The Authorship of the Poems of Laurence Minot: A Reconsideration

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I wish to pose a problem of attribution in Middle English literature. Or, to put it in different terms, I propose to invent a problem, since no one previously has seen this case to be one. This endeavour is not, I hope, simply an exercise in perversity. As I will try to suggest at the end of this paper, it is rather an attempt to typify a symptomatic problem that inheres in important aspects of our engagement with the medieval English canon.

British Library MS Cotton Galba E.ix is a northern manuscript of the early fifteenth century. Its contents are predominantly Middle English and include, most substantially, the romance *Ywain and Gawain* and the *Prick of Conscience*.[1] The manuscript also includes a number of unique historical poems, on events of the mid-fourteenth century, which have traditionally been ascribed to one Laurence Minot.

Laurence Minot himself remains a very shadowy figure. If he is the same person mentioned in various documents of this period (and it is by no means certain that he is), he appears to have flourished in the mid-fourteenth century,[2] and if the language of the Cotton manuscript is a valid indicator of his origins, he appears to have been from the north of England. What little else we can infer about Minot is derived from and is significant in relation to the various poems which have been ascribed to him. These

1 For modern descriptions of the manuscript, see Lewis and McIntosh, *A Descriptive Guide to the Manuscripts of the Prick of Conscience*, and Friedman and Harrington's edition of *Ywain and Gawain*.

2 For the scant details of Minot's life see Gray, "Minot, Laurence"; for the documents associated with him see Moore, "Lawrence Minot."

Florilegium, vol. 23.1 (2006): 145-53. © *Florilegium*

poems have been edited several times.[3] All editions have assumed without question that these poems are wholly the work of a single author of this name. Yet, if the evidence of the manuscript in which the poems appear is properly considered, the grounds for such a view may be less secure than has been generally assumed.

The poems associated with Minot occur on fols 52r-57v of the Cotton manuscript, set out in double columns, regularly of forty-eight lines, in the same hand of the early fifteenth century that copied most of the previous two leaves and the following text.[4] The start of the Minot poems marks the beginning of a new gathering in the manuscript, and the decision to begin these poems at this point was evidently a considered one: the preceding text ends about a quarter of the way down fol. 51vb; the rest of the column has been left blank. It seems likely that the copyist had access to some form of booklet, probably a single quire which was possibly circulating separately and which he chose to establish its position as a separate body of work by beginning it at a point that would clearly differentiate it from the preceding religious materials.[5] The underlying codicological distinctiveness of this group of poems, which superficially appears to present them as a single collection, has doubtless been a factor in leading scholars to consider them as if they were all the work of the same author.

The chronology of the poems has probably been another factor that has influenced consideration of questions of authorship. They have been traditionally divided into eleven separate poems, each dealing with an episode of English military triumph between 1333 and 1352. These are, in order, by date of event, verse form, and length, as follows:

I. The battle of Halidon Hill (1333); 8-line stanzas (usually), *abababab* (92 lines).
II. Post Halidon Hill (1333); 6-line stanzas, *aaaabb* (36 lines), with refrain.
III. Edward IV in Brabant and the sack of Southampton (1338); couplets (126 lines).
IV. Edward IV in France (1339); 6-line stanzas, *aabccb* (96 lines).

3 Notably by Hall, to whose edition all references to the text are made; for modernized editions see also James and Simons, Osberg, and Stedman.

4 This hand takes over on fol. 50ra, eight lines down the column. Friedman and Harrington believe (x-xi) that there is a second hand from this point to fol. 51vb, but I do not find it possible to distinguish this hand from that which copies the "Minot" poems that follow except by a darker shade of ink at the top of fol. 52r. This hand continues until the end of this codicological unit, fol. 75r (fol. 75v is blank).

5 The first 75 leaves of the manuscript, that is, the portion that precedes the *Prick of Conscience*, which is codicologically distinct, comprise 3 flyleaves and 6 gatherings of 12 leaves. The "Minot" poems occur at the start of the fifth gathering.

