

# Obscenity, Censorship, and Creativity in Fifteenth- Century Manuscripts

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Nuns picking phalluses from phallus-trees, from 14<sup>th</sup>-century copy of the *Romance of the Rose* (BnF MS Fr. 25526)



## **Monk handing penis to nun**

Paris, BNF, Fr. 25526, f. 160r (*Roman de la Rose*,  
France 14th century)



## Naked Woman Riding Flying Goateed Penis Monster

*Decretum Gratiani* with the commentary of  
Bartolomeo da Brescia, Italy 1340-1345.

Lyon, BM, Ms 5128, fol. 100r

# Dragon with penis hat

pontifical, Avignon ca. 1330-1340

Tours, Bibliothèque municipale, ms. Diocèse 8, fol. 59r





**Phallic creature with bell around neck,  
touching boot-wearing vulva**

# Genitals on ladders and griddles

Phallus and fish on  
griddle



Phallus and vulva  
on ladder



# Vulvas with Legs and Accessories





**A ship full of phalluses went out  
to sea...**



# Walking Winged Phalluses



**Go eat a bag of dicks!**



# Vulva figure wearing double phallus crown and walking on stilts



# Jaunty Vulvas with Crowns!



# Gender and Ball-Naming:

“the ballokis”

[scrotum/ testicles]:

“of wommen it is ycallid a  
purs for curtesie”

Men callen [it] a ters but for  
curtesie wymmnen callen it a  
yerde.

- Middle English anatomy in MS Wellcome 564 (c. 1450),  
fol. 44v.

Ters/Tarse = penis

Yerde = penis *or* stick

This mouth is clepid of  
clerkis vulva

[This mouth is called vulva  
by clerks]



Tentigo = Clitoris

lewed [uneducated] folk call [it]  
the kykyre in the cont

# Medieval Scribe Copying Manuscript

British Library, Yates Thompson MS 26 (1175-1200), fol. 2r.



# Ways Medieval Scribes and Readers Censored Obscenities:

- Code (Bonifatian alphabetic encryption; “fuck” = “gxdl”)
- Erasure (scraping obscenity from page)
- Substitution (substituting less-obscene term for more-obscene term)

# **Flen, flyys, and freris [Fleas, Flies, and Friars]**

Fratres Carmeli navigant in a both apud Eli.

Non sunt in celi, quia gxddbbov xxkxzt pg ifmk.

Omnes drencherunt, quia sterisman non habuerunt,

Fratres cum knyvys goth about and txxkxzv nfookt xxzxkt.

Carmelite friars sail in a boat near Ely.

They are not in heaven, because fuccant wivys of Heli (they fuck the wives of Ely)

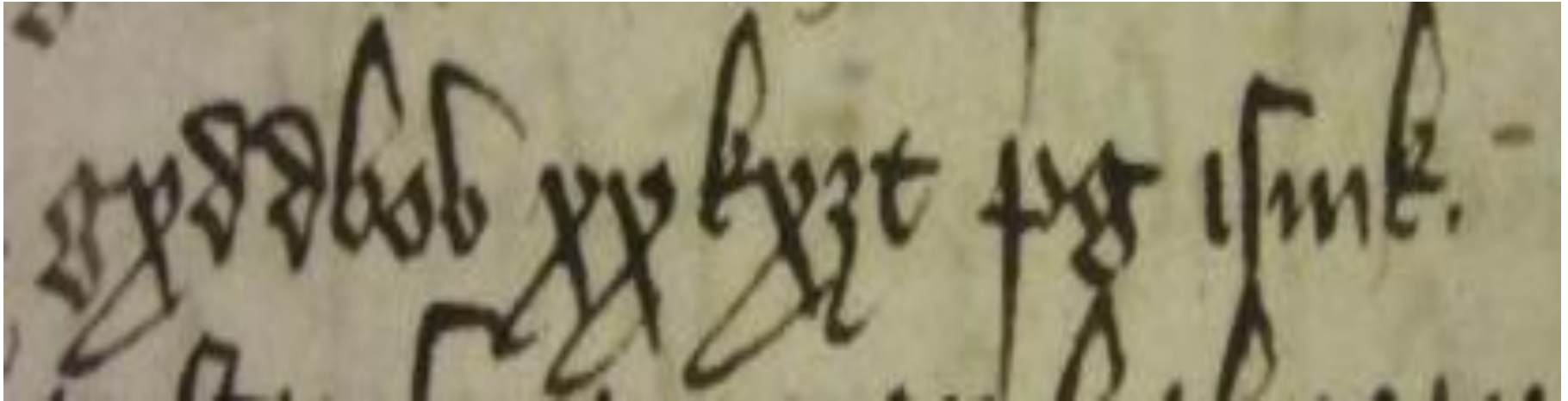
They all drowned, because they did not have a steersman,  
Friars with knives go about and swivyt mennis wyvis.]

is: cōfētencia gramina rēvī  
nas: f. cuncta pace tueyo.  
r. bryno flen flyzes a frero.  
frero: fowl falle hem yvo fyften zeyo.  
r. lomt flen flyzes ne frero.  
ngant in a both apud Eli.  
r. yddob ylyzt p̄g isnk.  
r. qz steyman non habneyunt.  
op a bout and tylyzt nfookt ylykt.  
enti sede locatū.  
r. salomon tū ille vocat.  
stant ita t̄hella.

