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journal or publication title	関西大学東西学術研究所紀要
volume	52
page range	A79-A91
year	2019-04-01
URL	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10112/00017134">http://hdl.handle.net/10112/00017134</a>

# Scribal glosses to *Elde* and *Earth* in London, British Library, MS Harley 913

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London, British Library, MS Harley 913, written in the early fourteenth century, contains a Middle English verse piece, *Elde*, about the misery of old age, and a bilingual poem, *Earth*, in English and Latin on the theme that humans composed of dust will return to dust. In the margins of these works are found eight glosses entered by the scribe of the two poems. What gives these glosses potential significance is that they are the only such marginal additions in the manuscript. This paper examines these glosses for clues about why the scribe entered them.

**Key words:** MS Harley 913, the fourteenth century, Middle English, Latin, glosses,  
*Elde*, *Earth*

London, British Library, MS Harley 913, written in the 1330s in Waterford, Ireland,<sup>1)</sup> contains *Elde*,<sup>2)</sup> a Middle English poem about how old people's physical condition deteriorates as they advance towards death. It is composed in a first person voice marked by a self-tormenting tone. The poem sounds sad and miserable, but at the same time it invites sniggers: because of old age the poet's body does not function as it used to, which prevents him from pursuing sexual pleasure, although he desires to do so.<sup>3)</sup> Elsewhere in the same manuscript is a bilingual poem, *Earth*,<sup>4)</sup> which addresses the familiar medieval theme that humans are composed of dust and will return to dust. It comprises fourteen six-line rhymed stanzas written alternately in Middle English and in Latin. Since the contents of the English stanzas correspond more or less to those of the Latin, it can be inferred that one is a translation of the other. What is striking about this poem is that not only does it engage heavily in wordplay in every stanza in both languages, but also, that each line, both English and Latin, maintains the same number of syllables with regular internal rhymes. It was obviously composed by a highly skilled poet, who had a good command of both English and Latin vocabulary. Evidently, *Elde* was originally followed by *Earth* because in the present manuscript pagination *Elde* is located on fols 54v and 62r, while *Earth* comes immediately after on fols 62r–63v. The sequence was clearly disturbed when the manuscript was rebound.<sup>5)</sup>

In the margins of these works are found eight glosses entered by the scribe of the two poems (and indeed most of the manuscript). What gives these glosses potential significance is that they are the only such additions in the manuscript. This paper examines these glosses for clues about why the scribe entered them.

The first gloss, *id est puer* (that is, *puer*) in Latin, is written above the word *schelon* in line 32 of *Elde* (Italics are mine).<sup>6)</sup>

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1) Fletcher, "The date", 306.

2) Turville-Petre, *Poems*, pp. 74–6; Lucas, *Anglo-Irish Poems*, pp. 158–63; Heuser, *Die Kildare-Gedichte*, pp. 167–72.

3) The theme was very common in medieval literature. Cf. "Reeve's Prologue" of Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. Turville-Petre assumes that a monologue of an old man about old age and physical deterioration are modelled on "The Elegies" of Maximianus written in the sixth century (Turville-Petre, *Poems*, p. 74; Juster, A.M., *The Elegies*).

4) Turville-Petre, *Poems*, pp. 87–90; Lucas, *Anglo-Irish Poems*, pp. 168–73; Heuser, *Die Kildare-Gedichte*, pp. 176–83.

5) Wada, 'Seven Sins', pp. 53–60; Lucas, "Reconstructing a disarranged manuscript", 286–99.

6) The text presented in this paper is based on Turville-Petre's edition. The conventional translation is given to

Y ne mai no more of loue done,

Mi pilkoc pisseþ on mi schone,

*id est puer*

Vch *schenlon* me bischrew.

(ll. 30–32)

(I am no longer able to make love, my penis pisses on my shoes, every rascal curses me.)

*Schenlon* may not have been a very common word since the present example is the only citation of the word in *MED*. It may have been an argot or a dialect word particular to a local region. That would probably explain why the scribe attempted an explanation with the gloss *puer*. *MED* defines the word as “a rascal” and suggests (with a query) a faulty etymology, based on a combination of *shēnde* n (=shame; harm) and a suffix *-lou*, a variant of *-leu(e)*. According to *MED*, *-leu(e)* or *-lou* is “a rare derivational suffix in adjectives”. The explanation does not seem very convincing. Wright and Halliwell interpreted the word as “rascal, vile person”.<sup>7)</sup> Herbert Coleridge referred to Wright and Halliwell with the added suggestion that it is “Probably a corruption of Dut. Schelm”, a form which is, however, quite different from *schenlon*.<sup>8)</sup>

