Is ‘My Lefe in a Lond’ or ‘My Lief in Londe’?  
And Does It Make a Difference?¹

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With few exceptions, we take for granted that a modern novel or short story will be identical in every copy, whether in hardcover, paperback, or anthology; indeed, a static or unchanging text, precisely the same in all or nearly all copies, is an identifying element of modernity. By contrast, an essential quality of early literature, when manuscript copies varied across time and space, is changeability, or to use linguist Bernard Cerquiglini’s term, variance. Cerquiglini argues in his 1989 Éloge de la variante (an English translation, In Praise of the Variant, appeared a decade later) that the play of similarities and differences among texts is so central to medieval writing that, in a famous phrase, it “does not produce variants; it is variance.”² That is, variety, in the form of differing manuscript readings, is at the very heart of medieval literature. Any manuscript captures a moment in the life of a text, but not its essential nature; its essence consists in variation and change.

Of course, we must have editions, standardized versions of early texts, if only to have a shared basis for discussion and interpretation. Cerquiglini himself admits that some type of edition is necessary,³ although he rejects as “Procrustean” the idea of forcing a manuscript to conform to the expectations of print.⁴ Edited texts are necessary to specialists and nonspecialists alike, opening to us the unfamiliar words and worlds of the medieval period. A
text like the *Canterbury Tales* is like a mansion with endless rooms, and editors open these rooms for readers to explore. However, editors also – intentionally or not – close off certain rooms, resolving textual problems and even making interpretive decisions before the reader first encounters the text. And sometimes, as in the texts I will describe below, editions themselves differ because of choices the editors make, revealing interpretive as well as manuscript variants.

In this essay I will use Cerquiglini’s idea of *variance* as a lens to examine a line in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, along with the lyric that provides its source, in order to explore how differences among manuscripts can affect the life, and afterlife, of a text. My broader goal is to demonstrate that even non-specialists can delve into the matter of how medieval texts are preserved, edited, and interpreted, a process that in this case entails multiple manuscripts, editors, and voices of a poem. This process of exploration can be fascinating for students and teachers alike, and – more important in my view – can give students a highly useful skill: the ability to sift information in detail and come to a reasoned conclusion.

Cerquiglini’s theories emerge from his study of medieval French literature, which has a rich oral pre-history and a daunting profusion of manuscripts, and thus are only partially applicable to Middle English texts, many of which survive in only a single manuscript. Nonetheless, his ideas are intriguingly applicable to the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, since he claims that medieval poems have a basis in utterance, or the spoken word, and a portion of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* echoes an older, oral culture. Specifically, the line on which I will focus, which modern editions identify as *Canterbury Tales* VII.2879 (“In sweete accord, ‘My lief is faren in londe!’—”) contains a tiny bit of a long-forgotten song. The line appears early in the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*, when we are first introduced to the strutting rooster Chauntecleer and his favorite
hen, Pertelote. The passage is memorable not only because of the marvelous incongruity of
chickens being in love, but also because chickens, better known for unmusical crowing and
clucking, are unlikely candidates to sing, as the narrator puts it, “in sweet accord” at all.

Here,\(^7\) followed by my transcription, is the line in context as it appears in one of the
best and earliest manuscripts of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Ellesmere:

\[
\ldots \text{he loued hyr so [that] wel was hym therwith}
\]
\[
\text{and swich a ioye was it to here hem synge}
\]
\[
\text{whan [that] the brighte sonne bigan to sprynge}
\]
\[
\text{in sweete accord my lief is faren in londe}
\]
\[
\text{ffor thilke tyne as I haue vnderstonde}
\]
\[
\text{beestes and briddes koude speke and synge}
\]