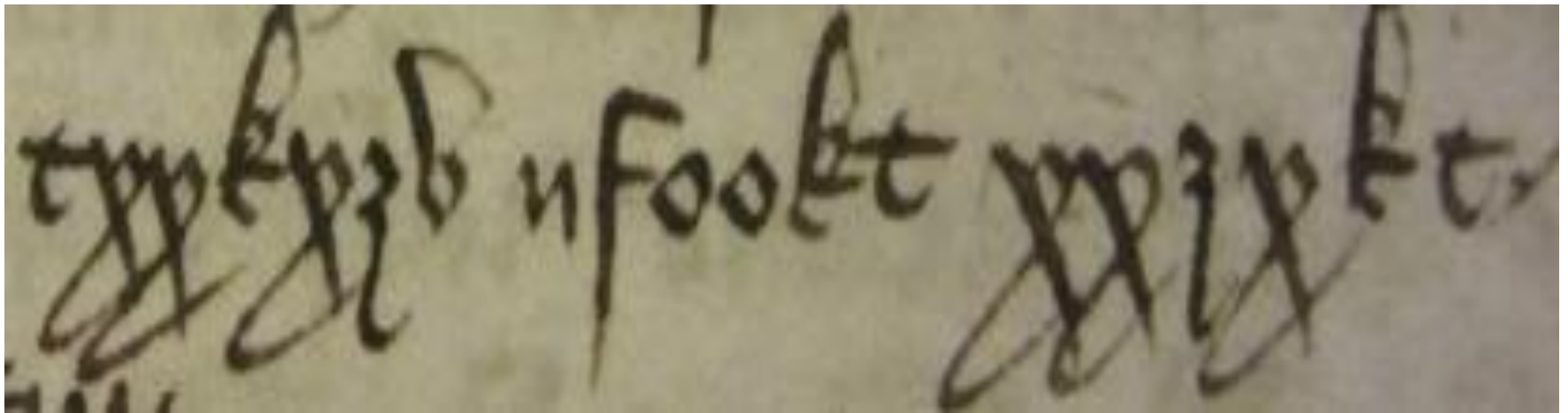
**“Flen, flyys, and freris” [Fleas, flies, and friars]**

London, British Library, Harley 3362, fol. 24r (c. 1450-75),  
Cambridge scholar’s notebook

**“gxddb0v xxkx3t pg ifmk”  
[fuccant wivys of heli (Ely)]**



txxkxzv nfookt xx3xkt  
[swivyt mennis wyvis]



## Erasure of Explicit Couplet:

“They myghte no more be broghte a-  
sondre/ Than dog and bych that men  
on wondre”

[They might no more be brought  
asunder/ Than dog and bitch that  
men wonder upon]

From Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne*; these  
lines are scraped from the page in British  
Library MS Harley 1701 (c. 1440)

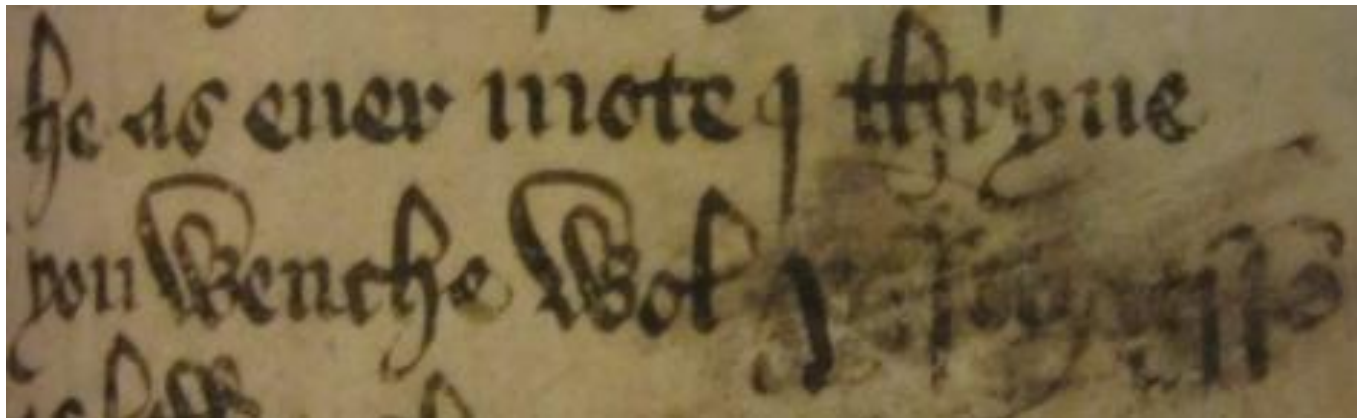


# Erasure in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*:

“yon wenche wol y swyffe [fuck]”

“yon wenche wol {...}”