Another possible explanation of the word is that in the Hiberno-English milieu in which Harley 913 was composed, *schenlon* might well have brought to mind the surname *Scanlon*, a reduced, Anglicized form of Irish *Ó Scannláin*, “descendant of *Scannlán*”; *Scannlán* is a diminutive form of *Scannal*, which is a reduced Anglicized form of Irish *Scandal* and a byname which originally mean “contention”.<sup>9)</sup> For example, Scanlan Mór was the second Christian King of Osraige or Ossory (d.c. 643), and Máel Pátraic Ua Scannail, or Patrick O’Scanlan, was made Primate of Ireland in 1261 and Archbishop of Armagh in 1261–70.<sup>10)</sup> On the evidence of the gloss, *puer* (“lad” or “servant”), one might speculate that its lemma *schenlon* originally referred to an eponymous *Scannlán* whose

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lines 31 to 32 here.

7) Wright and Halliwell-Phillipps, *Reliquiae Antiquae*, p. 90.

8) Coleridge, *A Glossarial Index*, p. 46.

9) Hanks, *Dictionary of American Family Names*. We know an Irish servant, Nancy “Scenlon” at the age of 24, arrived as an immigrant in New York in the mid-nineteenth century (Glazier and Tepper, *The Famine Immigrants*, p. 549).

10) Cosgrove (ed.), *A New History*, p. 758; O’Hart, “Irish Pedigrees”.

name became anglicized as a generic noun with a derogatory connotation.

One such candidate is mentioned in *Annála Connacht* (The Annals of Connacht) sub anno 1249, which records that “Donnchad son of Anmchad son of Donnchad O Gillapatraic, the bravest and most bountiful captain of all the Ossory from the time of Colman son of Bieene Caech and Scanlan Mor son of Cenn Faelad, was killed by the Galls [*sc.* Anglo-Normans] this year.” (underlining mine)<sup>11)</sup> The annals, composed in Irish, were copied in the mid-sixteenth century, based on an older source.<sup>12)</sup> Scanlan Mór might have, therefore, still been well remembered in 1249, although he lived more than six hundred years before. He was obviously a very popular king since *mór* means “great” in Irish; in other words, he was called “Scanlan the great”.<sup>13)</sup> He was also reputedly a friend of St Columcille (521–597). However, one wonders about the likelihood that the name and the achievements of this ancient king of Ossory would be known to the Anglo-Norman community of the thirteenth and the fourteenth century.

The other Scanlan mentioned above, Scanlan, Máel Pátraic Ua Scannail, was the 66th successor of Saint Patrick, who enlarged and beautified the cathedral of Armagh in 1268. The Annals of the Four Masters relate in the entry of the year 1270, “Maelpatrick O’Scannal, Archbishop of Armagh, went over to the King of England: the King received him honourably; and he returned home with great privileges”.<sup>14)</sup> Evidently, he maintained excellent relationship with the England crown. It should be noted that the Archbishop also founded at Armagh a house for Franciscans, the religious order whose influence is strongly evident in the contents of MS Harley 913.<sup>15)</sup> Again, however, the case for a connection between *shenlon* and Irish *Scandal* is tenuous at best.

Since there is no way to be sure about the accuracy of the gloss *puer*, much less to determine if it belongs with *shenlon*, a third line of enquiry is proposed here. I suggest that this problematic word is a combination of Middle English *chanel* “a gutter, drain, or ditch”<sup>16)</sup> (borrowed from Old French *chanel* or another form *chenel*)<sup>17)</sup> + a French diminutive suffix *-on*,<sup>18)</sup> which gives *chanel-* or

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11) Freeman, *Annála*, pp. 100–101.

12) The Royal Irish Academy, “Annals”.

13) Hennessy, *The Annals*, n. 2, p. 390.

14) Corpus of Electronic Texts Edition.

15) Lucas, *Anglo-Irish Poems*, p. 19.

16) *MED*, **chanel** (n.) Also **can(n)el**, **kanel** [OF **canel**, **canel**].

17) Godefroy, Dictionnaire, **CHENEL**.

18) Another example of *-on* is *chaton* (kitten) from *chat* (cat).