Below,\(^8\) again with transcription, is the same passage from another early and important
manuscript of the *Canterbury Tales*, the Hengwrt:

\[
\ldots \text{he loued hyr so [that] wel was hym ther with}
\]
\[
\text{but swich a ioye was it to here hem synge}
\]
\[
\text{whan [that] the brighte sonne gan to sprynge}
\]
\[
\text{in sweete acord my leef is faren in londe}
\]
\[
\text{ffor thilke tyne as I haue understonde}
\]
\[
\text{beestes and briddes koude speke and synge}
\]
ffor thilke tyme as I haue vnderstonde
beestes and briddes kouden speke and synge

These manuscripts were created within a few years of each other – very close to the year of Chaucer’s death, in 1400 – and were copied by the same scribe, Adam Pinkhurst. Yet there are three variants just within line 2879, in the spelling of *swete, accord, and lief* (that is, “dear one”). The surrounding lines contain differences in wording as well (*but and, gan and bigan*). For the most part, orthographic (that is, spelling) differences do not affect the line’s meaning (they are, as manuscript scholars would say, incidental rather than substantive), although the doubled vowels in Ellesmere’s *sweete* and *accord* might have made a slight difference in the way the line was pronounced. Yet the fact that so many variations occur in near-contemporary copies by the same hand demonstrates the great variety that Cerquiglini celebrates. In fact, line 2879 of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* appears in ten different variant forms in 22 surviving manuscripts and early printed texts. Thus, in order to study and simply to refer to the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* passage, editors weigh one source against another, ignore some (especially later-written) variants, and proffer a standardized text. In the case of this passage, the scholarly edition of Chaucer reads

> He loved hire so that wel was hym therwith.
> But swich a joye was it to here hem synge,
> Whan that the brighte sonne gan to spryng,
> In sweete accord, “My lief is faren in londe!” —
> For thilke tyme, as I have understonde,
> Beestes and briddes koude speke and synge. (VII.2876-81)

This edited version, with its modern punctuation, makes it clear that the birds are singing a specific song, or a line from a song, “My lief is faren in londe.” (Although Chaucer named many of his works, most medieval poems do not have titles; here, the line could refer to lyrics, to the name of a song, or both.)
Although it seems like a minute detail, the specifics of that song matter. Only one full (or apparently full) version of the song survives, in a manuscript that has interesting differences from both the edited Chaucer passage, cited above, and from the Ellesmere and Hengwrt versions. In this case, even an apparently incidental alteration makes a substantial difference in meaning – and, by extension, in how we might think about Chauntecleer and Pertelote, and the rooster’s perilous adventure in the tale. The single, apparently complete, version of the chickens’ song is preserved in a late-medieval manuscript at Cambridge University’s Trinity College library.¹² This manuscript is comprised of a series of little “booklets” that were copied about the year 1480 and may have been sample materials for a commercial scriptorium. According to textual scholar Linne Mooney, who has made an in-depth study of the manuscript, this short lyric is among materials that “must have been added after the initial writing” of the rest of Booklet I “to fill up blank spaces in the quires,” or sets of pages.¹³ The lyric’s continued existence, therefore, is due to a desire for efficiency in some copy-for-hire shop, its survival a matter of mere chance.

Perhaps we should not consider the preserved lyric as a separate poem, although some editors, such as R. H. Robbins, have treated it as such.¹⁴ It exists as the concluding lines, or coda, of a much longer poem addressed by a speaker to his beloved, who is called a “womanly creature” and “fayre lady.” The speaker bridges this longer poem and “My Lefe” with the line, “and for your love evermore wepyng I syng thys song.” Here is an image,¹⁵ followed by my transcription, of the seven-line poem from the Trinity College manuscript:
My lefe ys faren in a lond
Allas why ys she so
And I am so sore bound
I may nat com her to
She hath my hert in hold
Where-euer – she ryde or go
With trew loue a thousand fold[.]