V. The battle of Sluys (1340); chiefly 6-line stanzas, *aaaabb* or monorhymed quatrains (88 lines).
VI. The siege of Tournai (1340); 8-line stanzas, *abababab*, changing to 11-line stanzas, *abababab cac* (81 lines).
VII. The battle of Crécy (1346); couplets (for the first 20 lines), then 8-line stanzas, *ababbcbc* (172 lines).
VIII. The siege of Calais (1347); 8-line stanzas *ababbcbc* (96 lines).
IX. The battle of Neville's Cross (1346); 4- or 6- or 8-line stanzas, *aaaa*, *aaaabb*, or *aaaaaabb* (66 lines).
X. The battle with the Spaniards off Winchilsea (1350); 6-line stanzas, *aaaabb* (30 lines).
XI The capture of Guisnes (1352); 6-line stanzas, *aaaabb* (40 lines).

Chronology and subject matter provide a degree of overall coherence to these poems. But there are various problems, of differing degrees of importance, which have implications for the extent of such coherence. A minor one is line count. In sum, the account above gives a total of 913 lines for these poems. This count is not wholly accurate. Tiresomely, lineation in all editions has failed to include the rubricated couplets that appear at the start of ten of the poems — all, that is, except Poem IV. Hence there are actually 923 lines in total. This point is more than a simply numerical one. The presence of these rubricated couplets relates to a more significant question: how many poems are there in the manuscript? For the couplets that precede these ten poems are all, in addition, marked, immediately after them, by painted initials for the first letter of the opening word, alternately red with purple pen work or blue with red pen work. However, Poem IV, without a rubricated couplet, does have such an initial. There is also a painted initial on fol. 54vb, at the point where Poem VII changes from couplets to 8-line stanzas (that is, at the beginning of line 21).

Indicators of closure in the manuscript are less frequent than those which appear to mark the start of individual poems. At five points the word "Amen" is written: at the end of Poems III (fol. 53rb), V (fol. 54rb), VI (fol. 54rb), and XI (fol. 57va), but in Poem III it also occurs ten lines before the end, after a prayer:

> God bring þaire saules vntill his blis
> And God assoyl þam for þaire sin
> For þe gude wil þat þai war in. Amen.
> (III.114-16)

Clearly none of these divisional markers — rubricated couplet, painted initial, and the word "Amen" — is employed with absolute consistency, and this fact may raise some questions about the way editors have regularly divided these poems. The division between Poems III and IV is particularly uncertain. It depends on two factors: the occurrence of the word "Amen" in the putative final line (126) of Poem III, and the change of verse form in the following line. Neither of the points is necessarily a conclusive determinant of division. As noted above, "Amen" also occurs in line 116 of this poem, and changes in verse form do occur within other sections designated by editors as single poems (for example, in Poems VI and VII). Such indications suggest that by the time the poems had reached the Cotton manuscript, the process of transmission they had undergone had resulted in some uncertainties about the internal divisions of the received text.

These seeming uncertainties may have rather wider implications. For the local inconsistencies or uncertainties about layout seem to be linked to a larger, previously wholly unconsidered aspect of the presentation of these poems. Poem IX, on the battle of Neville's Cross, begins near the bottom of fol. 56ra. At this point, the layout of the verse changes: long lines are no longer written as single lines, but as half lines to the line. This layout continues to the end of Poem XI. There seems no obvious reason for this change: earlier — for example, in Poems II and V — long lines are copied as single lines. Nor is there any change in the ruling of the columns; these regularly measure 85 × 265 mm throughout the part of the manuscript containing these poems.

The most likely explanation for this change is that it reflects a shift in exemplar at this point in the earlier transcription history of these poems. That is, in copying Poems IX-XI, the scribe was following his copy, and this portion of the copy derives from an exemplar that was also set out in a different way from the earlier poems. Such an indication of exemplar shift self-evidently suggests that not all of the poems assembled in the Cotton manuscript originally came from a single source but that somewhere in the antecedent textual tradition lies more than one group of texts which were merged into a single assemblage in the process of transmission. This seems the most economical way of accounting for this departure from one consistent layout to a different but equally consistent one. There are no obvious reasons for seeking, by a more spacious format, to extend the poems to fill out a quire that does not, in any case, end for nearly another two and a half leaves. Nor are there other apparent manuscript constraints, such as a change of hand, that could bear on this question: as mentioned above, the same scribe continues to the end of this manuscript.