*chenel-on*, namely, “a little groove”. Arguably, this could have been a slang word for the vagina. It fits the context of the poem very well, both metrically and contextually. Thus, the first consonant of the subject, *schenlon* (voiceless palato-alveolar fricative /ʃ/), alliterates with its verb *beshrew* (with stress on the second syllable) in the same line. Moreover, with this sexual meaning *schenlon* suits well with the rest of the line, conveying the idea of the poet’s impotency. Note also that *canal*, from which *channel* derives, is used as a contemporary sexual euphemism.<sup>19)</sup> Therefore, lines 30 to 32 could be translated: “I am no longer able to make love, my penis pisses on my shoes, every vagina curses me.”

A few lines below *puer*, occurs the second gloss, *id est debile* (that is, *debile*), above the word, *lewe*, in line 35.

*id est debile*

Mi bodi wexit *lewe*:  
 When I bihond on mi schennen,  
 Min [ein] dimmiþ, al fordwynnen,  
 Mi frendis waxiþ fewe.

(My body grows *weak*: when I look upon my shins, my eyes grow dim, entirely wasted away, my friends grow few in number.)

*Lewe* means “weak, feeble, lame” conveying the same meaning as the Latin gloss *debile* (“lame, feeble, frail, weak”).<sup>20)</sup> In Middle English the lemma usually occurs as the second element in compounds, for example, *limlæw* (‘injury to a limb’) in Old English.<sup>21)</sup> The scribe/glossator might

19) Dalzell and Victor, *The Concise New Partridge Dictionary*, p. 491. Note that *MED* gives the only citation from this poem for the word *pilkoc* (in line 31) as a generic term and it does not fully explain its etymology. The situation is very similar to the case of *schenlon*. Incidentally, *An Anglo-Norman Dictionary* gives definitions: “cur, scoundrel!” for the word *chenaille*, *chenaile*, “channel, bed; gutter; passage” for *chanel*, and “(botanical term) hound’s tongue” for *chenlange*, *chenlaunge*, *chenelange*, *chenelonge*.

20) The subject of the sentence, *bodi*, derives from Old English *bodig*, a nominative, neuter, singular noun, which accords with a form *debile* of *debilis* in Latin.

21) Bosworth-Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*.

have found it unusual, and therefore worthy of comment, since it appears here as an independent morpheme. *MED* gives only three citations including one from *Elde*.

The remaining six glosses are found in the second poem, *Earth*, and are also entered by the main scribe of the manuscript. The first is *festine* in Latin, written, on the right margin, close to the English word *frow* in line three. The first two complementary stanzas of the poem are as follows:

Whan erþ haþ erþ iwonne wiþ wow,  
 Ðan erþ mai of erþ nim hir inow;  
 Erþ vp erþ falliþ fol *frow*, *festine*  
 Erþ toward erþ delful him drow.  
 Of erþ þou were makid, and mon þou art ilich;  
 In on erþ awaked þe pore and þe riche.

Terram per iniuriam cum terra lucratur,  
 Tunc de terra cepiam<sup>22)</sup> terra sorciatur.  
 Terra super aream *subito* frustratur;  
 Se taxit<sup>23)</sup> ad aridam terraque tristatur.  
 De terra plasmaris, es similis virroni,  
 Vna terra pauperes ac dites sunt proni.

(When man made of earth has acquired earthly goods with anguish, then earth can take her sufficiency from the earth. Man made of earth falls upon the earth in a very fragile state, a man made of earth moves himself miserably towards the earthen grave. You were shaped of the dust of the earth, and, man, you are all equal—the poor and the rich lie flat in the same earth.

When earth gains earth wrongfully, then let earth acquire plenty from that earth; earth upon

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22) The word has to be *copiam*.

23) The word should be *taxat* or pret. *taxavit*.

the floor is quickly reduced to nothing, it drew itself to dry (earth) and is made sad by earth. You are formed from earth; you are like Virro<sup>24)</sup>—the poor and the rich lie prostrate in the same earth.)

The reason why the author of the poem chose the word *frow* is obviously for alliteration with *fol fallith* in the same line, while, at the same time, for rhyme with *wow*, *inow*, and *drow* in lines one, two and four. The word *frow* was not only a very good choice for the author to complete the meter, but also its meaning perfectly fits the context. *MED* defines *frow* as “? *adv.* in crumbling fashion, as dust”. The definition is corroborated by Joseph Wright’s *English Dialect Dictionary*, which defines the word “Of wood: brittle, easily broken, apt to break off short. Of soil: light, spongy”. The latter meaning, associated with soil or earth, conveys well their brittle and friable quality. Moreover, judging by the question mark at the beginning of the *MED* definition and the fact that the unique example it cites is this one from *Earth*, we can assume that the word *frow* was not widely used and that its rarity prompted the scribe to supply the gloss, *festine*, to the word. According to Wright, *frow*, a variation of *frough*, is a form used in the North Country or the area in England north of the Humber, as well as Hampshire and Berkshire.