Among the many variant readings of NPT 2879 one variant, attested by three manuscripts, reads “In swete acord my leef is faren a londe,” reflecting the standard edition’s *londe* as well as the Trinity’s use of the article, *a*; this is the only other evidence supporting the idea that the first line of the song contained the phrase “a lond,” a detail that will prove significant. There could, of course, have been many versions of the song; the Trinity manuscript dates from the late fifteenth century, but the poem itself must be at least 90 years older than that, since the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale* was probably written between 1387 and Chaucer’s death in 1400. And of course, because it is a song, it could have had a long life before ever being written down: it might be decades or even centuries older.

This lyric, which for convenience I’ll call “My Lefe,” is of interest to scholars, and is included in many anthologies of British literature, primarily because of its connection to Chaucer’s story of sweet-singing chickens. One version of “My Lefe” has appeared in the *Norton Anthology of British Literature* since its first edition in 1962. It reads
My lief is faren in londe---
Allas, why is she so?
And I am so sore bonde
I may nat come her to.
She hath myn herte in holde
Wherever she ride or go---
With trewe love a thousand folde.

The first line of this edition closely matches the Ellesmere and Hengwrts readings of the Nun’s Priest’s Tale: “my lief [Hengwrts leef] is faren in londe.” The rest of the lyric includes, in addition to modernized capitalization and punctuation, an orthographic style that is more “medieval,” more Chaucer-like, than the Trinity version: myn herte replaces my hert, for example, and sore bonde appears in place of sore bound. However, in more recent anthologies, such as the Longman Anthology of British Literature quoted below, the editors adhere more closely to what I will call the Trinity wording:

My lefe is faren in a lond---
Alas! why is she so?
And I am so sore bound
I may nat come her to.
She hath my hert in hold
Where-ever she ride or go,
With trew love a thousandfold.18

In sum, Longman resembles Trinity much more than Norton does, while the first line of Norton is much closer to Ellesmere and Hengwrts (although both, as well as other editions I’ve seen, render Trinity’s verb ys in the modern form, is – which matches Ellesmere). Why these anthologized readings differ involves a story that goes back more than a century.

Usually, the older a variant is, the greater weight it is accorded by scholarly editors, but in this case we have a single old line – NPT 2879 – and a considerably “newer” remainder of the poem. Chaucer’s first audience probably knew and recognized the song, but it was eventually forgotten, its surviving copy tucked away in an obscure bundle of booklets in
Trinity Library. For centuries, then, only the first line of “My Lefe” was known, and that line only because of the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*. In fact, when in the late nineteenth century the Cambridge, Trinity manuscript was brought to public notice by Chaucer editor W. W. Skeat, he assumed that the manuscript’s first line, “My lefe is faren in a lond” was notably inferior to Chaucer’s version.19

Skeat, a great scholar, did much to create Chaucer studies and the Chaucer canon as we now know it, but his sense of self-importance must have been as great as his scholarship. When he reported on his discovery of the Trinity version in 1896, he “corrected” it to match Chaucer’s line. In a short piece entitled “Chanticleer’s Song,” Skeat wrote, “Readers of Chaucer would no doubt like to know what sort of a song was that sung by Chanticleer…. Well, I have found [it].” His report also includes the bridging line of the Trinity manuscript, “and for your love evermore wepyng I syng thys song” and on that slim basis Skeat decided that the seven-line lyric was “a well-known song” – an idea repeated by many editors since, despite a lack of evidence. Skeat further decided, in my view rather imperiously, that the lyric’s wording is “not quite correct.” He pointed out that the poem’s first line “has ‘in a lond,’ but of course, *a* must be omitted. Moreover,” he added, “‘lond’ should be *londè*, as Chaucer rightly has it, and consequently ‘bound’ should be *bondè*, a form of the past participle that is not uncommon.”20 Considering that Trinity is the sole surviving copy of the song, Skeat’s report was high-handed at the least; Cerquiglini would, I think, call him “Mr. Procrustes, Philologist.”21

