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ABSTRACT

An otiose stroke in scribal practice is a mark whose linguistic signification is obscure—yet such strokes abound as calligraphic additions to certain letters in English manuscripts of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries. This article seeks an explanation for the deployment of certain apparently otiose strokes, whose careful and persistent execution suggests a deliberate purpose in deployment. The vernacular production of the Carthusian scribe William Darker (working c.1481-1512) is chosen as an exemplum, and four common strokes in his work whose function is deemed ambiguous are examined in detail. Statistical and contextual analysis of the deployment of these strokes reveals semantic behaviours and patterns of use that suggest the marks had significant meaning for the scribe: though they do not necessarily function as abbreviations, they appear to bear linguistic meaning, and act with some consistency as signals of vowel length, pronunciation, and morphology. While these 'otiose' strokes remain resistant to full explication, the patterns here uncovered suggest a scribal intention to encode linguistic information via the conscious placement of calligraphic marks.

> There is at times in the digging and delving of the craft a blind complicity between '*labor*' and '*otium*'. That which is 'laboured' may at the same time be 'otiose' for the 'laboured' may not, in fact, have been worked on enough.
>
> - Geoffrey Hill, *The Enemy's Country*[1]

INTRODUCTION

An otiose stroke in a medieval English manuscript is a scribal addition to a letter which appears to be without linguistic significance. Such definitions as have been offered to explain these strokes more readily describe what they are not than what they are. As Malcolm Parkes has it, for example, such a mark 'is a superfluous stroke, one which does not form part of a letter, and which does not indicate an abbreviation.'[2] In the absence of either of these functions, it has proven difficult for modern readers to ascribe coherent meaning to their existence. So when we open a manuscript and come upon a slim line of ink gracing the ascender of a final *h*, or find on the foot of *n* a pointed toe that turns up and back, like the poulaine of a fifteenth-century dandy, we are without a ready explanation for their conspicuous presence. The palaeographer may discover meaning in the contribution made by these marks to the general aspect of the manuscript page, and the detective book-historian may collect them (like so many DNA samples) into a dossier for scribal identification, but for the editor, the literary critic and the historian, scholarly interest frequently ends with the decision to omit the marks entirely from transcription.[3]

Yet late medieval scribes laboured to produce these strokes in vast quantities, adding them to otherwise complete letter forms throughout their manuscripts. My claim is twofold: first, that the labour of these scribes implies a purpose; and second, that standard explanations of that purpose—decoration or abbreviation—are unsatisfactory. I rest this claim upon an examination of a certain class of ambiguous strokes, traditionally accounted otiose, which lies somewhere between the light touch of decoration and the ponderous imprint of abbreviation. This class of marks is found in English scripts from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century,[4] and though never universal in deployment, appears in a wide range of contexts: in textura, anglicana and secretary scripts, in both high and low-grade hands, and in documentary as well as literary manuscripts. In the close examination of the works of one scribe lies the possibility of discovering a new explanation for the widespread deployment of these troublesome 'otiose' strokes.

Pursuing this possibility is important: ambiguous strokes remain a crux for textual editing and linguistic history. Accurate and consistent representation of manuscript orthography is fundamental to theories of dialect and sound change, as well as to grammatical issues like adjectival flexion. New editions of texts, however, remain idiosyncratic in their treatment of the strokes: expansion or omission rests within the discretion of individual editors.[5] The faithful (if non-committal) representation of ambiguous strokes in the typeface of some early EETS editions[6] has over time been replaced by editorial interventions that are explained only briefly—and, whatever the decision, the strokes themselves are generally not retained.[7] The discovery of any principle that might illuminate trends in use and purpose in deployment will potentially have import for editorial decision-making, as well as for broader linguistic questions. Some attempt to make sense of these marks is certainly a desideratum for English palaeography.

A comprehensive history of non-abbreviatory strokes (those that are otiose or ambiguous) in English manuscripts remains to be written. One major complication is the sheer variety in their ductus (the direction and sequence of their strokes) and resulting appearance. They range from the most delicate of hairline flourishes to bold and carefully executed macrons formed as if in exact copy of true abbreviation marks. Similar strokes, moreover, can appear haphazardly placed even within the work of a single scribe: in certain deployments they unambiguously mark an abbreviation, yet in others they resist expansion. Such inconsistencies multiply; as a result, the time and place at which the strokes emerged has not been established, trends in their use have proven difficult to track, and a consistent principle of deployment remains elusive.

Those accounts that have attempted to explain something of the general development of ambiguous or otiose marks may for the most part be grouped into two broad narratives, the one privileging orthography, and the other essentially aesthetic. Of the former type is the reasoning that the strokes began as unambiguous marks of abbreviation, then gradually lost this signification, to become finally the otiose reflexes of a system no longer used or understood.[8] L. C. Hector posits a more specific origin of this type: strokes that were to become otiose, he suggests, first appeared affixed to the final consonant of English proper nouns in Latin documentary texts, and were intended to support the fiction that English names had declinable endings like their Latin counterparts.[9] In either case, an original function as abbreviation (afterwards deceptively or unthinkingly applied) is the source from which this otiose contagion spreads across the manuscripts of England. The second broad explanation points out that the strokes, though not marks of abbreviation themselves, closely resemble certain Latin abbreviation strokes. This theory argues that they appear in English manuscripts in mimicry of (or as a habit derived from copying) these heavily abbreviated Latin texts.[10] If deliberate choice is implied by the care and consistency with which these strokes were reproduced, English-copying scribes might be hypothesized as using the strokes to lend their vernacular a Latinate authority, or to create a textual appearance they recognized as typical of that ideal model. Ambiguous marks, on this reading, developed rather as 'features of fashion' than as carriers of linguistic meaning,[11] and might thus be imagined as a means to polish English texts to a rich Latin patina.

These general narratives can be associated with two quite different scholarly perspectives: that of the editor of text on the one hand, whose concern is for consistent orthography, and for whom a simple binary of abbreviation/non-abbreviation must be the interpretive imperative;[12] and that of the palaeographer on the other, whose primary focus on the aspect of the manuscript page might naturally suggest a broader aesthetic motivation. But neither approach has yet led to a complete or convincing explanation. Another perspective is wanted: one that proceeds from the supposition that the deployment of these strokes may be more deliberate than unthinking, and that it might imply something beyond the merely decorative. The strokes might, in short, carry a meaning that has not yet been imagined for them. An examination of the efforts of one scribe will usefully focus the search for such meaning. Accordingly, patterns in use that might begin to resolve the puzzle of late-medieval ambiguous strokes will be sought in the work of just one scribe.

WILLIAM DARKER'S AMBIGUOUS STROKES

As an exemplum, I use William Darker, a Carthusian located primarily at Sheen Charterhouse (in Surrey) from c.1481 until his death in 1512/13.[13] We can be reasonably sure of Darker's vernacular production: he has a distinctive hand, and signed two of his manuscripts. At least some of these manuscripts may be plausibly hypothesized as intended for the nuns at nearby Syon Abbey. Such relative certainties of time, place, scribe and audience make Darker a good subject. I examine the ambiguous strokes he used across five manuscripts, and seek to clarify his *modus scribendi* on the matter of these marks. A greater consistency in their distribution may be anticipated within the work of a single scribe than has yet been found across all scribal production;[14] Darker's practice may therefore provide a relatively stable foundation upon which to construct a fuller understanding of English ambiguous strokes. The strokes are no trivial part of his work: he frequently places as many as one hundred of them on each folio he copies. These typical strokes are set out in Table 1; they are there categorized into four types. With the exception of Type 1B, all are in evidence in Plate 1.