Some support for this interpretation of this change as exemplar shift may be found in the fact that this alteration in layout is linked to other changes at this point. For

example, while the rest of the poems follows a strict chronological sequence, such is not the case in Poem IX.[6] This poem deals with the battle of Neville's Cross, which took place in 1346, but in the Cotton manuscript it is placed *after* the siege of Calais (the subject of Poem VIII), which occurred in 1347. The departure from a consistently consecutive time line, in conjunction with the shift in format, suggests that Poem IX was a subsequent addition to an antecedent body of material rather than being initially part of an overall design. Such evidence suggests that the "Minot" poems as now constituted could be the outcome of a degree of piecemeal assemblage from more than one exemplar, brought together in a not wholly systematic way to embody the form of the text that lies behind the Cotton manuscript.

Verse form provides a degree of additional support for such a line of argument. Poems X (30 lines) and XI (40 lines) are both composed in the same verse form, 6-line stanzas, *aaaabb*,[7] and this form is also the predominant form in Poem IX. Of the 66 lines in this poem, lines 9-20, 29-40, and 49-66 all employ it; lines 1-8 and 21-28 have the form *aaaaaabb*, and lines 41-48 are two monorhymed quatrains. This form of the 6-line stanza is not used elsewhere in these poems: Poem II (36 lines) does have a 6-line stanza form *aaaabb* (36 lines), but with a refrain. Poem V, the battle of Sluys (1340; 88 lines), also uses mainly 6-line stanzas (lines 1-6, 19-36, 41-58, and 71-88), but these are interspersed with monorhymed quatrains (15-18, 37-40, and 59-70) and one 8-line stanza (7-14). The emergence of a sequence of poems in the same or predominantly the same verse form is untypical of these poems and distinguishes Poems IX-XI from those preceding them. Elsewhere, only in Poems VII-VIII are consecutive poems composed in the same verse form, and in the case of Poem VII not the complete poem (lines 1-20 consist of couplets).

The variant verse forms may raise questions about single authorship for all these poems. In all, nine different verse forms are employed in these poems. Only Poems I, IV, and X-XI use a single one. It is uncertain whether all these variations are by design or whether some are a consequence of stages in transmission through which passages may have been lost, as a consequence of which inadvertent variation may have been created. At some points this seems a likely explanation. But there seems to be a degree of diversity that may, if only negatively, call into question an assumption of common authorship.

6 Poem II does look back to the battle of Bannockburn in 1314, but this is done to set the Scottish triumph then in the context of Edward's revenge at Halidon Hill: "And now has king Edward wroken it, I wene" (Poem II.4).

7 In the case of Poem XI, there are six 6-line stanzas and a final monorhymed quatrain.

In addition, there are other shifts in technique from poem to poem. There is stanza linking, with a word in the final line of a stanza (usually the last) being repeated in the first line of the following one in Poems I and VI, and partial linking in Poems VII (lines 21-172) and VIII (lines 1-56). And in Poem II, the rhyme words in the final couplet of each stanza, the *b* rhymes, are the same throughout ("while" . . . "gile"). None of these characteristics occur in Poems IX-XI, which are in their turn marked by a developed use of the long alliterative line. In addition, Poems IX-XI are decasyllabic. The only other poem in this form is Poem V; the rest of the poems are generally octosyllabic.

This multiplicity of verse forms and techniques suggests either that Minot was an extraordinarily versatile versifier, to a degree that far surpasses any of his Middle English contemporaries, or that more than one hand was involved in preparation of the poems traditionally attributed to him. In fact, only two of the "Minot" poems specify him as author. Poem V opens with the assertion that "Minot with mowth had menid to make / Suth sawes & sad for sum mens sake" (V.1-2); and in Poem VII, his full name is given at the end of the prologue: "Help me, God, my wit es thin, / Now Laurence Minot will bigin" (VII.19-20). These assertions of authorial identity, placed at key points in these two poems, make the absence of such identifications elsewhere the more striking. If Minot was the author of all of these poems why did he signal his identity so intermittently? Such an *argumentum ex silentio* must be treated with proper caution, but it is one further element that invites consideration in the attribution of these poems.