In any case, the Norton version of “My Lefe” obeys Skeat’s dictum, “Chaucerizing” the poem, while Longman and other recent anthologies ignore Skeat and follow Trinity. For example, Norton changes Trinity’s spelling of *bound* to *bonde*, as Skeat says to do, for the sake
of the rhyme as well as for regularity of the meter, while Longman does not. These differences are not incidental: although *in londe* differs from *in a lond* by only a single letter, there is a substantial distinction in meaning. To take the Trinity manuscript version first, *faren in a lond* is a fairly plain and matter-of-fact phrase: if one’s “lefe is faren in a lond,” it’s fairly clear that one’s “beloved” or “dear one” has traveled somewhere, into some unnamed but specific country or region. For this reason, the gloss in the *Broadview Anthology*, which like Longman uses the Trinity wording, says the line means “My love has gone away [to another land].”

This sense of *faren* as “travel” or “go” persists today in both the wish for a good journey – “Farewell!” – and what a journey requires: “What’s the fare for this trip?” The rest of the verse, then, expresses regret that the beloved is away, frustration that he cannot join her, and a declaration of fealty wherever she may be.

On the other hand, the phrase *faren in londe*, without the *a*, is more complex. It too could simply mean “gone far away” or “gone to the country,” just as *faren in a lond* does. Further, occasionally in Middle English literature the phrase *in londe* serves no further purpose than to complete a line of verse. This phenomenon occurs in Chaucer’s *Tale of Sir Thopas*:

Thopas’s horse “goth an amble in the way,/ Ful softly and round/ in londe” (VII.885–87).

That is, the horse “walks slowly along the path, slowly and easily, in land.” The line is frankly gibberish, not much more meaningful than “tra-la.” If that’s the case here, then the words *faren in londe* in this poem might mean simply “go,” although its prominence in rhyme position and in the first line of verse makes such a reading less likely.

However, Middle English *faren* comes from the Old English verb *faran*, which can mean literally “to go, to travel” or, in a figurative sense, “to die.” The latter instance is similar to our modern euphemism “pass on” or “pass away.” For example, there’s a passage in Old
English, about the fate of people born on certain nights of the moon’s cycle, that says they will be *sona gefaren,* “soon gone” (that is, they will have an early death).\(^{23}\) So it seems to me at least possible that the Middle English phrase could imply a more general sense of departure – into exile, perhaps into death. In either case (*faren in londe* or *faren in a lond*), the speaker who is “bound” might be constrained by legal or family ties, or by some physical constraint; but, the reading “in lond” is to me the more evocative, suggesting that he may be incapable of reaching his beloved *because he is still alive.* We may in this case compare the speaker to Sir Orfeo in the Middle English romance by that name.\(^{24}\) Orfeo sees, as if in a vision, his wife riding on horseback, but he cannot speak to her or remain with her, for she has been spirited away to the netherworld by the King of Fairy, Pluto in the myth. In addition, in *Sir Orfeo,* a beloved person, Dame Heurodys, can “ride or go” even in the afterlife.

I think it probable that Skeat’s work influenced the editorial choice of *in londe* in subsequent versions; he uses it in his own 1894 edition, and in 1907, H. B. Hinckley’s *Notes on Chaucer* also followed Skeat.\(^ {25}\) Hinckley was cited by F. N. Robinson, whose 1933 edition is the foundation of today’s standard edition.\(^ {26}\) Just that quickly, the authority of the Trinity version was – so to speak – *faren in londe.* It is not surprising, then, that in Norton’s many editions over the last half-century the “Chaucerized” version has appeared consistently. (As we saw above, Norton uses a more medieval spelling, with additional instances of final -e.\(^ {27}\) ) I believe that E. T. Donaldson, the scholar who helped edit the first Norton in 1962, changed *bound* to *bonde* both for the rhyme and because of Skeat’s arguments about “bondë.” *Faren in londe* also scans better, and is perhaps more ambiguous, hinting at several possible meanings. As a New Critic, Donaldson likely would have prized ambiguity as well as beauty in a text. However, more recent anthologies, including *Longman,* may reflect the more recent emphasis
on history in literary criticism. Opting for *faren in a lond*, which is plainer and more prosaic, eschews both beauty and ambiguity, simply following Trinity. Thus the apparently random choice of one anthology or another embroils us, unknowingly, in competing and sometimes conflicting approaches to reading.

