

**Lexical Noun Variation in the Copy of *Cursor Mundi*
in British Library MS Additional 36983**

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This thesis is a comparative study of the variant lexical nouns that appear in the copy of *Cursor Mundi* in British Library MS Additional 36983 (commonly known as MS B) when compared against the main text of the *Southern Version of Cursor Mundi*, which is mainly a copy of Collage of Arms (Herald's Collage), Arundel Press LVII (commonly known as MS H). The researched material for this thesis was taken from the *Southern Version of Cursor Mundi*. Thousand-line excerpts were taken at regular intervals a total of six times, and the resulting dataset was searched for lexical noun variation in MS B. Out of a sample size of six thousand lines, 111 instances of noun variation were found. The unique SV nouns and B variants were recorded with data from the OED and compared against each other. The results suggest that the variation was caused by a mix of translation, correction, and scribal mistakes. The conclusion is made that the scribes of MS B did indeed alter the text of their exemplar both intentionally and unintentionally, however this thesis was not able to answer how systematic the process of revision was in MS B. The fact remains that much the manuscript's unique features have been left unresearched, and this calls for more thorough linguistic investigation into the copy of *Cursor Mundi* found in MS B.

Key words: Cursor Mundi, Middle English, historical linguistics, medieval studies, manuscript variation

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1 Introduction

The *Cursor Mundi* is a long verse biblical paraphrase written in Middle English, which covers the entire history of the world all the way from Creation to Judgement Day. Composed somewhere in the north of England in the early fourteenth century by a pious writer-compiler, the poem had a lasting appeal as a well-known piece of long vernacular religious verse (Thompson 1998, 1). The *Cursor Mundi*, henceforth CM, has been published in two modern editions: first between 1874 and 1893 by Rev. Richard Morris of the Early English Text Society who oversaw the publication of five manuscripts. The CM was edited and printed again about a hundred years later, by a team of researchers at the University of Ottawa under the general editorship of Sarah Horrall.

Instead of transcribing the same manuscripts as before, the Ottawa team decided to work on an edition based on four later manuscripts, which had been previously overlooked by Rev. Morris. Each of these four manuscripts were copied at a later date, geographically south of where the CM-poet is thought to have worked (Horrall 1978, 12). Based on the variant southern manuscripts, a new edition was fashioned: *The Southern Version of Cursor Mundi*, which was published between 1978 and 2000 in five volumes. Horrall argued that, with vast editing of language and a revised ending, the southern manuscripts present an original work of medieval poetry, and not a warped copy of the *Cursor Mundi* that was born of scribal blunders (ibid.).

This thesis examines one of the manuscripts presented in the *Southern Version*; British Library MS Additional 36983, henceforth referred to as MS B. MS B is the black sheep of the family of southern CM copies, leading Horrall to consider it too eccentric to be presented on its own and printed, but at the same time she called it “extremely interesting” and stated that it “deserves to be better known” (Horrall 1978, 23). The authors of the *Southern Version* did not use MS B for editing the main text, and it appears solely as variant readings in the editorial apparatus.

The scribes of MS B copied the language of their exemplar quite loosely (ibid.), and therefore there is a considerable number of features in the text that invite comparison. As a full description or linguistic profile of MS B can not be made within the time and resource constraints of a BA thesis, this study focuses on the lexical noun variants found within the manuscript, when compared against the main text of the *Southern Version of Cursor Mundi*.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 The manuscripts of the *Cursor Mundi* and description of MS B

The primary resource on which this thesis bases its assumptions about the *Cursor Mundi* and its manuscripts is John J. Thompson's book *The Cursor Mundi: Poem, Texts and Contexts* (1998). Thompson's monograph remains the latest, most comprehensive, and authoritative resource on the poem.

Complete and cohesive reproductions of the poem exist only in nine manuscripts (Thompson 1998, 23) which are named and listed in Figure 1 and Table 1. Figure 1 is a copy of the stemma tree of the CM manuscripts in the fifth volume of the *Southern Cursor Mundi*, which is based on the notes left by Sarah Horrall (Eldredge and Klinck 2000, 44). Table 1 contains the manuscript sigla, where points of information which are unclear or which require further investigation are italicized. The information in Table 1 is provided by Thompson (1998, 30–46) and Horrall (1978, 13–23).