[Table 1 - omitted]

Table 1: Four Types of Ambiguity[15]

[Plate 1 - omitted]

Plate 1: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 38, f.6v[16]

The apparently otiose nature of the adornments, and the time and effort necessary to achieve them, is evident. It is an advantage that Darker's hand, a distinctive and professional fere-textura,[17] is a high-grade variety with a consistently set execution, because this should diminish the possibility that the strokes under examination are merely the exaggerated finishing-strokes found in some more cursive hands. As can be seen in the Table 1 types and their Plate 1 appearances, the relevant marks in Darker's copying are formed purposefully, and often as separate strokes, unconnected to the underlying letter-form. They are clearly additions, deliberately, even meticulously, placed at set positions on each of the selected letters. Note, for example, the heavy macron above the <m> of <hym> in Plate 1 line 2, and <came> in line 6, neither of which has the aspect of a careless flourish; yet the stroke cannot easily be characterized as a mark of abbreviation, since the words it accompanies already appear complete. Editors who have been inclined to consider similar marks as orthographically significant have typically taken the strokes to signify an *e* following the letter upon which the stroke appears, or more rarely, a preceding *u*.[18] Here, as is often the case in Darker's deployments, neither possibility is consistently plausible.[19]

Any explanation of Darker's practice here must take into account his linguistic and scribal world (which was a varied and changing one) and Darker's peculiarities within it. His dialect, his idiosyncratic hand, and his apparent interest in the linguistic minutiae of the texts he copied are all factors of potential significance. Perceptions of broad trends in orthography, for example, play a role in editorial judgments about ambiguous strokes: 'typical' Middle English or Early Modern spellings have at times been invoked to justify an editor's decision.[20] But the development and interrelationship of spelling shifts is complex, and it is difficult to fix a norm for any period.[21] Darker's orthographic choices, moreover, may reflect his own dialect.[22] As to Darker's handwriting, he worked at Sheen Charterhouse for some thirty years, and there is evidence that he may have been a schoolmaster or ‘usher’ at Eton College before that. It is likely that he arrived in this scribal community with his distinct hand and style—and his preferences in ambiguous strokes—already formed.[23] A. I. Doyle’s examination finds little uniformity in script or style among the Carthusian scribes at Sheen,[24] and a limited survey of the vernacular productions attributed to Darker’s Sheen contemporaries and predecessors (like William Mede, Stephen Dodesham and James Grenehalgh) confirms the absence of any shared pattern of ambiguous marks.[25] Only in the matter of a tendency to linguistic precision can Darker be said to share in a scribal mode associated with Carthusian production: Biggs’ survey of the corrections to Dublin, Trinity College, MS 678 (which he attributes to Darker) notes ‘changes to the punctuation and capitalization, orthography, and morphology’; he concludes that Darker ‘was evidently concerned for linguistic correctness and consistency, as well as with the text and its meaning.’[26] Darker appears to have been inclined to impose his own careful linguistic system upon those texts with which he worked:[27] his use of ambiguous strokes must be understood as operating within this particular scribal and linguistic context.

A METHOD FOR THE ANALYSIS OF AMBIGUOUS STROKES

I turn now to the details of Darker’s work, and describe the method of my investigation. The five manuscripts that form the basis for the present study contain the bulk of the vernacular work known to have been copied by William Darker.[28] Manuscripts examined for the study included:

1. London, British Library, MS Add. 22121 (the *Speculum Christiani*);[29]
2. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 38 (the sole witness of the English *Dialog of Seynt Anselme and of oure Lady*);[30]
3. Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.vi.33 (eight religious prose texts);[31]
4. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 517 (the unique survival of *The Manere of Good Lyvynge* and several shorter texts);[32]
5. Glasgow, University Library, MS Hunterian T.6.18 (Books I-III of *Imitatio Christi*).[33]

The selection of text from these manuscripts forms a sample of approximately 43,000 words, or some one-third of Darker's total vernacular production. So large a selection is important given the infrequency of certain strokes, and the need to establish statistically significant frequencies for certain word-forms.

The present examination rests, in the first instance, on a detailed database of stroke deployment. Each instance of use in the manuscript samples was recorded with accompanying data: linguistic and grammatical information (such as the type of adjective to which a stroke is attached) as well as palaeographic information (such as word-position within a line of text). A particularly important feature of data-collection is that words carrying ambiguous strokes are tallied against unmarked examples of the same word and those sharing a similar spelling or appearance: the absence, as well as the presence, of ambiguous strokes was sought and recorded. The resulting data-set is thus capable of query from orthographic, morphological, phonological, syntactic and semantic perspectives, as well as palaeographic and aesthetic ones.

Analysis of the data draws on a number of fields. Historical lexicography and dialectology provide a background for the examination of probability of word expansion for orthographic reasons and other possible linguistic grounds for the addition of the ambiguous strokes (such as vowel quantity or historical inflection). Palaeographic analysis of the ductus and appearance of the strokes and their local manuscript context allows for scrutiny of possible interference from Darker's Latin-English code-switching (where habits of Latin copying might be carried onto the English page), as well as for assessments of the degree of deliberate intention implied by a stroke. The results of the analysis do not rely solely upon reports generated from the database: statistics are taken as suggestive rather than definitive; closer investigations are made within the context of the manuscript page and local textual environment.[34]

DARKER'S OTIOSE LABOUR, TYPE 1: MARKED ASCENDERS

Certain ascenders in Darker's manuscripts are crossed with hairline strokes, typically slightly above the x-height (the height of the small letters); the ascenders are only crossed when they appear as the final consonant or consonant cluster of a word. In Plate 1, line 6, these Type 1 strokes can be seen on <rewth> <moch> and <peple>. Darker adds this stroke only to the letters **b**, **bl**, **h**, **l** and **ll**; by far the most common are crosses on **h** and **ll**, which together account for over 96% of Type 1 strokes. Single **l** is only crossed in under 6% of its word-end appearances, and only once is the ascender of **b** crossed.[35] It is plausible then that the presence of the stroke on **b** and **l** is, within Darker's system, an error.[36] In the case of the most common strokes on **h** and **ll**, expansion into a following *e* is often possible (as for example to <doth*e*> where <h> is crossed), but in no case of crossed ascender is expansion to word-final *e* necessary; no other orthographic expansion is consistently plausible. In other words, if the hairline stroke is to be taken as a mark of abbreviation, it must be a most inconsistent one, bearing meaning on an almost random basis. For Darker, therefore, the hairline crossing of ascenders does not (in English) appear to be coherently associated with abbreviation.

In the case of **h**, the crossed ascender is more usually found on letter-forms bearing a thick head-stroke than forms with bifurcated or plain ascenders, which often appear closer to the beginning of words (compare Plate 1 <Mich>, line 14, with <When>, lines 2 and 6). The hairline stroke never appears on the ascender of **k** or **d**, though these graphs are often found in words that have as much linguistic claim to a word-final *e* as do those that are commonly crossed. But the curved shoulder-stroke of Darker's **k** typically exceeds the x-height (see Plate 1, line 8 <knewe>), and the unlooped ascender of **d** curves to the left: neither has the clean verticality of those ascenders that are usually crossed. Straight ascenders at the ends of words, that is, seem to attract calligraphic features like head-strokes and ambiguous strokes. It is tempting to suppose, therefore, that where **h**, **ll** and **bl** appear in the final portion of a word, they are crossed as a flourish, without reference to spelling or sense.

Wright complains of 'the ever difficult problem of a final -*e* that is sometimes indicated… by a horizontal stroke through the upper verticals of letters like *l*.'[37] His assessment of such strokes found over the course of the fifteenth century can be read as a narrative of decreasing confidence in the scribe. When he finds the hairline crossing of **ll** (which he takes to abbreviate -*lle*) in a manuscript copied in 1405, he calls it a 'normal' abbreviation,[38] and he accepts the same stroke to indicate a final *e* in a manuscript dated to 1410-20.[39] But when he comes to a manuscript dated 1450-60, he is less certain: 'the purpose [of the cross-stroke] being in each case presumably but not certainly to indicate the presence of final *e* (it may however have become merely a scribal mannerism);'[40] and when he finds the stroke still later in the fifteenth century, he is unwilling to associate it with abbreviation at all, merely noting its presence.[41] The latent argument of Wright's assessments is that the earlier significance of the strokes fades over the course of the fifteenth century, so that we should expect them to be mere flourishes by Darker's time.

On first appearance, Darker's manuscripts would seem to support the conclusion suggested by Wright's analysis. For example, Darker consistently places hairline strokes on both word-final <ll> *and* <lle>: his rate of omission is equally about 5.4% across both of these spellings—not an unexpectedly high error rate in the execution of a fine line. But the possibility that stroke placement on **ll** is a mere flourish meets a surprising challenge: in British Library, MS Add. 22121, where the final syllable of a word is <lly> (rather than <ll> or <lle>) the preference is overwhelmingly *not* to cross. Only once in this manuscript (<*con*tynually>, f.6r) is there a hairline crossing of <ll> where the following graph is <y>; conversely, six word-endings in <lly> appear without a hairline. This is a choice apparently based upon morphological rather than orthographic grounds: it occurs invariably with adverbial forms derived from an adjective ending in *-ful*; strikingly, it is maintained even where this final morpheme is in fact spelled with <ee>: <lawefullee>, f.10r. Morphological significance, rather than letter or letter-position, is the determinant here. A seventh such adverb (also uncrossed) is broken over the line-end as <wilful-ly>. This implies some understanding of morpheme division; Darker evidently considers the <ll> in adverbial cases not to be a single unit, but rather two discrete graphs: the first <l> completes the adjective; the second begins the adverbial suffix. For Darker, hairline crossing of **ll** indicates a liquid that, though orthographically doubled, is morphologically a single unit.[42] This pattern is seen consistently across Darker's manuscripts;[43] it is also found with **bl**: without exception, all adjectival forms ending in <ble> are crossed, all adverbial forms ending in <bly> are not crossed. This stroke, at least, carries some linguistic information.