BL MS Additional 35286, fol. 41r

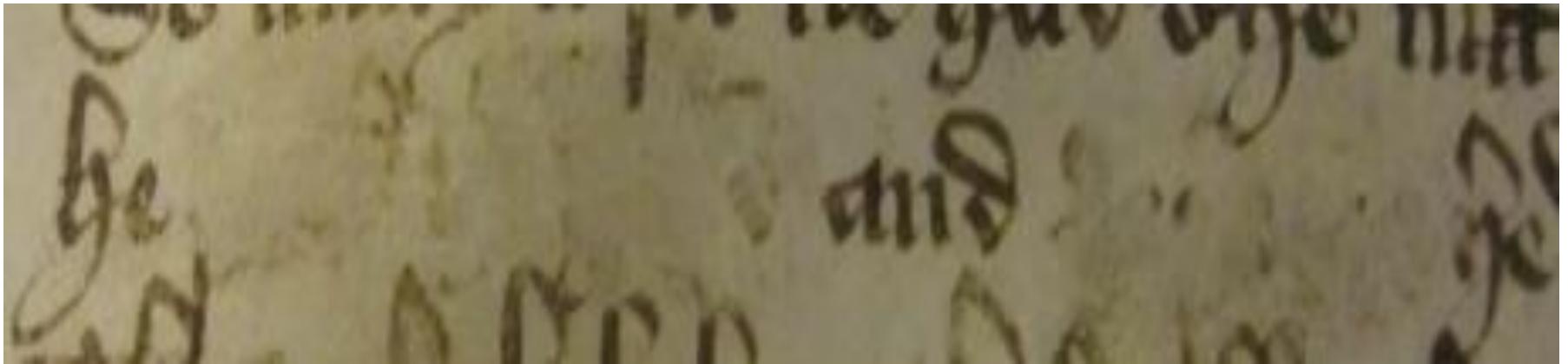


Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*:

“He priketh hard and depe as he were mad” [He pierces/rides hard and deep as though he were mad]

BL MS Additional 35286, fol. 41v:

“He {...} and {...} he were mad”



“w” of “swyfed” is erased and  
over-written with “ch”:

“swyfed” → “schyfed”

*Reeve's Tale*, MS Additional 35286, fol. 41v



# Less-Obscene Scribal Substitutions for “Swyved” in 15<sup>th</sup>-Century MSS of the *Canterbury Tales*

- “pleyed”
- “dight” [“did”]
- “dide” [did]
- “served”
- “schryve” [to make or hear  
confession]



**Sheela-na-gig in the British Museum, c. 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup>  
c., from Chloran, County Meath, Ireland**

Yeve thi cunte to cunnig,  
And crave affetir wedding,  
Quod Hendyng.

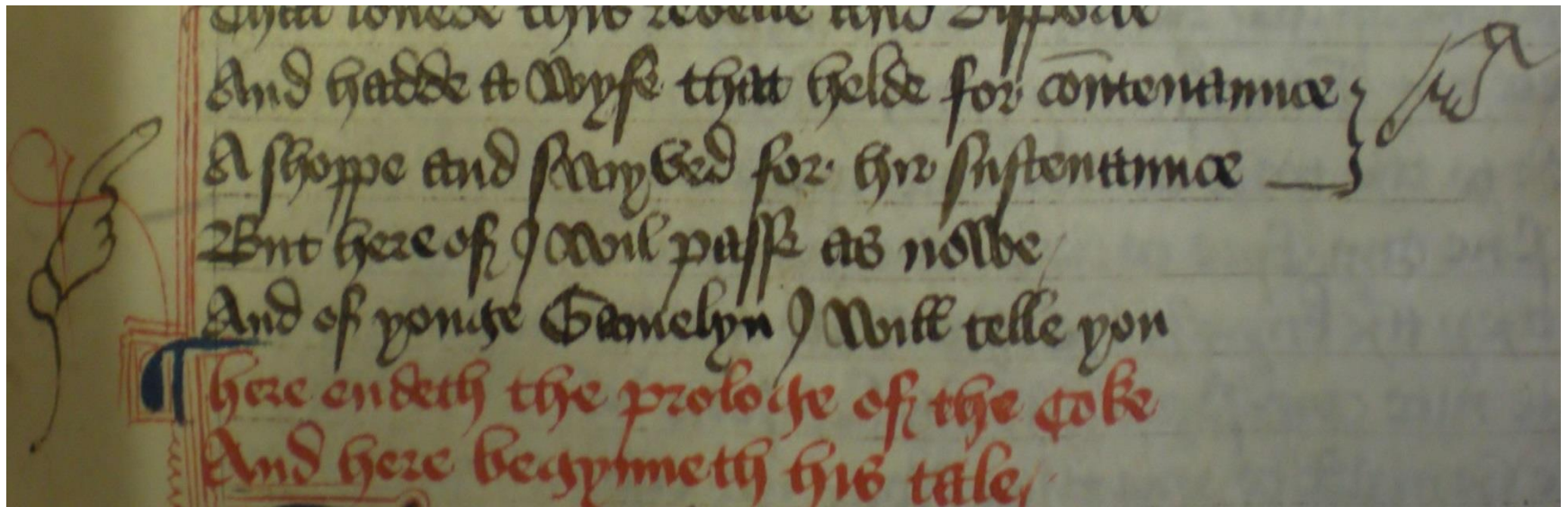
- collection of “Proverbs of Hendyng” in Cambridge,  
Cambridge University Library, MS Gg.1.1 (13<sup>th</sup> c.), fol. 479v.