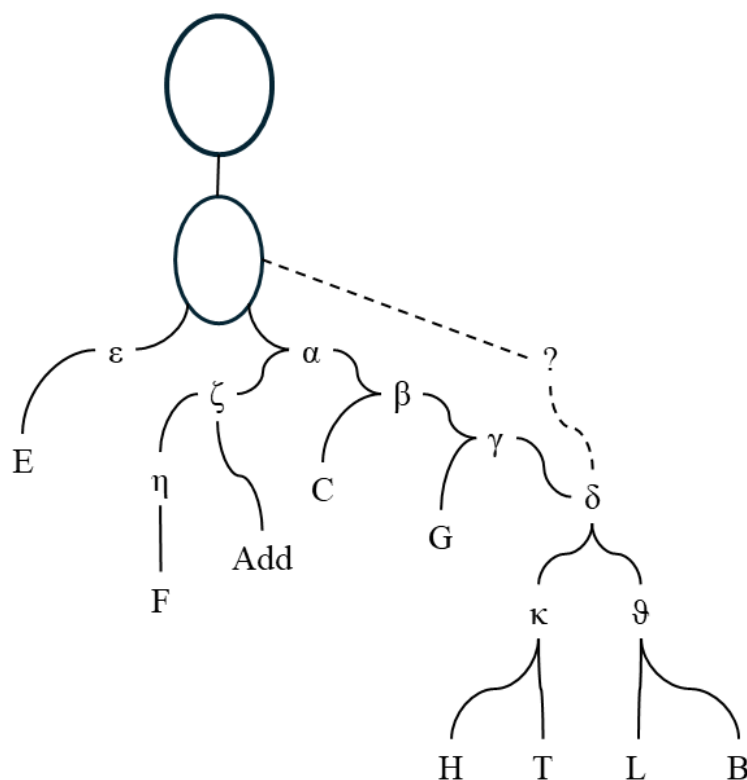


Figure 1. *Cursor Mundi* manuscript stemma tree (Eldredge and Klinck 2000, 44)

Table 1 Manuscripts containing the *Cursor Mundi*

	Location and shelfmark	Date	Dialect	Grouping
C	London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian A iii	1340	Yorkshire	Northern
G	Göttingen, Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, Cod. theol. 107r	<i>Second half of 14th century</i>	South-East Lincolnshire & Yorkshire	
F	Oxford, Bodleian Library, Fairfax 14 (SC 3894)	<i>Late 14th century</i>	Lancashire	
E	Edinburgh, Royal Collage of Physicians	<i>Late 14th century</i>	Yorkshire	
Add.	London, British Library, Additional 31042	Mid 15th century	<i>Northern</i>	
H	London, Collage of Arms (Herald's Collage), Arundel Press LVII	1400	Staffordshire	Southern
T	Cambridge, Trinity College, R.3.8 (588)	1400	Staffordshire	
B	London, British Library (previously in Bedfordshire General Library), Additional 36983	1442	<i>Bedfordshire</i>	
L	Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 416 (Bodl. 1479)	1459	<i>Non-northern</i>	

The manuscripts can be sorted into two groups. Henceforth these two groups are referred to as the northern (CGFE & Add.) and the southern (HTBL) copies, groups, or versions. The labels of northern and southern refer to the dialectal profile of the text in the manuscript, the geographical location of where the manuscript is thought to have been copied, and, most importantly, the shared textual tradition of the texts.

There is no one certain genealogy when it comes to the manuscripts of the *Cursor Mundi*, and many different stemmata have been proposed throughout the years (Eldredge and Klinck 2000, 42–44), but there is a unanimous agreement on the connectedness of H, T, B, and L, and their clear distinction from the rest of the manuscripts (ibid.). The main textual difference between the northern and southern copies is in the later parts of the poem, where the southern version ends the poem at line 23 880 and presents an alternative ending, whereas the northern manuscripts contain a poem over 30 000 lines (Thompson 1998, 57). The southern texts are chronicled to be younger than their northern counterparts, and are geographically located to have been written around the Central Midlands, south of where the original CM-poet presumably composed the poem (Thompson 1998, 14).

Furthermore, the version of *Cursor Mundi* presented in MS B stands out from the other southern copies in two major ways. First, it substitutes the Passion section of the poem, which

corresponds to lines 14 916–17 288 in THL, with 1140 lines of verse adaptation from the Pseudo-Bonaventuran *Meditationes vitae Christi* (Thompson 1998, 91). Second, B completely changes the ending of the poem, which corresponds to the last 1900 lines in THL, substituting it with 2300 lines from the *Pricke of Conscience* (Thompson 1998, 89). Thompson, who is usually reluctant to ascribe any intentional design to any version of the CM found in the southern group, agrees that these two unusual revisions signify an “ambitious late medieval attempt to reconstruct the poem” (ibid.).