While not a precise translation of *frow*, *festine* (“quickly, immediately”) broadly conveys the effect when the fragile human body falls on the earth. It also matches the meaning of the Latin word *subito* (“suddenly, unexpectedly”) found in the corresponding part of the following stanza in Latin, in line nine. One wonders if the scribe referred to the Latin stanza before entering the gloss.

Another Latin gloss explains the English word, *muntid*, in line 16. Here follows the stanza containing the word as well as the stanza in Latin which follows immediately after and delivers almost the same contents:

Erþ geþ on erþ wrikkend in weden,  
 Erþ toward erþ wormes to feden;  
 Erþ berriþ to erþ al is lif-deden;  
 When erþ is in erþe, heo *muntid* þi meden.      *metitur*

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24) Wada, “The bilingual poem”, 45.



When erþ is in erþe, þe rof is on þe chynne;  
 Pan schullen an hundred wormes wroten on þe skin.

Vesta pergit uestibus super uestem vare,<sup>25)</sup>  
 Artatur et uermibus vesta pastum dare;  
 Ac cum gestis omnibus ad uestam migrare;  
 Cum uesta sit scrobibus, quis wlt suspirare?  
 Cum sit uesta ponita, doma tangit mentum;  
 Tunc in cute candida verrunt uermes centum.     *trahunt*

(Man goes about in the world, moving here and there in garments; man is destined for the grave with worms. Man carries to the grave all the deeds of his life. When man is in the earth, it determines your just deserts. When man is in the grave the roof rests on the chin. Then a hundred worms shall wriggle on the skin.

Vesta (earth)<sup>26)</sup> marches in clothes on Vesta (earth) in a straddling manner, and Vesta (earth) is compelled to provide fodder for worms, and to journey with all its deeds to Vesta (earth); when Vesta (earth) is in a grave, who wants to sigh? When Vest (earth) is put in place, a roof touches the chin; then a hundred worms writhe over the pure white skin.)

Line four of the third Middle English stanza is usually translated: “When earth is in the earth, she (=earth) determines your just deserts.” Turville-Petre objects that it does not make contextual sense and that the word *heo* represents an original *ho* (“who”). In support he points out that *heo* as feminine third person singular pronoun does not appear elsewhere in the whole manuscript, while at the same time the interrogative pronoun *quis* appears in the corresponding part of the Latin stanza.<sup>27)</sup> He posits, therefore, that the original sentence would have been “when erþ is in erþe *ho* muntid þi meden?” And he interprets it to mean “when the earth is in the grave, who pays your wages?,” in keeping with his notes and glossary which translate *muntid* as “pays” and *meden*, “rewards,

25) The word should be *varie*.

26) For the use of the word *Vesta*, Wada, “The bilingual poem”, 46.

27) Turville-Petre, *Poems*, p. 134.

wages”.<sup>28)</sup>

While it is true that an interrogative pronoun, *quis*, is in the parallel Latin, the meaning does not correspond to that of the equivalent line in Middle English. The pronoun, *hoe*, need not necessarily be a mistake for *ho*, since it may refer to *eorþe* which was feminine in Old English and survived as such when it was transcribed in this manuscript in the 1330s. Turville-Petre’s observation that one does not find the form anywhere else in the manuscript, is hardly sufficient to support his claim that the form *heo* cannot be the original reading, given that the works in Harley 913 are a collection of all manner of writings,<sup>29)</sup> probably originating in different regions. Moreover, they do not seem to have been composed by one author. Since the stanza in English mentions “all his life’s deeds which man carries to the grave”, it seems better to translate the sentence in question as a statement, “Earth (*heo*) ordains (*muntid*) the ultimate reward of vice or virtue (*mede*)”. Note also that *MED* gives a definition of *minten mede* as “propose or offer a bribe; determine (someone’s) just deserts” (1. (b)) and refers to this marginal gloss.

The reason why the scribe wrote down the gloss *metitur* to *muntid* might be that he also was puzzled about how to interpret the sentence “heo muntid thi meden”. *Metitur*, third-person, singular, present tense, could be read either *metior* (I measure, judge) or *meto* (I gather, pluck off). Admittedly *meto* could make good sense with the meaning “Earth harvests your worldly gains”, but in the present context the scribe probably intended *metior*, since it has the support of the lemma *muntid* or *minten*. Incidentally, according to *MED* the form, “*munte(n)*”, is “chiefly south and West Midland”. That may be why the scribe did not understand the meaning of the verb. Nor would the corresponding sentence in the Latin stanza, “*quis* wlt suspirare?” (who wants to sigh?) have helped him solve the problem.