And hadde a wyf that helde for  
countenaunce

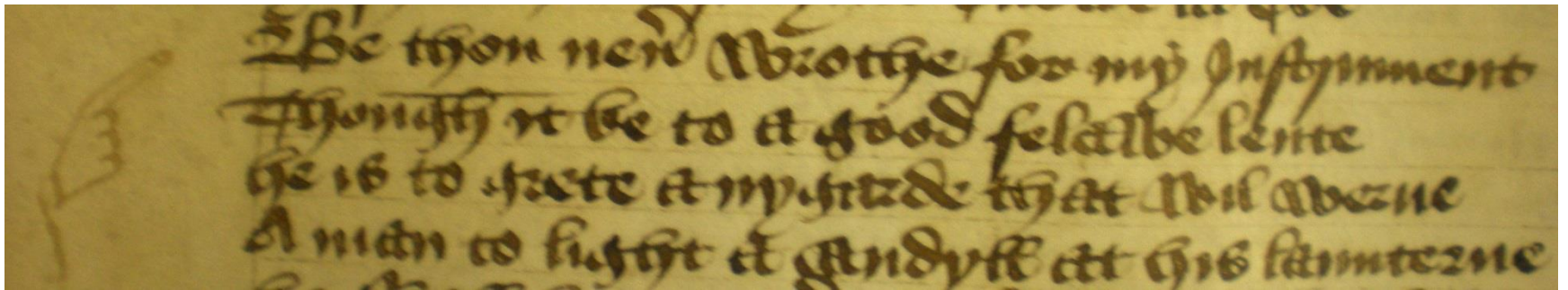
A shoppe, and swyved for hir sustenaunce.

- *The Cook's Tale*, in Cambridge, Cambridge University  
Library, li.3.26 (c. 1430-50), fol. 52r.



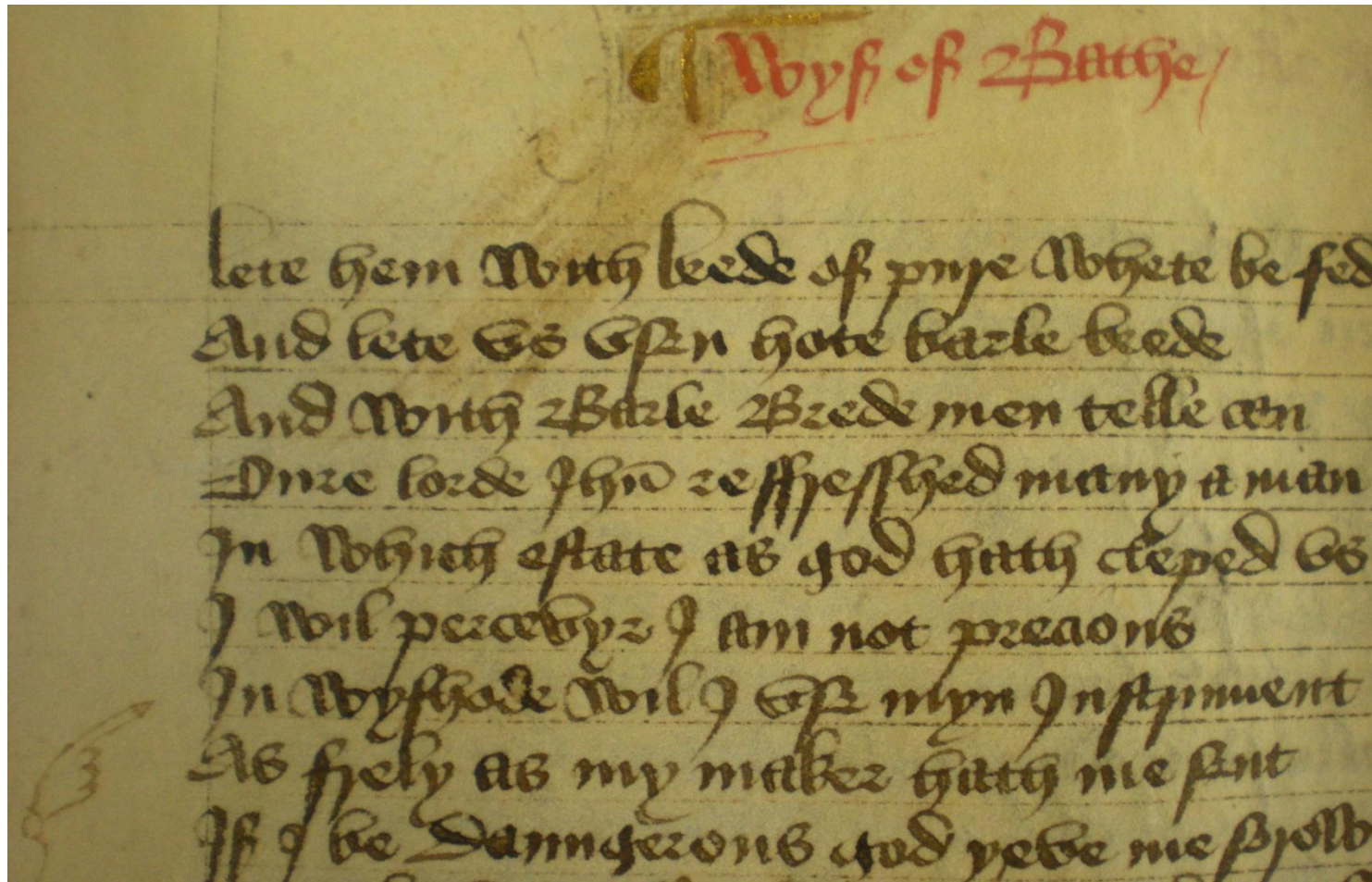
# Be thou never wrothe for my Instryment

- *Wife of Bath's Prologue*, CUL Ii.3.26, fol.  
113v.