When compared against the other manuscripts in the southern group, another unique feature of MS B is its language, and the reasons for the difference in vocabulary could be multiple. MSS B and L are roughly half a century older than MSS H and T (Horrall 1978, 14–17). Furthermore, the geographical location of where H and T were produced was probably Lichfield (Thompson 1998, 38–40), whereas the place of origin of B has not been investigated in detail, though Bedfordshire is the most likely option for B (Thompson 1998, 44). The possible influence of age on a scribe’s vocabulary is discussed further in the analysis section, and the possible dialectal influence is considered in the following section, and again in the analysis.

2.2 Theories of manuscript variation

One way to categorise variation found in a manuscript copy is to divide it into two categories: textual variation and dialectal variation. Textual variation is the alteration of words, while dialectal variation is the alteration of the forms of words (Laing and Williamson 2004, 86). In practice, dialectal variation happens when a scribe is presented with the task of copying a text not of their own dialect. This was a common situation, as the Middle English period has been called “*par excellence*, the age for written dialects” (Horobin and Smith 2002, 39).

Subsequently, the scribe may employ three different approaches: (A) the scribe produces an exact copy of their exemplar, (B) the scribe translates the entirety of the work into their own dialect, or (C) a system between A, and B. Approach A is somewhat rare, while B and C are much more common (McIntosh 1973, 61).

Dialectal variation can be called a kind of translation, and it could be said that this translation from dialect to dialect was quite ubiquitous in the ME period. This thesis examines lexical variation, which is an alternative term for textual variation, but this does not mean that the

effect of dialect is not in any way present in the lexical noun variants of MS B. The locations of where MS B and MSS H and T were copied, Bedfordshire and Lichfield respectively, are in different ME dialect areas (Burrow and Turville-Petre 1996, 7). Bedfordshire is located in the East Midlands dialect area (*ibid.*), however, it must be noted that the style of Middle English spoken in Bedfordshire had characteristics of its own, distinct from the East Midland dialect (Strang [1970] 1989, 163), and the ME dialect areas cannot be mapped with perfect accuracy (Burrow and Turville-Petre 1996, 6). Despite this, the dialectal situation of the manuscripts can be summarised by saying that the scribes in Lichfield and Bedfordshire were presumably accustomed to different ME varieties.

Textual variation is much rarer than dialectal variation. The usual percentage of substantial variation between cognate, meaning direct, copies is less than three per cent (Wakelin 2014, 49). English scribes can be described as accurate; they reproduced their exemplars quite faithfully (*ibid.*). When they do vary, the cause is either the result of a mistake, (dialectal) translation, or a correction. Scribal corrections can be seen within one manuscript, e.g. crossing over words or rewriting, or they can occur within the copying process. Both copiers and authors expected to be corrected by their readers, and they were aware that the texts they produced most likely contained errors (Wakelin 2014, 20). Combined with a Christian culture of humility, medieval scribal activity could be described as permeated by a readiness to correct and be corrected (*ibid.*).

Corrective variation while copying is primarily driven by a “desire for intelligibility” (Wakelin 2014, 58), which means that the correcting scribes were often looking for ways to make the text more easily understandable for their audiences. This was achieved by revising the basic vocabulary of the text, sometimes by altering style or substituting certain words for commonplace synonyms (Wakelin 2014, 190). It can be easily seen how this category of correction can intersect with dialectal translation, as lexical items can have different semantic interpretations in different dialect areas.

However, variation should not be overemphasized, since most scribes copy with little variation, as previously established. Copying, like all human activity, is prone to mistakes and, in fact, most variation in cognate copies appears as error (Wakelin 2014, 55). There are multiple explanations for scribal mistakes, but most of them result from the actual physical practice of copying. Most mistakes are visual, meaning the copying scribe misreads a single letter or an entire word from their exemplar. The scribe may also copy text from an adjacent

or nearby line and accidentally jump over multiple lines of the text. This is a frequently spotted mistake in manuscript copies called *eyeskip* (Wakelin 2024, 203). In addition, some mistakes can be auditory, meaning that the scribe misremembers their exemplar while internally dictating the text to themselves, and unintentionally produces a variant that matches the sound of what they had read (Wakelin 2014, 56). In this thesis, this was taken into account, and the variation found in MS B is examined from the perspective of probable mistakes.

2.3 Language in medieval verse

Poetry in the Middle English period must be primarily thought of as an oral activity. The CM-poet, as well as the scribes of MS B many years later, were both working with the assumption that their work would be experienced, for the most part, by a listening audience. This gives the CM a kind of “linear” quality, typical for vernacular Middle English verse (Sawyer 2024, 167).