It is also worth recalling that we lack any proper understanding of the circumstances of composition for the "Minot" poems. It seems to have been the more or less explicit assumption of editors that they were written as immediate responses to specific events. As one edition puts it, "Exactly when Minot wrote each individual poem remains a matter of debate. [. . .] However, there is some internal evidence to suggest that they were probably written down separately near to the time of each event."[8] Unfortunately, no evidence is specified. And since all the poems are quite short — the longest, Poem VII, is 172 lines, and only one other, Poem III, is over a hundred — and they are composed in such a variety of verse forms, stylistic and/or linguistic criteria are of little assistance in determining common authorship. That they were subsequently assembled and recopied in the form in which they have come down to us is self-evident, but it means that the main reason for concluding that those poems in which Minot does not explicitly identify himself are part of his canon must rest on the assumption that manuscript proximity provides a

8 James and Simons, eds. *The Poems of Laurence Minot*, 13.

secure basis for assigning common authorship. This, together with topical and chronological coherence, has appeared to editors to offer sufficient grounds for an assumption of a single authorial identity throughout these poems.

But while these factors have not hitherto seemed an adequate basis for questioning Minot's authorship of all these poems, the further points raised above may offer some grounds for uncertainty about his authorship, particularly in respect of Poems IX-XI, as do some further points. For example, these poems fall into several distinct chronological phases: Poems I-II deal with the battle of Halidon Hill and its aftermath (1333); Poems III-VI with Edward III in France, the battle of Sluys, and the siege of Tournai (1339-40); Poems VII-IX with the battles of Crécy and Neville's Cross (both in 1346) and the siege of Calais (1347); and Poems X-XI with the battle with the Spaniards off Winchilsea (1350) and the capture of Guisnes (1352). The assumption of common authorship requires a presupposition of episodic engagement by a single poetic sensibility with military events over a lengthy period. The possibility that these poems constitute some form of retrospective account of events, composed all at one time, cannot be ruled out but seems not inherently probable. The variations in length, verse form, and technique seem to suggest that these narratives are a series of piecemeal treatments of the events they recount. And if one does assume that this series of narratives was separately composed at different points in time — and possibly, given their geographical range, in more than one place — there seem cogent reasons, taking the totality of the evidence into account, for doubting that they were all necessarily composed by a single author.

As with many attributional arguments little of the evidence is susceptible to satisfactorily clear-cut conclusions. The scantness of the material under examination precludes any stylometric analysis. Consequently, it would be inappropriate to claim too much for the preceding discussion. The change in layout and the shift in chronology do not, of course, conclusively establish that Minot did not write these poems. Nor does their lack of explicit attribution. But cumulatively the facts pointed to above seem to carry a certain weight. The "Minot" poems may reflect a process of assemblage made not on authorial but on topical grounds through which various poems on the martial achievements of Edward III were yoked together over time. Seen in this light, these poems still retain an unusual degree of interest. It is not easy to point to a parallel sequence of linked secular Middle English poems in the mid-fourteenth century. If such a collection represents the activities of some contemporaneous anthologizer bringing together works by divers hands, then the originality of his conception still merits acknowledgement.

If these arguments about Minot's poetic corpus possess any cogency, they also possess a wider, symptomatic significance. One of the greatest and least remarked problems

confronting the student of Middle English literature is the problem of establishing canonicity. The corpora of important writers, like Langland, Chaucer, Lydgate, and Dunbar remain shifting and elusive. The attribution of various metrical romances to the same supposed author, Thomas Chestre, on highly dubious stylistic grounds, or of all the four (very different) poems in British Library MS Cotton Nero A.x (the so-called *Gawain* manuscript) to a single author suggests the uncertainty of canonical criteria, as do the fleeting poetic existences of such non-existent figures as the Duke of Suffolk and Huchoun of the Awle Ryal. These examples, which could be multiplied, indicate that considerable complexities are involved in addressing the problems of determining the body of work that can be confidently attributed to a single author in a period when such a concept as authorship was not established,[9] while, of course, many works survive wholly not just without any authorial identity but also without any geographical or historical context.[10] The example of the "Minot" poems may serve to remind us that our thinking about attribution for medieval English works may, at times, be based on assumptions that invite more searching scrutiny than they have received.

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9 On early authorial collections, see Edwards, "Fifteenth-Century English Verse Author Collections."

10 See Burrow, "Poems without Contexts."

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