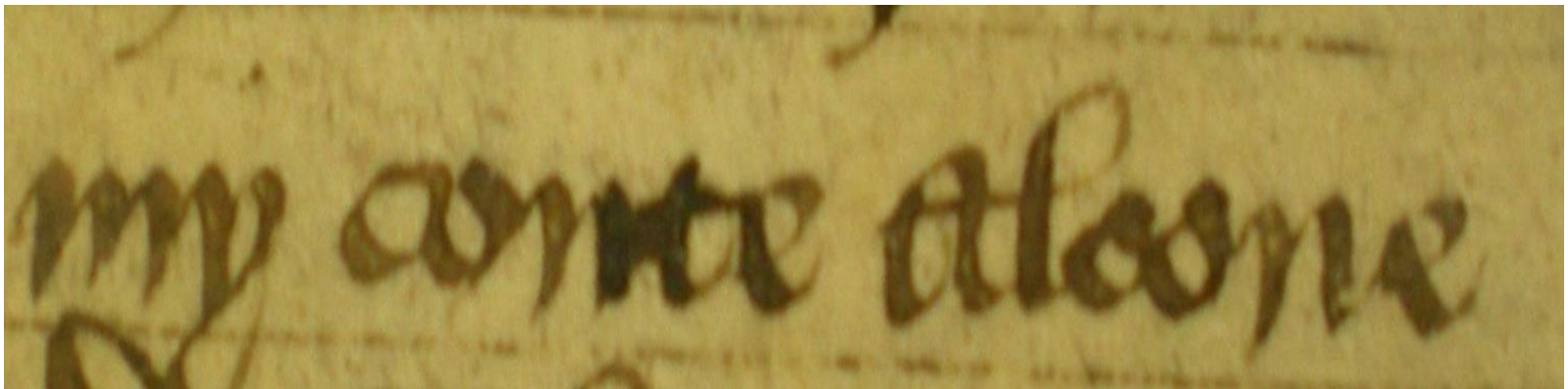


- In wyfhode wol I use myn Instrument  
- *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, CUL li.3.26, fol. 111r.



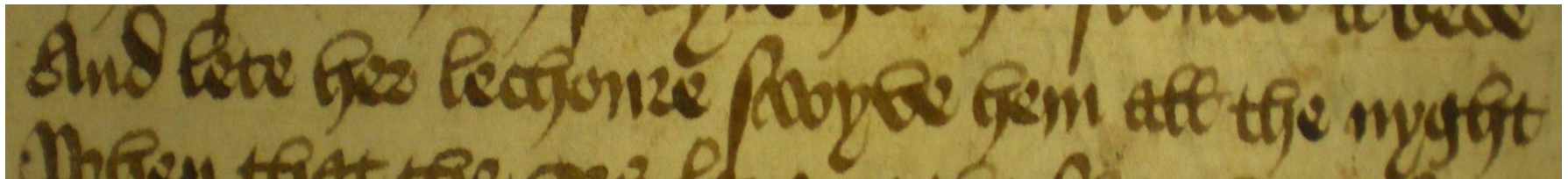
“my conte aloone,” with “conte”  
substituted for “queynte”

- *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, CUL Ii.3.26, fol. 114v.



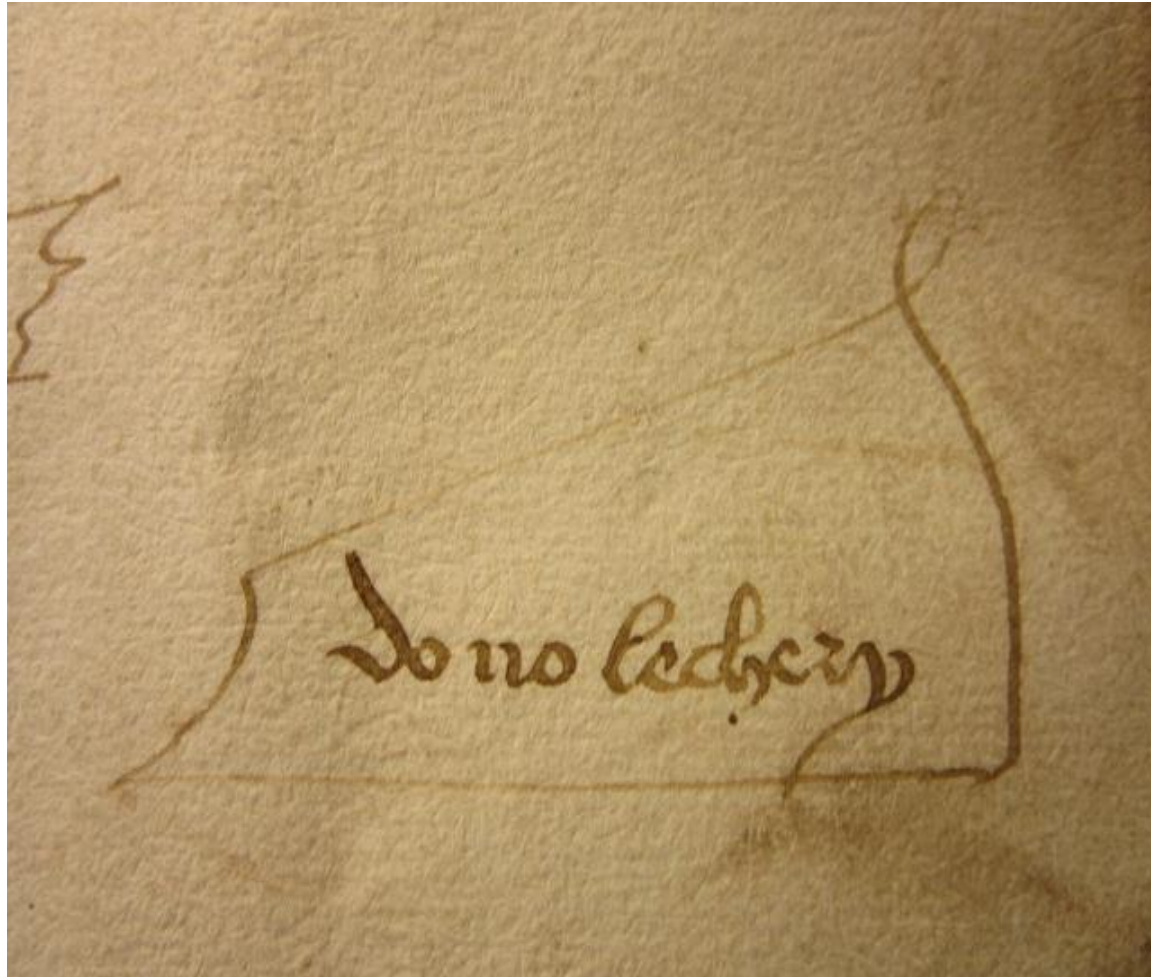
And lete her lecchoure swyve hem  
all the nyght (“swyve” has been  
substituted for the more decorous  
verb “dight” here).