At times, Darker's hairline on **ll** is replaced by a tailed dot (Table 1, Type 1B).[44] To create this stroke, the nib must be turned for the dot and its fine curled tail, a complexity of ductus that makes it difficult to claim the mark as a merely thoughtless flourish. The stroke is identical in form to a commonly used Latin mark of abbreviation (in Darker's hand often signalling an omitted *u*). In Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 38, the stroke appears on the <l> of Latin <m*u*ltitudine*m*> on f.2v, and it is on the following folio that all four vernacular instances occur.[45] The word <all> is elsewhere overwhelmingly found with hairline crossing; in the case of <myracle> the stroke might be taken to indicate a preceding *u*, giving <miraca*u*le>, but this is a spelling Darker himself does not use elsewhere.[46] Here, the most likely explanation is that the curl was used in place of a hairline in error, and as a result of Darker's proximate use of the Latin abbreviation stroke. This kind of 'capture error', in which the wrong physical movement is executed as a result of its similarity to another familiar movement in a moment of inattention,[47] does not mean that Darker is here deliberately imposing a Latin aesthetic upon his English text. In fact, Darker generally keeps his Latin strokes quite separate from his English ones. In his Latin copying, the hairline crossing of ascenders (a standard mark of abbreviation) is overwhelmingly found with single **l**;[48] in his English, such crossing is found with the doubled letter: single **l** hairline crosses are very rare. If any mimicry of a Latin aesthetic can be posited as a reason for Darker's ambiguous strokes, it cannot be one borrowed from his own Latin productions.

A more complex pattern appears in Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.vi.33: in the running header and explicit of a text beginning on f.41v, the word 'rule' appears. Orthography is most inconsistent; forms are recorded in Table 2.

ORTHOGRAPHY	STROKE	OCCURRENCES
<rewyll>	Type 1A (hairline)	8
<rewell>	Type 1B (curl)	5
<rewyll>	Type 1B (curl)	5
<rewle>	-	5
<rewele>	-	4
<rewel>	-	1

Table 2: Variation in 'rewell', Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.vi.33, ff.42r-67r

In this sequence, where a stroke is added, the Type 1B curl is preferred; where an unmarked <l> appears, it is accompanied by final <e> at a ratio of 9:1. The Type 1B curl is again functionally identical to the Type 1A hairline, and the difference in appearance was evidently not so significant as to make correction necessary: the presence of a mark, rather than its precise form, is the key. But comparison of the phonologically equivalent spellings in this table suggests another orthographic peculiarity: that marked <ll> is used interchangeably not (as might be expected) with an unmarked 'lle', but with unmarked <le>. A marked <ll> here (as in the earlier account of adjectival and adverbial forms) evidently represents a short, single-syllable liquid. This pattern is consistent: for Darker, unmarked final-syllable single **l** or **le** is the orthographic equivalent of the double **ll** *marked* with a hairline or curl. In Darker's orthographic alternatives, the crossing or marking of ascenders is a deliberate visual reinforcement of a significant morphological distinction.

To conclude: no pattern could be discerned in the Type 1A crossing of **h**: in the sample, only sixteen final-syllable **h** forms lack a cross-stroke, all in verbs in the third person singular; 714 examples are crossed. Even limiting the inquiry to third person singular verbs spelled with final <th>, the omission rate stands at under 4%.[49] The hairline crossing of **h** must rest for the present as otiose. But the correlation between a decision to cross **ll** and certain morphological or phonological phenomena suggests a more meaningful deployment: for Darker, the hairline crossing of the ascender, at least in the cases of **ll** and **bl**, bore linguistic significance. In such cases, it tends to be the absence of the stroke, rather than its presence, that 'marks' the unusual forms for the reader; the features thus distinguished are subtle ones; but on their account, the strokes can no longer be securely accounted meaningless. Darker's hairline cross is not (always) otiose. But nor is it a mark of abbreviation: it provides additional information about letters that are already present. At times, it demonstrates syllable division, and its presence or absence distinguishes subtle differences in the morphological function of a doubled letter <l>. Its regular presence at word-end certainly contributes to the total aesthetic of Darker's script and book production, and this is no less true for the linguistic nicety of its application. So we must begin to understand Darker's scribal aesthetic as one comprehending more than 'mere' decoration. The aesthetic of crossed **ll** is one whose pleasing effect involves also the sense and sound of the scribe's language.

DARKER'S OTIOSE LABOUR, TYPE 2: CURL OVER WORD-FINAL G

Where **g** appears at the end of a word, it is overwhelmingly accompanied by a curling stroke, connected to its finishing horn or flat top-stroke (see Plate 1, line 6 <hauyng>, and Table 1, Type 2). The nearly unvarying deployment of the stroke on word-final **g** is easy to dismiss as merely automatic (and therefore otiose). Parkes would appear to agree: he refers to a 'firm stroke added to final **g**' in Darker's work, but transcribes without expansion.[50] However, the mark is not a mere flourished continuation-stroke, for pen-lift is generally discernible. And where the stroke *is* absent from a final-syllable <g>, an added final <e> generally appears.[51] Regularly finding an <e> in places where the ambiguous stroke is omitted from <g> is suggestive: the stroke might well be an abbreviation for this letter.[52] To promote this possibility to a probability, however, the palaeographer wants one more clue: some thoughtless error that would expose the assumption governing the scribe's norm. (A stroke wrongly placed on a mid-word *g*, with the usual following *e* omitted; or a poorly-planned line into which the stroke could not be squeezed, brought to orthographic completeness by the addition of a final *e*, would be ideal—either would confirm that in Darker's mind, the Type 2 stroke abbreviated this letter.) But Darker leaves no such trace: his unfaltering consistency withholds the evidence needed to clinch or refute the case for abbreviation.

Whatever the abbreviatory potential, far more striking is the phonological pattern: marked **g** is associated for Darker particularly with the syllable /ɪŋ/: over 97% of all marked words ending in <g> have a final <ing>, either as a participial suffix or as part of the stem.[53] Where the stroke does not appear, the spelling pattern is very different.

	MARKED FINAL <g>	**UNMARKED FINAL <ge>**	**UNMARKED FINAL <g>**
/ɪŋ/ (*-ing* as suffix)	88%	0%	0%
/ɪŋ/ (*-ing* as part of stem)	9%	33%	0%
other sound combination	3%	67%	100%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Table 3: Phonological variation in words ending <g> or <ge>

As Table 3 shows, two thirds of the cases where we find <ge> instead of marked <g> contain a sound other than /ɪŋ/ (including <-onge>, <-unge> and <-age>) and in the remaining third, the final <ing> belongs to the stem, rather than being the participial suffix. Of the eight words consistently inscribed with final <ge> and without an ambiguous stroke, five are Old French in origin (e.g. <langage>);[54] it may be significant that these words historically contain the sound /dz/ rather than /ŋ/. Certainly, there is so little difference in the appearance of all words with final-syllable <g> as to make it unlikely that they are distinguished on visual grounds alone; again, it is not a purpose to abbreviate, but a difference in morphology and phonology that must account for Darker's scribal preferences, and the aesthetic that these preferences create.

Given the patterns observed, it may make more sense on a conceptual level to think of '**g** with stroke' at word-end as the *unmarked* form, in that it provides the visual standard against which '**g** without a stroke' stands out—once again, the absence of the stroke, not its presence, calls attention to the relevant phonological difference.[55] The ambiguous stroke (or rather, the mark of its absence) plays a role in distinguishing different pronunciations.

To conclude: Darker’s curl over **g** is not otiose. It functions as the standard word-final form against which an unusual absence can warn of a change in pronunciation or spelling. This function (for this palaeographer at least) came as a surprise; equally surprising was the usefulness and legibility of the signal: in Darker’s manuscripts an unmarked **g** stands out in its nakedness at word end, one of many visual signals on the manuscript page leading the reader’s eye through the text.