Linearity means that poetic effect is, in a way, built up, but this also implies that hearers, unlike readers, cannot go backwards and forwards in between the lines. This means that the audience cannot compare or contrast and they are expected to have a response to the poem from a single hearing (*ibid.*). From this an assumption can be made, rather simplistically, that the vocabulary of the work must be at least somewhat familiar to the hearers of the poem, and the lexis must be understandable intuitively, with only the context of the preceding lines. Accordingly, a poem with a strong vernacular and linear quality, like the CM, is more amenable to editing and revision of language (Wakelin 2014, 190).

The *Cursor Mundi* is written in octosyllabic metre with short rhyming couplets (Thompson 1998, 1). The CM employs a system of mixing open and closed couplets, which is a common verse structure for its time (Sawyer 2024, 35). The couplet is defined as a rhyming pair of lines, and the closed couplet is a complete syntactic unit in itself, whereas the open couplet links syntactically to the preceding or succeeding couplet (*ibid.*).

In the case of a poem consisting of rhyming couplets, a scribe’s efforts to revise the language of their exemplar are limited and defined by the set rhyme scheme (McIntosh 1973, 61). Variation in the rhyming position is discussed further in the analysis section. Conforming to the metre is another limiting factor (*ibid.*), but for the sake of brevity, it is assumed in this

thesis that the B scribes followed the metric pattern to the best of their ability, and I refrain from commenting on the syllabic difference between the B variants and their counterparts

3 Materials and methods

3.1 Materials

This section is a discussion of both sides of this comparative study: MS B and the text of the *Southern Version of Cursor Mundi*, which is intended to be a copy of MS H. As established, MS B is not transcribed in the *Southern Version*, and it only appears as variant readings in the editorial apparatus. Excerpt lines from MS B appear as examples throughout this thesis. It is important to note that these lines were constructed based on the text from the *Southern Version*, with the variant words and phrases substituted in accordingly. Ideally, either the B manuscript itself or a full transcription would have been used for study, but unfortunately this was not possible.

It should be emphasized that the manuscript that MS B was compared against is only mostly MS H. The text of the *Southern Version* is almost entirely a transcription of MS H, with missing leaves supplanted from MS T, and the most obvious scribal blunders substituted from other southern manuscripts (Horrall 1978, 25). As a result of the fact that an unknown amount of text is editorial in nature, the manuscript that B is compared against is not referred to as MS H, but as the text of the *Southern Version*, shortened to SV in the examples and the analysis section.

Except for the case of MS B, all other line excerpts are presented exactly the way they were found in the *Southern Version of Cursor Mundi*, with the conventions employed by the editors left in place, like capitalisation and the system of presenting expanded abbreviations in italics (Horrall 1978, 25–27).

For the sake of accuracy, it must be mentioned that while terminology like “substitutions”, “revision”, and “edits” are often used in this thesis, there is no way of certainly knowing that all variant readings in MS B are original to it. The only way to confirm this would be to compare MS B against its direct exemplar, which is not possible as it is unfortunately lost to time (see Figure 1). However, the fact that MS B contains a large amount of variation that is absent in MS L, which is its closest relative, means that a considerable amount of this variation must be original.

3.2 Sample size

The five volumes of *The Southern Version of Cursor Mundi* present a poem that is 23 898 lines long. The sample size was defined primarily by the requirement that it had to be limited to a number that is feasible for one person to manually collect, catalogue, and analyse within a reasonable timeframe.

Lines 14 916–17 288 where MS B substitutes the CM with text from *Meditationes vitae Christi* were purposefully excluded from the selection, as was the *Prick of Conscience* extract in the revised ending of B. Although both instances of large-scale substitution are a part of what makes the version of CM presented in B so distinctive, researching their language is unfortunately outside the scope and stated purpose of this thesis.

When the material from sources outside the CM is excluded, the remaining text is 19 859 lines long. Out of the 19 859 lines, thousand-line excerpts were taken at regular intervals a total of six times. The resulting six thousand lines were searched for a variant noun in B that matched the set criteria, which are introduced in the following section.

