La
103 447 tre loue Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
104 459 yf that yf Hg Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
105 464 more yet more Hg El Ad3 Ch Cp Dd Ht
106 467 y take take Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
107 472 is hys Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 Ht
108 483 the the the Unique in Cx2
109 491 day hard day Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
110 499 That is It was so Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
111 502 no wight wolde ne coude Unique in Cx2
112 506 loue loues Hg Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp La
113 506 this Iopcryte Iopcryte Hg Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp La
114 514 noman none Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 Ht
115 521 Graunte Graunted Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
116 531 grauntid hym had grauntyd Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
117 538 in of Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 Ht
118 539 ioye the Ioye Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
119 558 herde felte Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
120 562 aftir as fer as Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
121 575 mette fette Unique in Cx2
122 575 me leue bleue Unique in Cx2
123 577 y he Unique in Cx2
124 590 Bothe Be ye Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
125 600 repeyrisch repeyryng Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
126 604 they theyh Hg El Ad3 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
127 607 his that hys Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 La
128 623 arm barm Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd La
129 631 plastris salues Hg Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd La
130 638 y peyntid is peyntid Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Cp Dd Gg Ha4 Ht
131 650 processe my processe Hg El Ad3 Bo2 Ch Dd (Gg Ha4 omit)
132 664 Mercurius Mercurius hous He El Ad3 Ch Cp
Caxton's Editing of the “Canterbury Tales”

APPENDIX B

Variants by Tale

The tales in bold are the ones Hellinga considers “practically untouched.”

1. General Prologue  150 significant changes (858 lines)
2. Knight’s Tale  448 significant changes (2244 lines)
3. Link 1  12 significant changes (76 lines)
4. Miller’s Tale  79 significant changes (666 lines)
5. Link 2  14 significant changes (66 lines)
6. Reeve’s Tale  93 significant changes (404 lines)
7. Link 3  4 significant changes (40 lines)
8. Cook’s Tale  7 significant changes (58 lines)
9. Link 7  22 significant changes (98 lines)
10. Man of Law’s Tale  188 significant changes (1064 lines)
11. Link 15  6 significant changes (32 lines)
12. Merchant’s Tale  225 significant changes (1174 lines)
13. Link 8  7 significant changes (28 lines)
14. Squire’s Tale  123 significant changes (664 lines)
15. Link 20  (not present in Cx1) 26
16. Franklin’s Tale  197 significant changes (908 lines)
17. Wife of Bath’s Prologue  140 significant changes (830 lines)
18. Wife of Bath’s Tale  62 significant changes (406 lines)
19. Link 10  2 significant changes (36 lines)
20. Friar’s Tale  53 significant changes (365 lines)
21. Link 11  14 significant changes (44 lines)
22. Summoner’s Tale  87 significant changes (586 lines)
23. Clerk’s Tale  187 significant changes (1176 lines)
24. Link 13  4 significant changes (36 lines)
25. Link 14  1 significant change (7 lines)
26. Nun’s Tale  45 significant changes (553 lines)
27. Link 33  14 significant changes (160 lines)
28. Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale  92 significant changes (762 lines)
29. Physician’s Tale  53 significant changes (286 lines)
30. Link 21  4 significant changes (40 lines)
31. Pardoner’s Tale  90 significant changes (640 lines)
32. Shipman’s Tale  57 significant changes (454 lines)
33. Link 24  3 significant changes (18 lines)
34. Priorese’s Tale  41 significant changes (238 lines)
35. Link 25  2 significant changes (21 lines)
36. Tale of Thopas  23 significant changes (205 lines)
37. Link 28  8 significant changes (48 lines)
38. Tale of Melibee  35 significant changes (918 lines)
39. Link 29  7 significant changes (102 lines)
40. Monk’s Tale  96 significant changes (680 lines)

26. Link 20 has a total of 36 lines and link 31 has a total of 16 lines; these are not taken into account here because they are accounted for in the line substitutions, additions and deletions.
41. Link 30  
42. Nun's Priest's Tale  
43. Link 31  
44. Link 36  
45. Manciple's Tale  
46. Link 37  
47. Parson's Tale  
48. Chaucer's Retraction