DARKER’S OTIOSE LABOUR, TYPE 3: CURVED STROKES OVER M AND N

Among the most perplexing of all the strokes under examination are the curved macrons that sometimes appear above the nasal consonants **n** and **m** when they appear in word-final or penultimate position (see Plate 1, line 4: <gon̄>, <hym̄> and line 6 <cam̄e>). These thick, separate strokes are formed with a deliberate movement of the pen, apparently left to right; more rarely the stroke curves from the final foot of the letter **m** or **n**, apparently moving right to left (see Table 1, Type 3).[56] This variation in ductus has no discernible significance for the sense of the stroke—a point worth noting, since the connectedness of ambiguous strokes to their parent letter has at times been given as grounds for considering them to be otiose flourishes.[57] Whatever the ductus, the bold appearance of the strokes is unmistakable: it is counter-intuitive that such clear and deliberate signs should not bear some meaning.

The chief interpretive difficulty here is the frequent inclusion of this stroke even where a final <e> has been written out: expansion in these cases (and there are a significant number) is impossible. In Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 38, for example, this apparently redundant use of the stroke occurs 18 times, to 76 occasions where the stroke appears without a following <e> and so might function as an abbreviation. An error rate of more than 17% is difficult to explain away; Darker does not correct any apparently superfluous usage. Then there is the overall infrequency of use: in British Library, MS Add. 22121, there are only 45 words whose final or penultimate nasal is marked with a macron; 256 words similarly spelled lack the stroke.[58] Finally, there is no statistical correlation between absence of an ambiguous stroke and presence of final <e>.

In English-language manuscripts, the abbreviation stroke for nasal consonants is a macron, placed above the preceding vowel (the word ‘in’ for example, may be abbreviated to ‘ī’). Could the macron above **n** and **m** be an abbreviation for a doubled nasal? Most unlikely: where a nasal is elsewhere to be doubled, the mark appears over the preceding vowel, never the nasal itself. And in any case, the resulting orthography would be implausible: it would produce such words as <born*n*>, <from*m*>, <him*m*> and <cam*m*e>. A notable exception is <syn>, which, when marked, might plausibly be rendered as <syn*ne*>, a spelling Darker himself uses with some frequency.

In Darker’s Latin script, a similar macron is used heavily as a mark of abbreviation, both for many different vowels and for consonants in various combinations. It is quite common in word-final position or preceding a final vowel: as in <frem̄>, <dn̄o> and <om̄i> (=‘fr*atr*em’, ‘d*omi*no’ and ‘om*n*i’).[59] Darker’s tironian ‘and’ abbreviation (a common mark, shaped in Darker’s English hand something like a *z* with a crossbar—see Plate 1, line 9 ‘wyse ⁊ eloquent’) takes a similar sign above its head (as it does in the work of many fifteenth century scribes), heightening the general association of this stroke with abbreviations, and making the more perplexing its appearance with an orthography that resists plausible expansion. The implication of these points for a number of commentators has been that the addition of such strokes to vernacular texts is an affectation of style borrowed from Latin.[60] At least in the case of William Darker, however, the infrequency noted above poses a significant challenge to this assertion, since visual mimicry would surely produce a more widespread and consistent use than that actually seen: two or three macrons to a page—and some pages entirely without macrons—hardly gives the text a Latin veneer.

In short: too many strokes are found in the manuscripts to dismiss them as mere capture error, and too few too intermittently applied to support the claim that they are a deliberate visual contribution to the aspect of the written page. Can another explanation be found for their presence?

A possibility is that these strokes work to clarify letter combinations made ambiguous by visual similarity—the minims of <un> or <um> for example. But it is no more likely (in fact, statistically somewhat less likely) for the stroke to appear in such letter combinations. The one exception is the word-final syllable <oun>, which is frequently abbreviated to <oū>. This syllable deserves some attention, for it offers the only plausible narrative linking Darker's deployment of Type 3 ambiguous strokes to historical abbreviations within English. The similarity of the letters **u** and **n** in fourteenth and fifteenth century scripts might have resulted in scribes mistaking the word-final form <oū> (='ou*n*') for 'on̄' (='o*u*n').[61] This, in turn, might create ambivalence later in the fifteenth century as to whether it is an *n* or a *u* that is to be marked at the end of a word.[62] Of course, even in the event of a general (and poorly understood) scribal association of a word-end macron with romance-derived suffixes ending in the sounds /un/ or /ɒn/, there is little reason such an association should extend to other word-end nasals, as it so often does.

Darker does distinguish clearly between **u** and **n**, but even in his precise and deliberate hand there is occasional evidence of some ambivalence in the placement of his strokes where the final portion of the word has an underlying form -*ion*, -*ioun* or -*oun*.[63] His treatment of <adopcon> in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 517 provides an example. The word appears twice in quick succession (see Figure 1, lines 1 and 7)—assuming that a final *e* is not suspended in either case, the orthography intended may either be 'adopc*iou*n' or 'adopc*i*on'.

[Figure 1 - omitted]

Figure 1: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 517, f.10v (detail)[64]

In the first <adopcon>, it is difficult to tell whether the stroke is intended to abbreviate an *i* and a *u*, an *i* alone, or neither; in the second, *two* strokes are in evidence: a curl moving from the foot of the <n>, and a second clarifying stroke overwritten, placed more above the preceding <o> than the final <n>. The original curl from the foot of the <n>, it appears, was insufficient to mark the abbreviation intended. Editing this text for a recent edition, Anne Mouron judges that the strokes abbreviate an *i* in both instances.[65] The use of a macron over a nasal to suspend an *i* two letters earlier in the word is a common interpretation of the mark in this troublesome letter-combination;[66] this is, however, a very different explanation from any that might be given for nasal macrons elsewhere in Darker's corpus.[67] Context and surrounding orthography are evidently crucial in the interpretation of the stroke, even where it appears with the same ductus, on the same letter, and in the same position within the word. Whatever the decision made regarding the necessary expansion for <adopcon>, it is at least clear that Type 3 strokes occupy a somewhat ill-defined place in Darker's collection of supplementary marks.

The statistical method and a close reading of the context of the manuscript page come together here—or rather, confront one another frustratingly. Often, the data suggest possible general explanations that are weakened or contradicted when the immediate context of each stroke is considered. An imaginative sympathy with the hand and mind of the scribe in the particular context of each stroke repeatedly discovers specific reasons for instances of phenomena that the palaeographer would wish to explicate collectively; coherence of scribal method dissipates under the pressures of local physical and linguistic constraints. But the evidence for each possible explanation must be weighed, and instances of use individually judged for their accord with the pattern of the whole: no other process can arrive at a verdict.

The verdict, in Darker's case, is that his use of the macron stroke is not without meaning, though that meaning is neither merely visual nor wholly orthographic: patterns of use emerge that, surprisingly, appear to work independently of spelling in word-final <e>. That is, the appearance of a final <e> is something of a red herring: ignore this letter and a plausible explanation emerges. The word *son*/*sone* provides a good example. Three forms appear: <son̄> and <son̄e>, both signifying Present Day English 'son' and <sone>, signifying Present Day English 'soon'. This distinction is absolute: irrespective of the presence or absence of word-final <e>, the ambiguous stroke is always associated with the short-vowel /son/ 'son'; likewise, <sone>, invariably carrying a word-final <e> and *no* stroke, always denotes the presumably long-vowel /soːn/ 'soon'. The words <som>, <syn> and <whom> are regularly associated with the stroke, while <reson> (plausibly to be pronounced /rezoːn/ or /rezuːn/) is never found with it. The words <born̄>, <com̄> and <som̄>, though taking a final <e> more or less at random, almost always appear with a stroke. It is of note that doubled consonants were increasingly associated with a short preceding vowel in this period;[68] Darker, who does not in general display this orthographic preference, might instead have used a strongly marked macron to represent the same phonological point. This possibility is made more plausible by the occasional association of the Type 3 stroke with the final <pp> of <worshipp>, a consonantal doubling very likely to be associated with the shortness of the preceding vowel.[69] Though this correlation cannot be absolutely sustained (even limiting the examination to words in ‘o+nasal’, there is a significant incidence of conflicting data),[70] two things can be claimed: Darker uses the stroke consistently to distinguish similarly spelled words; and, in the case of stroke over nasal following <o>, there is a strong preference that the preceding vowel be short. It is a plausible hypothesis that this stroke is sometimes used by Darker in the way a doubled consonant was used by Orm in the twelfth century: to show that the preceding vowel is a short one.[71]

To conclude: Darker’s Type 3 strokes occupy unstable ground: in his Latin, strokes of the same appearance mark a variety of abbreviations; in his English, the meaning of the strokes changes with the letter they accompany. Unambiguously marking abbreviations only when associated with vowels, their uncertain presence on nasals seems to show a scribe struggling to signify the phonological nuances of vowel length or quality with an imprecise tool. Darker’s own somewhat erratic application of the stroke is unsurprising, given the range of meanings it elsewhere implies, but a correlation between the stroke and some aspects of phonology is unmistakable. Darker’s nasal macron is (probably) not otiose.