- *The Wife of Bath's Prologue*, CUL li.3.26, fol. 118r.



# Lustful Women in Church (according to *Idley's Instructions*)

Beholdyng the schort  
garmentes round all abought,  
And how the stuffyng of the  
codpece berys out...



Seventh Commandment: "Do No Lechery"

Peter Idley, *Idley's Instructions to His Son* (mid-15<sup>th</sup> century)

**Queen Semiramis, from Idley's *Instructions*:**

She wolde no man in ony wyse denye.

She ne sparid straunger ne other,

And if he come not she wold hym call.

She toke her sonne and eke her brother.

Suche a fals lust was on her fall,

Hir corage was to have ado with all.

[She would not deny any man in any way,

She spared neither stranger nor other,

And if he did not come to her, she would call him.

She took her son and also her brother.

Such a false lust was fallen upon her,

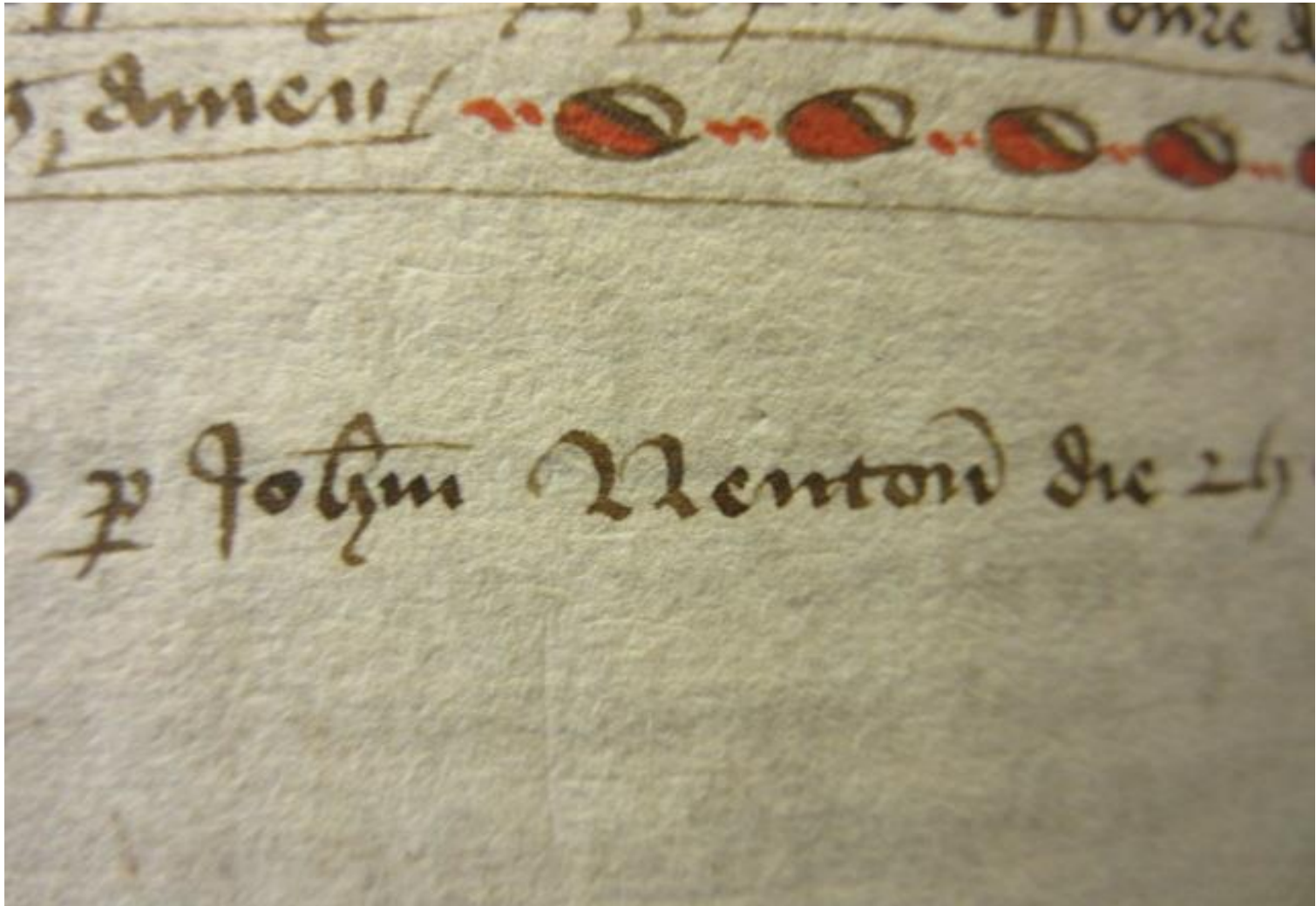
That her desire was to "do" them all. ]