3.3 Methods

The selection of noun variants for analysis was informed by three main criteria. First, all significantly reorganised or reworded lines in B were not counted, even if they include lexical noun variation. An example of a significant rewording in MS B can be seen in line 6392:

- (1) And out brast of þat watir a stronde (SV)
 Oute of þe stone brast a flode (B)

(Horrall 1978, l. 6392)

Second, only those B variants were included that show discernible difference in the noun's root lexeme compared to its counterpart in SV. Instances of variation where the core noun is the same in SV and B, but the only difference is in, for instance, an inflectional ending, plural form, or the inclusion of a definite or indefinite article, were excluded from the data:

- (2) Lady she is of peples alle (SV)
 Lady she is of peple alle (B)

(Horrall 1978, l. 101)

- (3) Thonder fyre 3yueþ mon his sizte (SV)
 Thonder fyre 3yueþ a man his sizte (B)

(Horrall 1978, l. 539)

And third, the exclusion of non-lexical variants counted out B readings which appear to be different spellings of their SV counterparts. This variation is in the category of dialectal variation as defined by Laing and Williamson (2004, 86). There are instances of remarkably close spellings or dialectal forms included in the apparatus:

- (4) And þour3e significacioun (SV)
 And þour3e singnificacion (B)

(Horrall 1978, l. 3380)

Both the B and SV readings are recorded Middle English forms of the same lexical item; signification (*OED*, s.v. “signification,” n. forms), and it is unclear how such variants found their way into the text of the *Southern Version* if the stated goal of the editors was, as Horrall puts it, to exclude “differences of dialect or spelling” from the editorial apparatus (Horrall 1978, 26). Without delving on the topic for too long, all cases of where the B variant is simply an alternate spelling or form of its SV counterpart, were not included in the data. The focus of this thesis is specifically on lexical variation.

When a lexical variant matching the criteria was found, the first resource used to confirm the meaning of the word was the glossary provided in fifth volume of the *Southern Version of Cursor Mundi* (Eldredge and Klinck 2000, 205–263). The glossary lists words in the *Southern Version* that are obsolete or that have experienced semantic shift, which made it the primary resource for all semantic interpretation. If the noun in question did not appear in the glossary, the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) and the online version of the Middle English

Dictionary (MED) were consulted to find the meaning of the word. The OED was then used to confirm the reading, and to supply all necessary data for the study.

Using the data provided by the OED, all SV nouns and B variants were labelled regarding their etymological background, synonymy between each other, and status within Present Day English (PDE). In terms of PDE, three descriptions were assigned to the nouns: obsolete, in use, and other. The third category contains words that were not obsolete but were described as chiefly dialectal, archaic, or poetic by the OED. In the case of MS B, this category also contains those nouns that were classified as scribal mistakes.

4 Results and analysis

4.1 Vocabulary

Out of the sample size of six thousand lines, 111 instances of B noun variation were found that met the criteria mentioned in section 3.3. Within the 111 instances of variation there are 93 unique SV nouns and 93 unique B nouns, meaning that some words were repeatedly omitted, and some were repeatedly added in MS B.

In regard to etymological background, there are no substantial differences between the two groups. The only two noteworthy differences are that MS B favours more French and Latinate vocabulary (19 in SV against 30 in B), and SV contains more loanwords of Scandinavian origin (seven in SV against four in B).

Table 2 shows in alphabetical order the nouns that the B scribes substituted more than once:

Table 2 Nouns that were repeatedly substituted from MS B

SV noun item	No. of times substituted in MS B
au3te	3
benisoun	2
derner, dernere	2
eern, ern	3
elde	2
felle	2
licam	3
lord, lordes	4
menske	2
merkenes	3
sted, stide	2

According to the OED, aside from one item in Table 2 (*lord, lordes*), every single one of the SV nouns that B omitted more than once is either obsolete or otherwise rare in PDE, i.e. archaic, poetic, or dialectal. Table 3 presents the results when all 93 unique nouns from both SV and B are categorised from this perspective:

Table 3. Obsolescence of the substituted SV nouns and B variants in terms of PDE

	Nouns still in use	Obsolete nouns	Other
SV	42 (45%)	28 (30%)	23 (25%)
MS B	67 (72%)	13 (14%)	13 (14%)

The SV nouns that are absent in B seem to contain more archaic and dialectal forms, which were probably inherited from the earlier northern manuscripts (see Figure 1). The scribes of MS B appear as either type B or C scribes as defined by McIntosh (1973, 61); they were acting as translators and substituted, at least partially, the unfamiliar lexis of their exemplar to a familiar one.