DARKER’S OTIOSE LABOUR, TYPE 4: CURL OVER WORD-FINAL R

Darker uses three forms of **r**, of which only two appear with an additional stroke (Table 1, Type 4). The 2-shaped (or ‘round’) **r**[72] is never given an additional stroke; short-r often takes a stroke where it appears in word-final position. Long-r is twice found word-finally:[73] on both occasions it has the curling stroke, but in a finer, and to my eye less deliberate form. It might be argued that this latter form, with its flourished finish, influenced the development of the curl on the short **r**, and thus that the curl is in both cases otiose. This hypothesis of a merely visual motivation for Type 4 strokes is apparently supported by the total absence of such strokes with the round-r form.

The ambiguous stroke accompanying **r** appears only in word-final position: it is nowhere followed by <e>. (The sole case of medial positioning in my samples is a noun ending in <-nes>, where the first morpheme is treated independently of its suffix.) The stroke is more likely to be omitted than to appear: the ratio of marked-**r** to unmarked-**r** in word-final position is approximately 5:8. Inclusion, however, is not random: <for> and <or> are never found with a final stroke, nor are <brother>, <fadir> or <hir>. On the other hand, <our> always carries the stroke, unless its final <e> is written out; <feer>, too, overwhelmingly appears with a stroke. Darker's use of <her> both as a pronoun and for the adverb 'here' overwhelmingly carries the stroke. It is difficult to conceive of any purely visual reason why <hir> and <her'> should be so absolutely differentiated. And then there is the fact that all words that occur with a stroke appear elsewhere written out with no curl and a final <e>. Words that are never seen with the curl (e.g. <or>, <hir>, <brothir>) are also never seen with a final <e> inscribed. It seems clear that for Darker, curl over word-final <r> is an abbreviation for <e>.[74]

Accounting for this orthographic distinction on linguistic grounds is a further challenge. For example, Darker's <her'>, depending on signification, has two different phonological histories: there is no historic word-final <e> in the case of the adverb (OE *hēr*),[75] and there is a different final vowel entirely in the case of the pronoun (OE *hiera*). The length of the preceding vowel is a more likely factor: <our'> and both senses of <her'> have long vowels; <for> takes an unstressed short vowel. There is evidence that by the early modern period, word-final <e> was used to mark just such a preceding long vowel;[76] it is possible to conclude both that the stroke over word-final <r> stands as the equivalent of <re>, and that this spelling represents an early development of the quantity-marking final <e> that was to emerge in the early modern period. This vowel-length hypothesis is supported by pairs such as <four’>/<for>, and is also consistent if we accept historical length in the cases of <Jangler’> and <cellar’> (OF *jangeleor*; AN *celier*).[77]

A still more striking association occurs in Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.vi.33, in Darker’s selection of words taking final <r’> after <o>. Darker corrects an inscription of 2-shaped <r> to the short-r form, and can have no other motivation for doing so than the insertion of a curled stroke. This correction can be seen in the third line of Figure 2: the final <r> of <mor> has been altered from a 2-shaped form, and the curled stroke added above it.

[Figure 2 - omitted]

Figure 2: Cambridge, University Library, MS Ff.vi.33, f.4r (detail)[78]

The use of 2-shaped <r> after <o> is to be expected. But the word so formed was unacceptable to Darker; a correction was made which allowed the addition of the curled stroke. On the line below, the same word is written without abbreviation as <more>. The choice to alter the letter form and add the curled stroke (instead of adding a final <e>) suggests that the correction was made after the line was complete, rather than as it was being written: evidently, this was a non-trivial omission. Seven other examples of <more> with 2-shaped <r> occur in proximity to these; the word never appears simply as unmarked ‘mor’. For Darker, after the letter <o>, the forms <r’> and <re> are interchangeable, while <r> and <r’> are not. That is to say, it may be a mistake to understand the fundamental distinction encoded by the stroke as being orthographic (i.e. abbreviating a final *e*); the real issue appears to be vowel length, for which two scribal marks are possible: one uses a letter (a final <e>), the other uses a Type 3 stroke. Elsewhere, another 2-shaped <r> is converted to short-r form to distinguish unmarked <for> from marked <afor’>, and again apparently after the completion of the line.[79] This cannot be a variation based in etymology, as the <for> element in both cases descends from the same OE *for*, indifferently spelled in the late medieval period with and without final <e>. But where <for> has a short unstressed vowel /o/, <afor'> takes a long stressed vowel /o:/. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records the gradual appearance of a distinction in spelling between 'for' and 'fore' in Middle English; Darker certainly consistently distinguishes the pair <for> and <þerfor> from the pair <afor'> and <before>,[80] an anticipation of what was to become a settled orthographic distinction. Roger Dahood notes a similar distinction of <or'> and <ore> from <or> in Southwell Minster, MS 7, copied in a manuscript by another scribe of the same period, though in his study 'therefore' appears in the same group as 'afore' and 'before'.[81] Dahood's scribe, that is, distinguishes only between freestanding <for> and <-for> as the latter part of a compound; Darker's distinction is the more linguistically defensible. But the crucial point is that in Darker's use of the curling stroke, lexical and apparently phonological differentiation is unmistakable.[82] Here, analogy with other spellings with word-final <re> might encourage an editor to treat the stroke as an abbreviation; but the more important point is the connection to vowel length. The primary sense this stroke encodes for Darker, I suggest, is phonological rather than orthographic.[83]

There are certain words in which word-final <r'>, <r> and <re> alternate such that it is difficult to see any meaningful pattern, but this need not be fatal to the basic association of the stroke with <e>, nor with its underlying phonological system: such flexibility would reflect both the variable spelling of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, and the relatively incidental nature of the phonological feature to which the stroke calls attention. Deviation from a self-imposed system of vowel markers could never be fatal to the sense of the text copied; in the absence of such an imperative, it should come as no surprise to detect the scribe in some degree of inconsistency.[84]

To conclude: Darker's curl over **r** is not otiose at all. It acts plausibly as a mark of abbreviation, and more importantly as a signal of vowel length.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated patterns in the deployment of ambiguous strokes (even in their most hairline form) that suggest a detailed linguistic and grammatical understanding on the part of the scribe, and a concern with the accurate calligraphic recording of this information. William Darker's ambiguous, apparently otiose strokes in fact form a complex system of essentially diacritic marks, deployed to clarify, among other things, points of phonology and morphology. With this system, the scribe's hand attempts to guide the reader's eye through the ambiguities of their shared language; the reader's eye needs to be keen to discern the signposts. But it is not implausible that Darker's Carthusian brothers at Sheen, engaged in the solitary rumination of *lectio* (those '[p]rivate devotional performances in the cell'),[85] and no less the sisters at Syon Abbey, meditating on their path to righteous living through his texts, would have found such signs legible. In Darker's interpretation of the English vernacular aesthetic of added line and curl, there is guidance for pronunciation in the length and division of the syllables, and guidance for the eye to follow the contours of the words; in his audience there is a community of male and female readers who might thereby have been enabled to feel more deeply and surely the sacred meaning of their texts. In Darker's manuscripts we see a scribe labouring intensely to imbue with meaning those strokes that we have since come to call otiose; in the reading communities to which he belonged, and which his productions helped to shape, decoration and meaning are one.

It is perhaps unlikely that the patterns observed with Darker's four stroke types will be found to repeat themselves regularly in the work of other scribes: the orthographic idiolect and aesthetic sensibilities of a different scribe might well lead to the deployment of the strokes according to a different rationale (though the point of congruence between Darker and the scribe of Southwell Minster, MS 7 suggests at least some similarity between scribal methods). But it is to be hoped that future investigators will in their delving uncover further and more complete patterns of use in the various ambiguous strokes found in fifteenth and sixteenth century vernacular manuscripts. In the broader context of the deployment of these strokes, it may well be discovered that William Darker stands as one of the last transmitters of a system of extra-litteral marks representing fine distinctions in sound and sense that flourished briefly in the later medieval period, but that has since been lost to the English language.