Refrain from Semiramis section,  
repeated six times in six stanzas:

**“With hir croked instrument to  
encrees and multeplie.”**

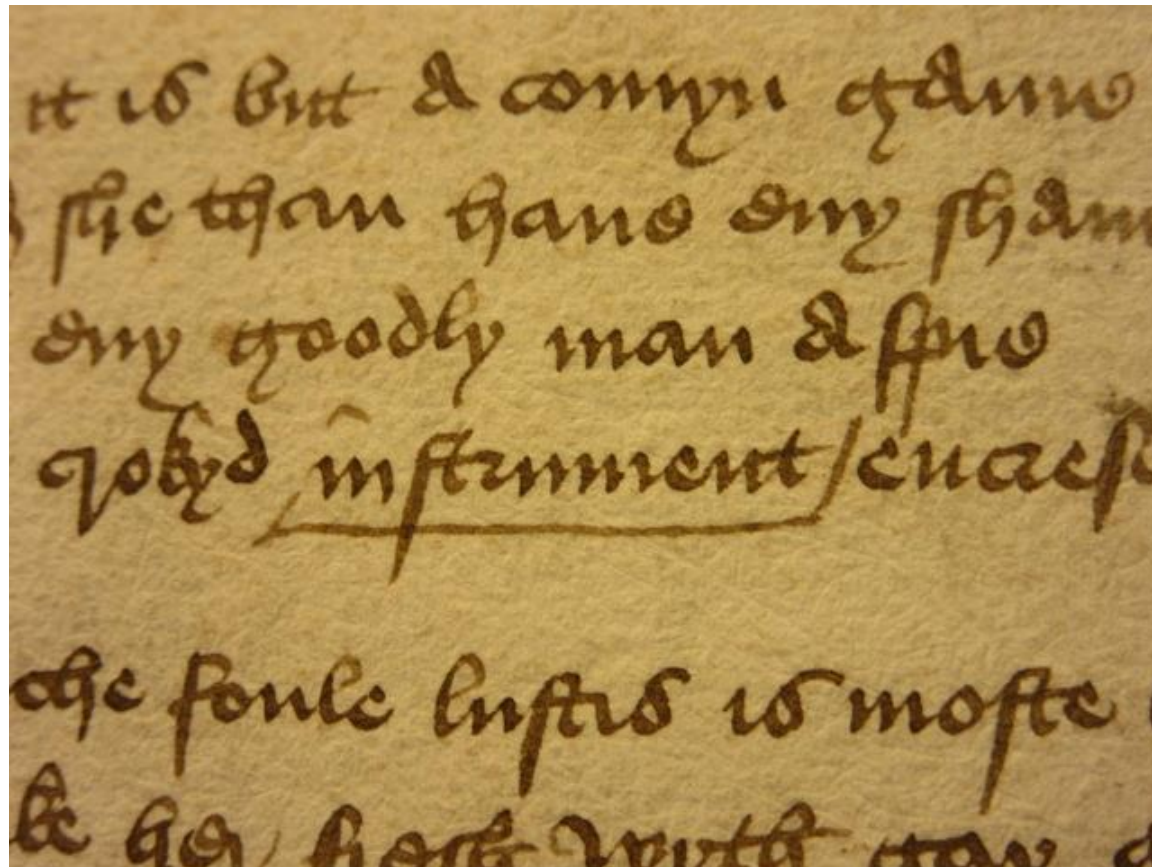
[With her treacherous ‘instrument’  
(vulva) to increase and multiply  
(her sexual encounters/partners)]