10 significant changes (34 lines, short version)  
100 significant changes (626 lines)  
(not present in Cx3)  
14 significant changes (104 lines)  
28 significant changes (258 lines)  
11 significant changes (74 lines)  
50 significant changes (1006 lines)  
1 significant change (12 lines)
Caxton’s Editing of the “Canterbury Tales”

APPENDIX C

Witness Sigils

Manuscripts

| Code | Institution | Call Number |
|------|-------------|-------------|
| Ad1  | London, British Library | MS. Add. 5140 |
| Ad3  | London, British Library | MS. Add. 35286 |
| Bo1  | Oxford, Bodleian Library | MS. Bodl. 414 |
| Bo2  | Oxford, Bodleian Library | MS. Bodl. 686 |
| Bw   | Oxford, Bodleian Library | MS. Barlow 20 |
| Ch   | Oxford, Christ Church College | MS. 152 |
| Cp   | Oxford, Corpus Christi College | MS. 198 |
| Dd   | Cambridge, University Library | MS. Dd.4.24 |
| Ds1  | Tokyo, Takamiya MS 32 | (ex Devonshire) |
| El   | California, San Marino, Huntington Library | MS. El. 26 C 9 (Ellesmere) |
| En1  | London, British Library | MS. Eg. 2726 |
| En2  | London, British Library | MS. Eg. 2863 |
| En3  | London, British Library | MS. Eg. 2864 |
| Fi   | Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum | MS. McClean 181 |
| Gg   | Cambridge, University Library | MS. Gg.4.27 |
| Ha4  | London, British Library | MS. Harley 7334 |
| Ha5  | London, British Library | MS. Harley 7335 |
| He   | New Jersey, Princeton University Library | MS. 100 (Helmingham) |
| Hg   | Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales | MS. Peniarth 392 D (Hengwrt) |
| Hk   | Norfolk, Holkham Hall | MS. 667 |
| Ht   | Oxford, Bodleian Library | MS. Hatton Donat.1 |
| Ii   | Cambridge, University Library | MS. Ii.3.26 |
| La   | London, British Library | MS. Lansdowne 851 |
| Lc   | Lichfield Cathedral | MS. 29 |
| Ld1  | Oxford, Bodleian Library | MS. Laud Misc. 600 |
| Ld2  | Oxford, Bodleian Library | MS. Laud Misc. 739 |
| Ln   | Lincoln Cathedral Library | MS. 110 |
| Ma   | University of Manchester, John Rylands Library | MS. English 113 |
| Mc   | Chicago, University of Chicago Library | MS. 564 (McCormick) |
| Mg   | New York, Pierpont Morgan Library | MS. 249 |
| Mm   | Cambridge, University Library | MS. Mm.2.5 |
Bibliographical Society of America

Ne  Oxford, New College, D.314
Nl  Northumberland, Alnwick Castle, MS. 455
Ph2  Geneva, Bodmer Library, MS. 48 (Phillipps 8136)
Ph3  Philadelphia, Rosenbach Museum and Library, MS. 1084/1 (Phillipps 8137)
Ph4  California, San Marino, Huntington Library, MS. HM 140 (Phillipps 8299)
Ps  Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS. Fonds Anglais 39
Rai  Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. poet.141
Ra3  Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. poet.223
Ra4  Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Rawl. poet C.86
Ry1  London, British Library, MS. Royal 17 D.XV
Ry2  London, British Library, MS. Royal 18 C.II
Si  Tokyo, Takamiya 22 (Sion College)
Tc1  Cambridge, Trinity College, MS. R.3.3
Tc2  Cambridge, Trinity College, MS. R.3.15
To1  Oxford, Trinity College, MS. 49

Pre-1501 Printed Editions

Cx1  Caxton, first edition (c. 1476)
Cx2  Caxton, second edition (c. 1482)
Pn  Pynson (1492)
Wy  Wynkyn de Worde (1498)