Earlier I referred to a text as a mansion full of rooms and mentioned that editors open many rooms to us, while closing off a few. Editing, in this view, *finishes* a poem – makes it readable and accessible, but also “finishes it off,” makes it something different from when it was a real and vibrant song. But we might imagine more about this text from remembering it *as* a song, its words constituting a lyric in the truest sense, since Trinity refers to it in this way and Chauntecleer and Pertelote perform it.

As a song, “My Lefe” would have been performed aloud (as was most secular English literature in the medieval period), and no song is performed precisely the same way in every instance (just as no two manuscripts are just the same). Just as children’s songs and chants vary over time and distance, performed texts are likely to change over time and space. This alteration, as we have seen, is in Cerquiglini’s view the central element of medieval literature. *In londe, in a lond, faren a londe* – all these variants and more might have been heard in songs sung centuries ago. Turning away from editions, then, allows us to enjoy a text that, in Cerquiglini’s phrase, is “copied by hand, manipulated, always open and as good as unfinished.” And in imagining such real and varied performances – “sounds and sweet airs that give delight” to quote Shakespeare’s Caliban – we can add one more measure of delight in reading the *Nun’s Priest’s Tale*.

In that story, Chauntecleer and Pertelote squabble over whether dreams foretell the future, with Chauntecleer taking a bookish, *auctoritative* angle and Pertelote, a more practical
approach. Chauntecleer’s dream of being attacked by a fox does in fact come true, but with a
comically happy ending: having captured Chauntecleer, the fox turns back to taunt his
pursuers, and when he opens his mouth the rooster makes a speedy getaway. If, then,
Chaucer’s avian sweethearts sing about a love who is _faren in londe_, their song might be
prophetic of Chauntecleer’s going “far away” from his beloved Pertelote, perhaps to his death.
But _if_ they sang, like the Trinity poet, of a love who was _faren in a lond_, then the song might
remind us that it wasn’t death after all, but just a short and humiliating journey, that
Chauntecleer had to face. If we listen to Cerquiglini, it’s better for us _not_ to know – to leave the
matter open, like a medieval manuscript, like a performance, and have it both ways.

Notes

1 Earlier versions of this essay were delivered at the New Chaucer Society Congress in July
2008, and at Randolph-Macon College in March 2016. I wish to thank to Amy Goodwin and
Mary Morse for their careful reading and comments on this project.

Wing (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 77-78.


5 Ibid., p. 34.

6 Quotations from the standard edition are from Larry D. Benson, gen. ed., _The Riverside
Chaucer_ (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1987), identified henceforth by line numbers in the text.

7 This image appears in Daniel Woodward and Martin Stevens, _The Ellesmere Chaucer

8 This image appears in Paul G. Ruggiers, ed. _The Canterbury Tales: A Facsimile and
Transcription of the Hengwrt Manuscript, with Variants from the Ellesmere Manuscript_.
(Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1979), folio 100r.

This point is clearly explained in Erick Kelemen’s *Textual Editing and Criticism: An Introduction* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009), 14-17.


12 Linne Mooney, “‘A Woman’s Reply to her Lover’ and Four Other New Courtly Love Lyrics in Cambridge, Trinity College MS R.3.19,” *Medium Aevum* 67 (1998): 235-56. The manuscript is named for its location: Cambridge University, Trinity College. Future references to this manuscript will be to Trinity.

13 Ibid., p. 237.


16 Thomas, op. cit.


20 Ibid.


29 Cerquiglini, op. cit., p. 34.

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