It is important to note that the items in Table 2 were not all substituted systematically in MS B, they are simply the nouns that were substituted more than once. Line 3616 contains a noun that was substituted twice in B (both times to *blissyng*), but in this line it goes unedited:

(5) And þou shalt haue my benisoun (B)

(Horrall 1978, l. 3616)

Despite this, the vocabulary of MS B appears closer to PDE than the language which is found in the SV group. Two reasons can be found for this phenomenon: geography and age. The end of the Middle English period was marked by the gradual move towards standardisation of the written language, and out of that process a language variety known as the Chancery Standard, which is the predecessor to modern written English, emerged as the most prominent (Strang [1970] 1989, 161). The Chancery Standard was shaped by the style of English spoken in London, which was partly influenced by the East Midlands dialect (Strang [1970] 1989, 162). As was previously established, the B scribes were also probably influenced by that same dialect. The Chancery Standard began to appear in official documents around 1430 (Strang [1970] 1989, 163), which would make its emergence partially simultaneous with the production of MS B (see Table 1).

MS B is also the youngest CM copy along with L. MS B is inscribed with the date Jan. 1. 1442 (Horrall 1978, 17), which would make the time gap between the production of HT and B somewhere around 30 to 50 years. There is a possibility that a part of the lexicon present in

SV had experienced changes, as the time period when MSS H and T were copied was “[i]n vocabulary [...] probably one of steady but modest gains, and dramatic losses” (Strang [1970] 1989, 184). When the dialectal situation is also taken into account, it seems likely that, about half a century later, the B scribes could find a part of the vocabulary of their exemplar as unfamiliar.

4.2 Synonymous and non-synonymous variation

In this thesis, synonymous variation is defined as instances of variation where the SV noun and B variant show near-equivalent OED definitions. 74 lines out of the 111 lines studied were marked as containing synonymous nouns in SV and B, which means that the majority of variation is synonymous. Line 6032 contains an example of synonymous variation:

(6) þat he wol do þis þunder cees (SV)

 þat he wol þis wedyr cees (B)

(Horrall 1978, l. 6032)

þunder in SV should be interpreted as ‘thunderstorm’ or ‘storm’ rather than simply PDE “thunder” (OED, s.v. “thunder,” n. sense 1.d). This reading is favoured because the OED entry for sense 1.d of “thunder” cites line 6019 of the *Cursor Mundi*, and line 6032 refers to the same subject; the seventh plague of Egypt. *Wedyr* in this context is also understood to have a negative connotation, and this variant should not be read as PDE “weather” but rather “adverse, unpleasant, hurtful, or destructive condition of the atmosphere” (OED, s.v. “weather,” n. sense 1.g). Line 6032 is interpreted to contain synonymous variation, and it was marked accordingly in the data.

Non-synonymous variation takes less effort to spot. These variants can change the meaning of the line, which could be a reason why they appear less often:

(7) þat þese breþere pleyed same (SV)

 þat þese chyl dyrn pleyed in same (B)

(Horrall 1978, l. 3025)

As discussed previously, both correction and translation can be linked to synonymous variation. For instance, line 6032 can be seen as correction by the way of paraphrase, as the scribes choose more commonplace or generalising words to make the text simpler or more understandable for their audiences (Wakelin 2014, 190).

Variation in line 6032 can also be read as dialectal translation; *bunder* could have had a slightly different meaning to the audiences of MS B than SV. The first OED recorded use of “thunder” in the sense of a storm is from the CM text in MS C, a northern manuscript (OED, s.v. “thunder,” n. sense 1.d). It is possible that this definition of “thunder” was used more in the northern dialects, and the word may have had different connotation in the dialect of the B scribes, and this led them to clarify the language of their exemplar.

On the other hand, non-synonymous variation more difficult to interpret. Line 3025 talks about the biblical figures Isaac and Ishmael. In the Bible, they are half-brothers and in their early youth during the events described (Gen. 21:1–10), which means that both the SV and B readings are accurate in terms of content. *Chyldyrn* and *breþere* are dissimilar by appearance and sound, which crosses out the possibility of a mistake resulting from internal dictation. Likewise, the word *chyldyrn* does not appear physically near line 3025, which rules out eyeskip as well. This variant is by all accounts an original reading to B, confirmed by viewing the same line in MS G, the northern manuscript which shares the most similarities with the southern manuscripts (see Figure 1).

(8) þat þise breþer þai plaid samen (G)

(Morris [1874] 1961, l. 3025)

More so than line in 6032, the B variant in line 3025 appears as pointless rewording, however it does reveal something about the attitude of the B scribes toward the CM. Scribes who would drift into paraphrase could be said to value substance over style. Since they were often copying something for practical use, the exact word choice and word order was of no particular interest to them (Wakelin 2014, 190). Furthermore, the large quantity of synonymous variation in MS B seems to support this argument; the B scribes were perhaps

more concerned with communicating the ideas and moral lessons of the CM, rather than its diction. Non-synonymous variation also includes instances where the B scribes appear to correct the content of their exemplar, rather than its language. This phenomenon is discussed in the next section.