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[1] Geoffrey Hill, *The Enemy's Country: Words, Contexture, and Other Circumstances of Language* (Stanford, 1991), 8.

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[2] *English Cursive Book Hands, 1250-1500* (Berkeley, 1980), xxvi.

[3] See e.g. the section of the LALME introduction dealing with 'Purely Graphetic Variation' (s. 1.4.7): M. Benskin et al., *An Electronic Version of A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* [www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/elalme/elalme.html] (Edinburgh: © 2013- The Authors and The University of Edinburgh). Accessed 1 February 2019. Exceptions to the practice of omitting strokes deemed otiose from transcription do exist: e.g. Laura Wright, *Sources of London English: Medieval Thames Vocabulary* (Oxford, 1996), 17-19.

[4] And in some French texts: e.g. the apparently superfluous stroke attached to the *z* in a manuscript reproduced in Pamela Robinson, *Catalogue of Dated and Datable Manuscripts c. 888-1600 in London Libraries*. 2 vols (London, 2003), 2. plate 226. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this reference.

[5] Some of the problems created by editorial interpretation of these strokes—particularly with regard to the binary of abbreviation/non-abbreviation—are laid out in Laura Wright, 'On Variation and Change in London Medieval Mixed-Language Business Documents', in Merja Stenroos, Martti Mäkinen and Inge Særheim (eds), *Language Contact and Development around the North Sea* (Amsterdam, 2012): 99-115, 101.

[6] E.g. Friedrich W. D. Brie (ed.), *The Brut; or, The Chronicles of England*, EETS (London, 1906).

[7] Detailed accounts grappling with transcribing ambiguous strokes include Peter Robinson and Elizabeth Solopova, 'Guidelines for Transcription of the Manuscripts of the Wife of Bath's Prologue', in N. F. Blake and P. M. W. Robinson (eds), *The Canterbury Tales Project Occasional Papers*, vol. I (Oxford, 1993), 19-52; and Michael Pidd and Estelle Stubbs, 'From Medieval Manuscripts to Electronic Text: A Transcriber's Tale', in Norman Blake and Peter Robinson (eds), *The Canterbury Tales Project Occasional Papers*, vol. II (Oxford, 1997), 57.

[8] E.g. C. E. Wright, *English Vernacular Hands from the Twelfth to the Fifteenth Century* (Oxford, 1960), 16-24. It is worth noting, however, that for many stroke-types under examination here, clear evidence of a consistent abbreviatory function is scant even early in their history.

[9] *The Handwriting of English Documents* (London, 1958), 38. Charles Johnson and Hilary Jenkinson, *English Court Hand A.D. 1066-1500*, 2 vols (New York, 1915; repr. 1967), 1. xxiii, reason similarly, but lay greater stress on unthinking scribal habit. Laura Wright, 'Mixed-language Business Writing: Five Hundred Years of Code-switching', in Ernst Håkon Jahr (ed.), *Language Change: Advances in Historical Sociolinguistics* (Berlin, 1998), 99-118, presents a fuller account of the complexities of possible abbreviation strokes across Latin and English.

[10] E.g. Grant G. Simpson, *Scottish Handwriting, 1150-1650: An Introduction to the Reading of Documents* (East Linton, 1998), 44; N. Denholm-Young, *Handwriting in England and Wales* (Cardiff, 1954), 70.

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[11] Malcolm B. Parkes, *Their Hands Before our Eyes: A Closer Look at Scribes* (Aldershot, 2008), 101-126.

[12] E.g. Teresa Marqués-Aguado, ‘Editions of Middle English Texts and Linguistic Research: Desiderata regarding Palaeography and Editorial Practices’, *Variants: The Journal of the European Society for Textual Scholarship* 10 (2013): 17-40, 25; Roger Lass, ‘*Ut custodient litteras*: Editions, Corpora, Witnesshood’, in Marina Dossena and Roger Lass (eds), *Methods and Data in English Historical Dialectology* (Bern, 2004) 21-48, 23 note 2.

[13] On Darker’s work, see A. I. Doyle, ‘William Darker: The Work of an English Carthusian Scribe’, in Christopher Baswell (ed.), *Medieval Manuscripts, Their Makers and Users* (Turnhout, 2011), 199-211; A. I. Doyle, ‘Recent Directions in Medieval Manuscript Study’, in Derek Pearsall (ed.), *New Directions in Later Medieval Manuscript Studies: Essays from the 1998 Harvard Conference* (Rochester, NY, 2000), 1-14; T. C. Barnard et al., *‘A Miracle of Learning:’ Studies in Manuscripts and Irish Learning* (Aldershot, 1998), 124-6; Brendan Biggs (ed.), *The Imitation of Christ: The First English Translation of the ‘Imitatio Christi’*, EETS (Oxford, 1997), xxiii-xxiv; and Brendan Biggs, ‘The Language of the Scribes of the First English Translation of the *Imitatio Christi*’, *Leeds Studies in English* 26 (1995): 79-111.

[14] E.g. Venetia Nelson, ‘Problems of Transcription in the ‘Speculum Vitae’ MSS’, *Scriptorium* 31 (1977): 254-59, 255, comparing 35 MSS of the *Speculum Vitae* (produced by different scribes, copying at different times) finds no consistent pattern in the use of ambiguous, apparently otiose marks.

[15] Not included in this study is the occasional return-stroke from the bowl of the <d>, seen, for example, at the end of the final line of Plate 1 (<seyd>). The thinness and speed of this stroke, and the lack of sharp direction change or pen-lift in its execution, give it the appearance of an unconscious continuation: it looks more like a flourish (and less like any known abbreviation) than do the other strokes under consideration.

[16] 172mm × 144mm; support is a poor-quality paper. Only one side of each folio contains text: the sole witness of the English vernacular *Dyalog of Seynt Anselme and of oure Lady of the Passion of oure Lord Jhesu Chryst*. The text begins, ‘they brouȝt hym to byschop Cayphas. ther’ fyrst after he was | take I syȝe hym̄.’ Reproduced with permission of The Bodleian Libraries.

[17] For categorization, see Malcolm Parkes, *English Cursive Book Hands,* 8. See also Doyle, ‘Recent Directions’, 6, who similarly categorizes Darker’s writing as ‘a distinctive fere-textura.’

[18] On expansion to *u*, see the discussion of marked **n** in Ralph Hanna and David Lawton (eds), *The Siege of Jerusalem*, EETS (Oxford, 2003), lxxxviii. A less common expansion in situations involving marked **n** (where the letter appears word-finally, after a vowel) is to double the nasal: ‘-*n*n’: e.g. Michael G. Sargent, *James Grenehalgh as Textual Critic*, 2 vols (Salzburg, 1984), 1. 9; and throughout Edmund Colledge and James Walsh (eds), *A Book of Showings to the Anchoress Julian of Norwich*, 2 vols (Toronto, 1978). For examples in Colledge and Walsh, see e.g. ‘comy*n*n’ and ‘ca*m*me’, 311. Sargent describes this editorial choice as ‘difficult’ (*James Grenehalgh as Textual Critic*, 1. 9); independent evidence in support of the resulting orthography is scant.

[19] As a result, where Darker’s productions have formed the basis for a modern edition, his additional marks have in general been ignored. In Anne E. Mouron (ed), *The Manere of Good Lyvyng: A Middle English Translation of Pseudo-Bernard’s Liber de modo bene vivendi ad sororem* (Turnhout, 2014), of which Darker’s MS Laud Misc. 517 is the only copy, the editor does not refer to his ambiguous strokes at all: ‘All abbreviations have been silently expanded according to the most common spelling, when unabbreviated forms are given elsewhere in the text’ (40). A

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comparison of the edited text with the MS suggests that she considers Darker's ambiguous strokes to be non-abbreviatory otiose marks, including in the case of the heavily-marked stroke on <r>.

[20] E.g. Ruth Kennedy, *Three Alliterative Saints' Hymns: Late Middle English Stanzaic Poems*, EETS (Oxford, 2003), xcv, who reasons in favour of the expansion of <all> with slashed ascenders to 'all*e*' partly on the grounds that '*all* does not seem to occur in Middle English.'

[21] For the sixteenth century, see M. L. Samuels, 'Spelling and Dialect in the Late and Post-Middle English Periods', in Michael Benskin and M. L. Samuels (eds), *So Meny People Longages and Tonges: Philological Essays in Scots and Mediaeval English Presented to Angus McIntosh* (Edinburgh, 1981), 43-54, 44. For the fifteenth, see N. Davis, 'Scribal Variation in Late Fifteenth-Century in English', in Fernand Mossé (ed), *Mélanges de linguistique et de philologie, Fernand Mossé in memoriam* (Paris, 1959), 95-103.