Another Latin gloss, this time to a Latin word in the fourth stanza which has been quoted above. The gloss, *trahunt*, is written to *verrunt* in the sentence, “Tunc in cute candida *verrunt* uermes centum” (Then a hundred worms cover the pure white skin). *Verrunt* (<*verro*) means “(they) sweep along” or “cover,” whereas *trahunt* (<*traho*), “(they) draw along”. The English equivalent to this Latin word, *wroten* (“to writhe”), is found in “þan schullen an hundred wormes *wroten* on þe skin”

28) Turville-Petre, *Poems*, p. 153.

29) Lucas, *Anglo-Irish Poems*, pp. 14–21; Fitzmaurice and Little, *Materials*, pp. 121–6. For a more detailed list of Latin texts in the manuscript, see Cartlidge, “Festivity”, 33–52.

(Then a hundred worms must wriggle on the skin) of the preceding English stanza. The scribe supplies the gloss, *traho*, presumably because the verb was much more widely known and used, whereas *verro* meaning “I sweep along or to cover” usually occurs in poetic contexts, which readers might not have been familiar with.

A fourth gloss is Latin “*lucrataris*” (Heuser, “*lucrabaris*”), a form of the second-person singular of the imperfect subjunctive of *lucror* (I win or gain), to the English word *wonne* (gained) in line 30. The gloss is put on the left margin of the line:

Of erþ þow were bigun, on erþ þou schalt end;  
*lucrataris* Al þat þow in erþ *wonne*, to erþ schal hit wend.

(Of dust you were created, in dust you must end. All that you gained on earth must return to the earth.)

Again, nothing seems complicated morphologically or syntactically. The scribe might have wished to clarify that “*wonne*” is the past tense of “*winnen*”, given that almost all the other verbs in the text are in the present tense and perhaps also to avoid confusing it with the homonymic verb, “*wonne*” (to live), which would not contextually make sense here.

It is intriguing that another Latin gloss, *lucratur*, the third-person singular present indicative, again of the verb *lucror* (“I win”), occurs above the English word, *get*, on line 37:

*lucratur*  
 Erþ *get* hit on erþ maistri and mi3te,  
 Al we beþ erþ, to erþ we beþ idi3te

(Man made of earth achieves sovereignty and power on earth. We are all dust, we are destined for the earth.)

According to *MED*, the form *get* can be the singular third person present or past tense, which might

explain the Latin gloss with its present tense as meant simply to disambiguate the tense of *get*. These two passages have much the same idea that we are all dust and will all return to the earth from which we can take nothing with us. The scribe possibly went back to *wonne* on line 30 in order to check the tense just in case, since the lines share a very similar context. Incidentally, the pronoun *hit* here is pleonastic.

The last gloss *bildip* is inserted on the upper margin adjacent to the top line of the folio. The gloss goes with the English verb *bilt*, which appears twice in the same sentence:

*bildip*

Erþ *bilt* castles, and erþe *bilt* toures.

(Earth builds castles and earth builds towers.) (l. 65)

Again this gloss may have been intended to disambiguate *bilt*, which is not past, but present tense; or perhaps the scribe did not like that the form lacks the uncontracted inflection in *-ep/-ip* which he may have considered more correct. The latter is likely to be the case since this gloss is written in English whereas the others are all in Latin, as we have seen. The equivalent passage in Latin in the next stanza containing *edificat*, third person, singular, present, supports the reading of *bilt* as present tense.<sup>30)</sup>

These eight glosses to the two poems, entered by the main scribe and all but one in Latin, point to the fact that he was certainly a very careful reader, not only conscious about lexical usage but even the tense of verbs. He was probably not a speaker of the type of English from the north country, because he does not seem to have understood the vocabulary of that area. He tended to gloss Latin poetical words with more commonly used equivalents. We can also infer that he did not directly belong to the circles in which the original author(s) of the poems originated. It is to be noted that some English words which the scribe glosses were not commonly used in Middle English, so we could surmise that they were particular to the relatively local, Hiberno-English

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30) Turville-Petre takes the form as past tense (*Poems*, p. 140).

community in Ireland.<sup>31)</sup>

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31) This research was financially supported by MEXT (the Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research or KAKENHI: 00123547 for 2018).

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