4.3 Corrective variation

As previously mentioned, a culture of correction was omnipresent in the scribal activity of the ME period. MS B is no exception, and some lines can be seen as containing a corrective spirit when examined closely. Confirming a correction requires comprehensive analysis, and for the sake of brevity only one example is discussed in detail. Lines 6993–6994 describe the biblical figure Caleb, spelled *Calef* in SV and B:

(9) Calef coom aftir Iosue / of israel demer was he (SV)

Calef coom aftir Iosue / of israel þe rote was he (B)

(Horrall 1978, ll. 6993–6994)

The title *demer*, ‘judge’, is substituted for *þe rote*, probably with the sense of ‘scion’ or ‘descendant’ (*OED*, s.v. “root,” n. sense II.1.b). The most likely explanation for this substitution is that Caleb, contrary to what the line in SV states, was not one of the named twelve judges of the Old Testament. The younger brother of Caleb, Othniel, was the first of the biblical judges according to the narrative (Judg. 3:9). Othniel is mentioned soon after, where he is erroneously referred to as the son of Caleb:

(10) Calef had a sone othomel / he demed þe folk of israel (SV)

(Horrall 1978, ll. 7001–7002)

The reason for the substitution must not have been that the B scribe found the word *demer* unfamiliar, as the terminology of *demer*, *deme* etc. is consistent during the segment where the CM-poet lists the twelve judges. Line 6994 is the only time that the B scribe varies the terminology in any form (Horrall 1978, ll. 6993–7082).

This instance of variation can be interpreted as an example of the B scribes correcting the terminology of their exemplar. *Demer*, ‘judge’, is in this context a specific term denoting a small group of people in the Bible, and it is likely that the B scribe would at close reading notice the title applied being inaccurately. Having noticed this mistake, the scribe then produced a new title for Caleb, a word that has the added benefit of allowing him to leave the rest of the line unchanged.

However, it is noteworthy that the “correcting” B scribe failed to notice the apparent mistake of the reference to Othniel as Caleb’s son, which is a mistake repeated in every single southern manuscript, as Horrall points out (1978, 400). The B scribes’ correcting behaviour appears to be inconsistent, as they sometimes included corrections in the text they were producing, but also repeated mistakes inherited from their exemplar. This would make MS B a typical manuscript copy in this regard; irregular in its correcting attitude (Wakelin 2014, 44).

4.4 Variation in the rhyming position

Out of 111 B variants, 35 appeared as the final word in the line, or in other words, in the rhyming position. The number could be seen as quite high, since scribes were often hesitant to substitute or edit rhyming words (McIntosh 1973, 61).

Readers of Middle English texts appreciated rhymes and held them to a high regard (Sawyer 2024, 90), and the B scribes appear to have carefully avoided creating any breaks in the rhyming structure of the poem. When viewed side by side, the majority of the variant B nouns can be read to be phonetically close enough to their SV counterparts to not disturb the rhyme scheme:

- (11) And o godhede in vnite (SV)
 And o god in trenite (B)

(Horrall 1978, l. 6342)

- (12) Þat coupe counsel of þis tibinge (SV)
 Þat coupe 3eve counsel of þis þing (B)

(Fowler 1990, l. 10 704)

(13) þei were forwondride of þat liȝt (SV)þei were awondred of þat sight (B)

(Mous 1986, l. 18 163)

(14) And noþing loueþ more þen oure kynde (SV)And noþing loueþ he more þen mankynd (B)

(Eldredge and Klinck 2000, l. 21 896)

However, there seems to be rare exceptions, as only one instance of variation can be identified as having broken the rhyme scheme:

(15) Good was þe world in þat ceesoun (SV)Good was þe world in þat tyme (B)

(Horrall 1978, l. 3509)

In line 3509, the most probable cause for the disturbance is that the B scribe misidentified the line above this line as its rhyming pair, which has the word *dynere* in its rhyming position. What the B scribe did not consider is that this substitution leaves the next line without a rhyming pair. Additionally, the B scribe did not edit the rhyming word of that following line, *benison*, into a variant that would rhyme and complete the couplet.

In general, the evidence suggests that the B scribes seem to have gone through appreciable effort to produce variants that match the sound of their exemplar. However, it must be noted that there is a possibility that some of the variation in the rhyming position could be mistakes resulting from moments of misremembrance during internal self-dictation. Some of the B variation that matches its SV counterpart in sound and visual appearance could very well be unintentional, while still appearing to the reader as grammatically and logically valid variation.