[22] Biggs, 'The Language of the Scribes', 93-6. Among other idiosyncrasies, Darker uses 'owyne' in addition to 'own', prefers 'good' or 'goode' to 'god' (ModE 'good'), and his spelling of 'wolle'/'wylle' (ModE 'will') is highly variable.

[23] Doyle, 'Book Production', 14. See also Doyle, 'William Darker', 123; Biggs, 'The Language of the Scribes', 93-96 and 109.

[24] 'Book Production by the Monastic Orders in England (*c.* 1375-1530): Assessing the Evidence', in Linda L. Brownrigg (ed.), *Medieval Book Production: Assessing the Evidence* (Los Altos Hills, CA, 1990), 1-19, 13.

[25] Folio samples were examined from six MSS in which text or annotation is attributed to these scribes; though ambiguous strokes were often in evidence, the pattern of stroke-types used by Darker was not consistently seen. See e.g. New Haven, Beinecke, MS 661, containing the *Siege of Thebes* (attributed to the hand of Stephen Dodesham in Linne R. Mooney, 'Vernacular Literary Manuscripts and their Scribes', in Alexandra Gillespie and Daniel Wakelin (eds), *The Production of Books in England 1350-1550* (Cambridge, 2011), 192-211, 206-7).

[26] Biggs, *The Imitation of Christ*, lxviii-lxix. On Carthusian preoccupation with textual purity, see Sargent, *James Grenehalgh as Textual Critic*, 1. 19-21; Daniel Wakelin, *Scribal Correction and Literary Craft: English Manuscripts 1375-1510* (Cambridge, UK, 2014), 23-4. On the general fifteenth-century tendency *not* to correct for dialectal minutiae of orthography (as Darker appears to have done in Trinity College, MS 678), see Wakelin, *Scribal Correction*, 162-170.

[27] Brendan Biggs, 'A Critical Edition of the First English Translation of the "Imitatio Christi"' (Doctoral Thesis, University of Oxford, 1992), 19-26.

[28] Attribution relies on Doyle, 'William Darker', 199-211. Darker is also likely to be responsible for the Latin in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 414 and the final section of British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii; his is certainly the subsidiary hand in several further MSS, though these additions are too brief to be considered here.

[29] Some 40 of 168 folios contain English: approximately 6,000 words in total. On this MS, see Gustaf Holmstedt (ed), *Speculum Christiani: A Middle English Religious Treatise of the 14th Century*, EETS (London, 1933), xlviii-l.

[30] Approximately 6,000 words of text. See also Ogilvie-Thomson, *Manuscripts*, 72 and 544.

[31] A sample of approximately 13,000 words (40 folios of a total of 140) was taken. Where only a portion of the MS is sampled, folios are taken in blocks of ten at regular intervals. On this MS, see Margaret Connolly, *Manuscripts in the University Library, Cambridge (Dd-Oo)*, Index of Middle English Prose: Handlist XIX (Woodbridge, 2009), 158-62; Charles Hardwick and Henry Richards Luard, *A Catalogue of Manuscripts Preserved in the Library of the University of Cambridge*, 5 vols (Cambridge, 1856-67), 2. 534-6; Phyllis Hodgson (ed), *Deonise Hid Diuinite and other*

Treatises on Contemplative Prayer Related to the Cloud of Unknowing, EETS (London, 1955), xiv-xv.

[32] A sample of approximately 12,000 words was taken (40 folios of a total of 184). *The Manere of Good Lyvyng* is a work in 73 chapters, translated from the pseudo-Bernard's *Tractatus de modo vivendi* (*PL* 184:1199-1306). Other texts in the MS include *The Twelve Degrees of Mekenes*, *Seynt Albert the Byschop Seyth Thes Words*, and *Of Pacyens to be had in Sekenes*. See Mouron (ed.), *The Manere of Good Lyvyng*, 8; H. O. Coxe, *Laudian Manuscripts*, Bodleian Library Quarto Catalogues 2, repr. from the edition of 1858-85, with corrections and additions, and an historical introduction by R. W. Hunt (Oxford, 1973), 374-5; S. J. Ogilvie-Thomson, *Manuscripts in the Laudian Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford* (Woodbridge, 2000), 50-1; and Parkes, *English Cursive Book Hands*, 8.

[33] A sample of approximately 6,000 words was taken (25 folios of a total of 118 containing text). See Rowin Cross, *A Handlist of Manuscripts Containing English in the Hunterian Collection, Glasgow University Library* (Glasgow, 2004), 18; Patrick Henderson Aitken and John Young, *A Catalogue of the Manuscripts in the Library of the Hunterian Museum in the University of Glasgow* (Glasgow, 1908), 124; Biggs, 'The Language of the Scribes', 81 and 94; and Brendan Biggs, 'The Style of the First English Translation of the *Imitatio Christi*', in Roger Ellis and René Tixier (eds), *The Medieval Translator: Traduire au Moyen Age* (Turnhout, 1996), 187-211, 188.

[34] An example of this contextual examination is provided by the apparently sharp turn of the stroke not included in the investigation: the tail seen on the final <d> of <beheld>, Plate 1, line 2. This 'ductus' I diagnose as unintentional: the result of the nib catching on the unusually rough surface of the poor-quality paper.

[35] In <nombre>, MS Add. 22121, f.28v. Compare with similarly placed but uncrossed <b> in <scrybes> (MS Laud Misc. 38, f.8v), <wherby> (MS Laud Misc. 517, f.5v), and <iob> (MS Hunterian T.6.18, f.11r).

[36] There is only one orthographic pattern here: single <l> is most commonly crossed in words spelled <-ple>: <peple> (x7); <temple> (x7); <simple> (x7); <example> (x4). In most cases of <l> crossing, and all instances of crossed <bl>, a word-final <e> is already inscribed: there is no possibility of expansion. E.g. <dowble>, <possible>, <horible> (MS Laud Misc. 517 f.8v, f.2v; MS Add. 22121, f.33r).

[37] *English Vernacular Hands*, xvii. See also Alpo Honkapohja, 'Latin in Recipes?' A Corpus Approach to Scribal Abbreviations in 15th-century Medical Manuscripts', in Päivi Pahta, Janne Skaffari and Laura Wright (eds), *Multilingual Practices in Language History* (Boston, 2018), 243-271, 248.

[38] *English Vernacular Hands*, 16. Describing London, British Library, MS Add. 32578.

[39] London, British Library, MS Cotton Titus C.xvi.

[40] *English Vernacular Hands*, 22. Describing Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawlinson B.408.

[41] *English Vernacular Hands*, 24. Describing London, British Library, MS Lansdowne 285.

[42] Phonology may also be implicated here: the older distinction between long and short consonants is more likely to be preserved in pronunciation where the sound is repeated across a morpheme boundary. If this phonological distinction is indeed active in Darker's dialect, the resulting geminated /lː/ is consistently indicated by the absence of a hairline stroke. But this would be a surprisingly late date for such a distinction.

[43] E.g. MS Laud Misc. 517, f.4r <fayth fully>, in which the <h> is crossed, but the <ll> is not.

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[44] In the samples under examination, this stroke is only found in three MSS: MS Laud Misc. 38, MS Laud Misc. 517, and MS Ff.vi.33. In the third of these, it appears only in a rubricated running heading, and in the first only on four occasions, all on a single folio.

[45] These are <all> (x3) and <myracle> (x1).

[46] But note that a transitional /u/ emerged in certain cases before /a/ and back /l/; thus Lydgate's <paule>, <braule>: Carl Horstmann, 'Nachträge zu den Legenden: Kalendar in Versen von Dan John Lydgate', *Archiv* 80 (1888): 114-35; Richard Jordan, *Handbook of Middle English Grammar: Phonology*, tr. and rev. Eugene Joseph Crook (The Hague, 1974), 232-3.

[47] Donald A. Norman, 'Categorization of Action Slips', *The Psychological Review* 88 (1981), 1-15, 8; Hans-Leo Teulings, W. M. Thomassen and Gerard P. van Galen, 'Invariants in Handwriting: The Information Contained in a Motor Program', in Henry Kao (ed.) *Graphonomics: Contemporary Research in Handwriting* (Oxford, 1989), 306-315.

[48] As in the standard abbreviations <capli> for 'cap*itu*li' and <vl> for 'v*e*l' where the <l> is crossed: London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A.ii, f.204v.

[49] Where the hairline is omitted from a word, a final <e> is never added, though this spelling does very occasionally appear in Darker's corpus. Crossed <h> appears in the combinations <th>, <ch> and <gh>; almost never with <sh>. It is difficult to discern a phonological reason for this distinction, especially since the differentiation of graph-patterns <ch> and <sh> is upheld even where it does not reflect a phonological distinction between /tʃ/ and /ʃ/: the final ascender of <wache> (ModE 'wash') is consistently crossed.

[50] *English Cursive Book Hands*, 8.

[51] Final <e> is written out where the ambiguous stroke also appears only once: <strong'e>, MS Add. 22121 f.40r. The one case where the <g> appears word-finally without a stroke (<prolog>) is found on an opening folio, in a rubricated heading on an otherwise empty line (MS Laud Misc. 517, f.1r).

[52] Outside the work of Darker, there is evidence that a stroke over word-final <g> can indicate abbreviation: the scribe of Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 262 omits the nasal in <techyg> (='techy*n*g', f.60v), marking the <g> with a curl; on the facing folio (61r), the same omission is marked in a more standard way with macrons above the vowels: <thīkȳg> (='thi*n*ky*n*g'). In the handwriting of this scribe (a contemporary of Darker's, writing in a large, set textura), a mark on word-final <g> could apparently substitute for a macron above the preceding vowel. Darker, too, usually marks omitted nasals on the preceding vowel (see Plate 1, line 7 <*con*dē*m*pned>), but on at least one occasion, he omits the *n* from the verbal suffix -*ing*, and places his stroke over both the remaining letters <yg> (<w^{t}stondyg>, MS Hunterian T.6.18, f.6v). Here, the stroke certainly indicates the omitted *n* after the <y>; it may also supply an omitted final *e* (=?'w^{t}stondy*nge*'). Similar placement is seen in <hauyg> (=?'hauy*nge*', MS Laud Misc. 517, f.5v). There is some ambivalence of placement here, but a stroke proximate to final <g> could evidently function to abbreviate. On the scribe of Douce 262, see Laurel Braswell, *A Handlist of Douce Manuscripts containing Middle English Prose in the Bodleian Library, Oxford*. IMEP IV (Cambridge, UK, 1987), 56-7.

[53] E.g. MS Add. 22121 f.25v; MS Laud Misc. 517 f.13v.

[54] Hunterian MS T.6.18 f.6v.

[55] This conclusion accords to some extent with Daniel Wakelin 'Writing the Words', in Alexandra Gillespie and Daniel Wakelin (eds), *The Production of Books in England, 1350-1500* (Cambridge, UK, 2011), 34-58, 48-9, who argues for the importance of even apparent 'otiose' strokes to the total meaning of a letter. In the present case, letter-with-mark and letter-without-mark might better

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be characterized as two different letter forms: in neither form can a part of the whole be isolated as otiose.

[56] See also Nelson, ‘Problems of Transcription’, 255.

[57] A distinction suggested also by the LAEME editors’ decision to distinguish between ‘connected’ strokes and ‘unconnected’ ones in marking transcription: Margaret Laing and Roger Lass, ‘Introduction’, in Margaret Laing, *A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English, 1150-1325*, Version 3.2 [http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/laeme2/laeme2.html]. Edinburgh: ©The University of Edinburgh, §3.4.6.

[58] The preposition ‘in’, which never attracts a Type 3 stroke, is excluded from this set.

[59] MS Add. 22121, f.1r.

[60] See, e.g. Parkes, *English Cursive Book Hands*, xxix.

[61] Hanna and Lawton, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, lxxxviii, suggest that a stroke above the final nasal in <don̄> might indicate a preceding *u* in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 656. On expansion of medial *-u-*, especially in *-oun*/*-ion*/*-ioun* endings, see Kennedy, *Three Alliterative Saints’ Hymns*, xcv-xcvi.

[62] This can result in editorial inconsistency also: Francisco Alonso-Almeida and Alicia Rodríguez-Álvarez, ‘The ‘Sekenesse of Wymmen’ Revisited’, *Manuscripta*, 40 (1996) 157-164, 158.

[63] Such forms generally derive from the Latin suffix *-tiō* or *-iō*, often via Old French *-tion* or *-cion*.

[64] 190mm × 140mm with 20 written lines; support is a well-prepared animal membrane. MS contains a long text, *The Manere of Good Lyvynge* (excerpt from this text is shown in fig. 1) and several shorter religious English texts. Reproduced with permission of The Bodleian Libraries.

[65] *The Manere of Good Lyvyng*, 49.

[66] E.g. Wakelin, *Scribal Correction*, xiii. See also Giles E. Dawson and Laetitia Kennedy-Skipton, *Elizabethan Handwriting, 1500-1650: A Manual* (New York, 1966), 20.

[67] Such as <peyn>, Figure 1, line 2, for which following *e* would be the most plausible expansion.

[68] Jordan, *Handbook*, 152-3.

[69] Found in MS Add. 22121, ff.38r and 40v (x3 total). A similar pattern of short-vowel associations may be traced in Venetia Nelson’s discovery that the scribe of Cambridge, University Library, MS Gg.1.7 (containing the *Speculum Vitae*) includes the stroke with the words *nane*, *done*, *sone*, *Corne*, *Som*, *come*, *mans*, *þan* and *kyngdom*—appearances she calls ‘clearly meaningless.’ (Though note, *contra*, the use of the stroke with *doun*.) ‘Problems of Transcription’, 255-6.

[70] Neither <oon> nor <on> takes a stroke; <down> (surely to be pronounced /duːn/) almost invariably does.

[71] See R. W. Burchfield, ‘The Language and Orthography of the Ormulum MS’, *Transactions of the Philological Society*, 55 (1956): 56-87.

[72] So called because it typically follows the rightmost edge of rounded letters; in Darker’s hand, these are <o>, <b>, <d>, <p>, <w> and <y>.

[73] E.g. MS Laud Misc. 38, f.7r: <ther>.

[74] This interpretation is common for editors and paleographers: e.g., Jane Roberts, *Guide to Scripts used in English Writings up to 1500* (London, 2005), 184 (Plate 41).

[75] The adverb did acquire a final <e> by an analogical process in the early Middle English period, and retained a by-form with that syllable into the fourteenth century. See Donka Minkova, *The History of Final Vowels in English: The Sound of Muting* (Berlin, 1991), 131-2.

[76] E.g. E. T. Campagnac (ed.), *Mulcaster’s Elementarie* (Michigan, 1980), 123-5.

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[77] On sound changes governed by following /r/ in this period, see Charles Laurence Barber, *Early Modern English* (Edinburgh, 1997), 116-124.

[78] 210mm × 151mm with 19 written lines; support is well-prepared animal membrane. The MS contains eight religious prose texts in English, including the rules of Saints Brigit of Sweden and Augustine of Hippo. Reproduced with permission of Cambridge University Library.

[79] MS Ff.vi.33 f.6r.

[80] Only once is <befor> spelled without final <e> or stroke.

[81] 'Abbreviations, Otiose Strokes and Editorial Practice: The Case of Southwell Minster MS 7', in Ronald Waldron, Susan Powell and Jeremy J. Smith (eds), *New Perspectives on Middle English Texts: A Festschrift for R. A. Waldron* (Cambridge, 2000), 146-48. The MS is described in M. Wakelin, 'The Manuscripts of John Mirk's *Festial*', *Leeds Studies in English* 1 (1967): 93-118; its dating to the end of the fifteenth or early sixteenth centuries follows N. R. Ker and A. J. Piper. *Medieval Manuscripts in British Libraries*, 4 vols (Oxford, 1969-92).

[82] Hanna and Lawton, *The Siege of Jerusalem*, lxxxvii-lxxxviii, come close to suggesting a grammatical basis for the curl on <r>; their reasoning, however, relates more to the grammatical signification of final *e* than that of the stroke itself.

[83] A stroke or accent as the marker of a long syllable has a long, if sporadic, history of deployment. See Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, tr. Dáibhí ó Cróinin and David Ganz (Cambridge, UK, 1990), 171; Bischoff's account draws on E. A. Loew, *The Beneventan Script: A History of the South Italian Minuscule*, 2nd edn (Rome, 1980), 274-7.

[84] See also Dahood, 'Abbreviations, Otiose Strokes and Editorial Practice', 147.

[85] Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago, 2008), 27. I owe the preceding phrase to Suzanne Reynolds, *Medieval Reading: Grammar, Rhetoric and the Classical Text* (Cambridge, 1996), 29.