4.5 Scribal mistakes in MS B

Out of the 111 instances of variation examined, 15 lines in MS B were identified as containing a probable mistake, which would make as many as 13,5% of the variant nouns unintentional. This category includes misspellings and lexical variants that are not logically compatible with the rest of the line. For example, when in line 6669 the B scribe substituted *swinke*, meaning labour (*OED*, s.v. “swink,” n. sense 1.a), with *stynk*, the meaning of the line becomes confused:

- (16) Now shul 3e of þo domes here /
 Þat god 3af to moyses sere /
 Alle to telle hit were gret swinke /
 But summe are gode to here me þinke (SV)

(Horrall 1978, ll. 6667–6670)

To paraphrase the above lines, the poet intends to speak of the *domes* of Moses, meaning ‘commandments’ (Eldredge and Klinck 2000, 216), but expounding on the whole story would be too great a task: *gret swinke*. The B variant here is grammatically correct but logically faulty variation, as no OED definition of *stynk* seems to work with this line. It is in the realm of possibility that the B scribe used the word *stynk* in a figurative use for an unpleasant thing or task, but the OED’s recorded senses all relate to smell in some way for both the verb and the noun (*OED*, s.v. “stynk,” n. & “stynk,” v.). Eyeskip is not a viable cause in this instance, so the most likely explanation is that this variant was caused by a misspelling or a misreading.

Another example of a probable mistake in B is the curious variant that appears in line 18 022:

- (17) And nayles þour3e feet & hondis styngre (SV)
 And nayles þour3e fest & hondis wring (B)

(Mous 1986, l. 18 022)

This line talks about how nails were driven through Jesus’ *feet* and *hondis*, ‘hands’. Here MS B gives a strange alternate reading of *fest*. The only OED definition of *fest* that could work in

the context of the line is a ME period spelling of *fist*, in the now obsolete sense of a hand that is not closed (*OED*, s.v. “fist,” n. sense 2.a). This reading, too, appears confusing when read in the context of the line; the scribe would be repeating the same concept twice. On the other hand, there is a chance that this is a stylistic choice. It is possible that the B scribe was attempting to create a heightened poetic effect with a repeating double noun pattern, which is a structure present in a few other ME poems (Sawyer 2024, 39).

However, this would be an odd target for correction, and line 18 022 is the only occasion in its entire subsection where a variant that creates a repetition appears (Mous 1986, ll. 17 977–18 024). When the similarity of sound and visual appearance of *fest* and *feet* are taken into account, a scribal misspelling or a misreading becomes the most coherent explanation.

5 Conclusion

The B scribes encountered an altered text; the *Cursor Mundi* had already been reorganized into its southern form, already distinct from the northern manuscripts in terms of content. But out of every single southern copy, MS B seems to be the only one, at certain points, to also radically revise the language and terminology of the CM. It is clear that MS B contains more variation than a typical cognate copy, but unfortunately this can be only confirmed by viewing the direct exemplar of MS B, which is, as previously mentioned, unknown and lost to time.

MS B has been studied before, mainly from the standpoint of textual criticism, but the amount of linguistic investigation into it is regrettably scarce. There are multiple possible perspectives to consider, each of which would add significant depth to answering the question of the manuscript variation found in MS B. For example, the other texts included in MS B besides the CM should be studied for variation. It would be interesting to see if some patterns of variation found in the version of *Cursor Mundi* in MS B would repeat themselves in the sections containing material from those other sources.

The apparent phenomenon that the scribes of MS B “updated” the language of the CM should be researched further. The results in section 4.1 point out that the language of MS B leans towards being closer to PDE than the language of the other southern manuscripts. A large part of the substituted vocabulary seems to be obsolete or in other ways rare in terms of PDE, which suggests that the B scribes may have had a preference for contemporary language, but unfortunately this thesis was only able to give an overview of this subject. I believe that it would be possible to answer this question thoroughly, by, for example, comparing the vocabulary of both SV and B against other similarly dated writing from the same dialect area.

Qualitatively, the variation found in MS B is typical for a text that is open for scribal revision: the variation consists of an irregular mix of corrections, translations, and mistakes. However, I hope that some examples that I have provided, especially in sections 4.1 and 4.3, demonstrate that some of this variation was not done entirely without method. In summary, the results of this thesis show that the scribes of MS B did indeed alter their text, both intentionally and unintentionally, but this so-called revision cannot be considered systematic with present evidence.

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