# Scribal Signature: "John Neuton"



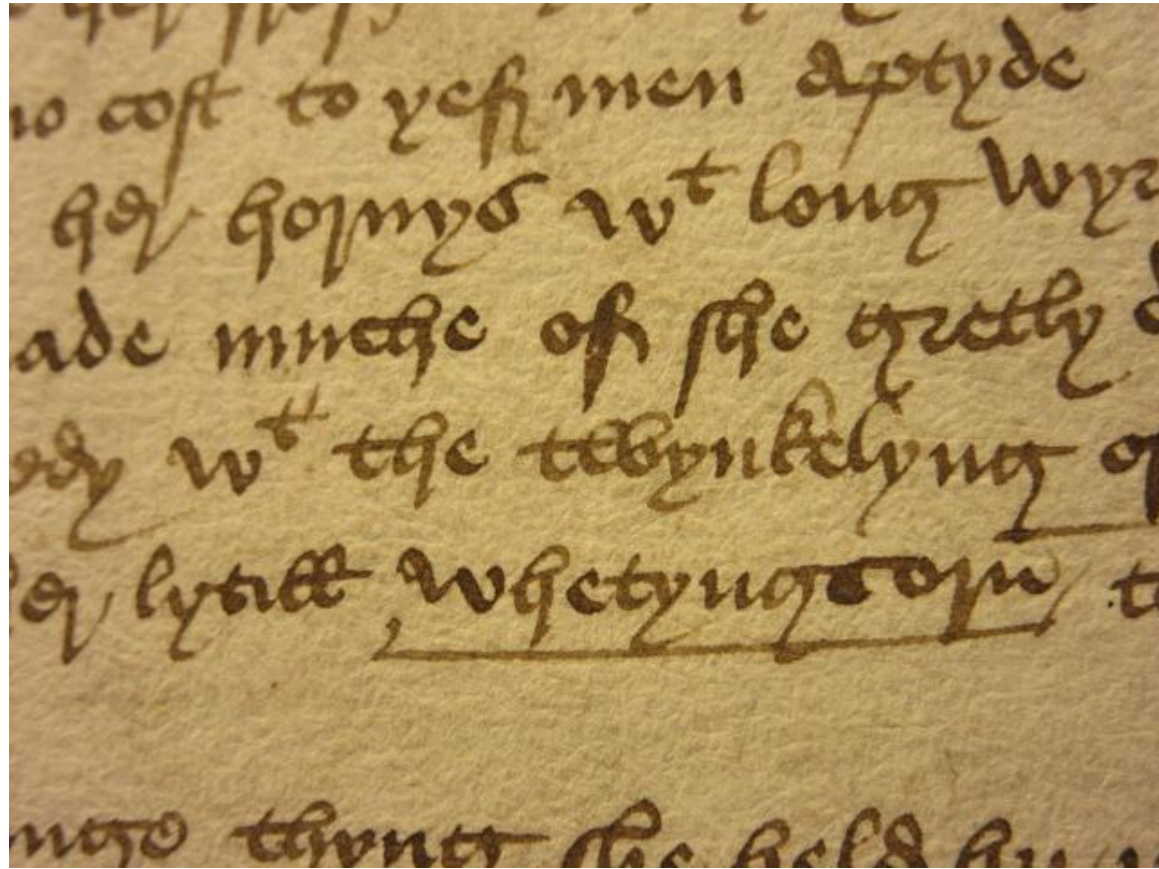


- **croked instrument**
- **lytill whetyngcorne** [little grain of wheat]
- **twachylle** [narrow passageway]
- **crokid shap** [crafty / treacherous 'shape' (genital euphemism)]
- **prety tytmouse** [pretty titmouse]
  - **so many workars**

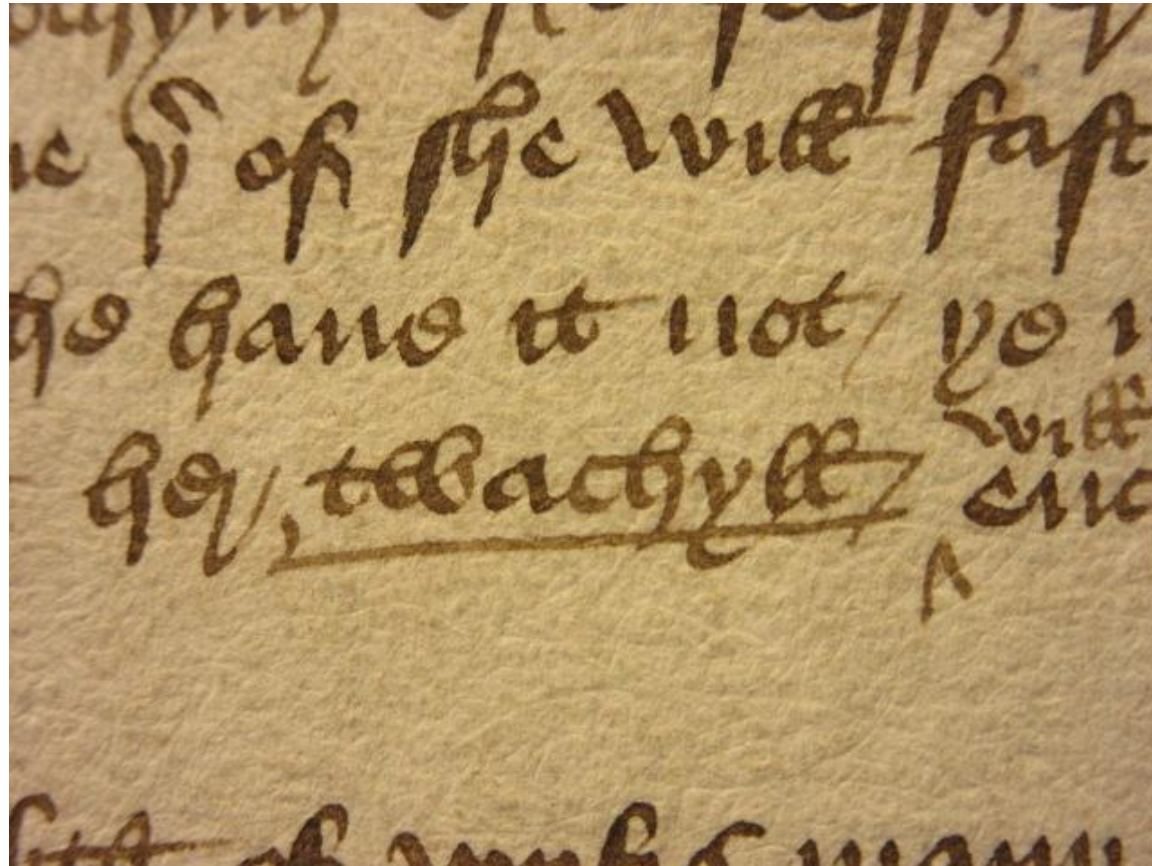


## **“crokyd instrument”**

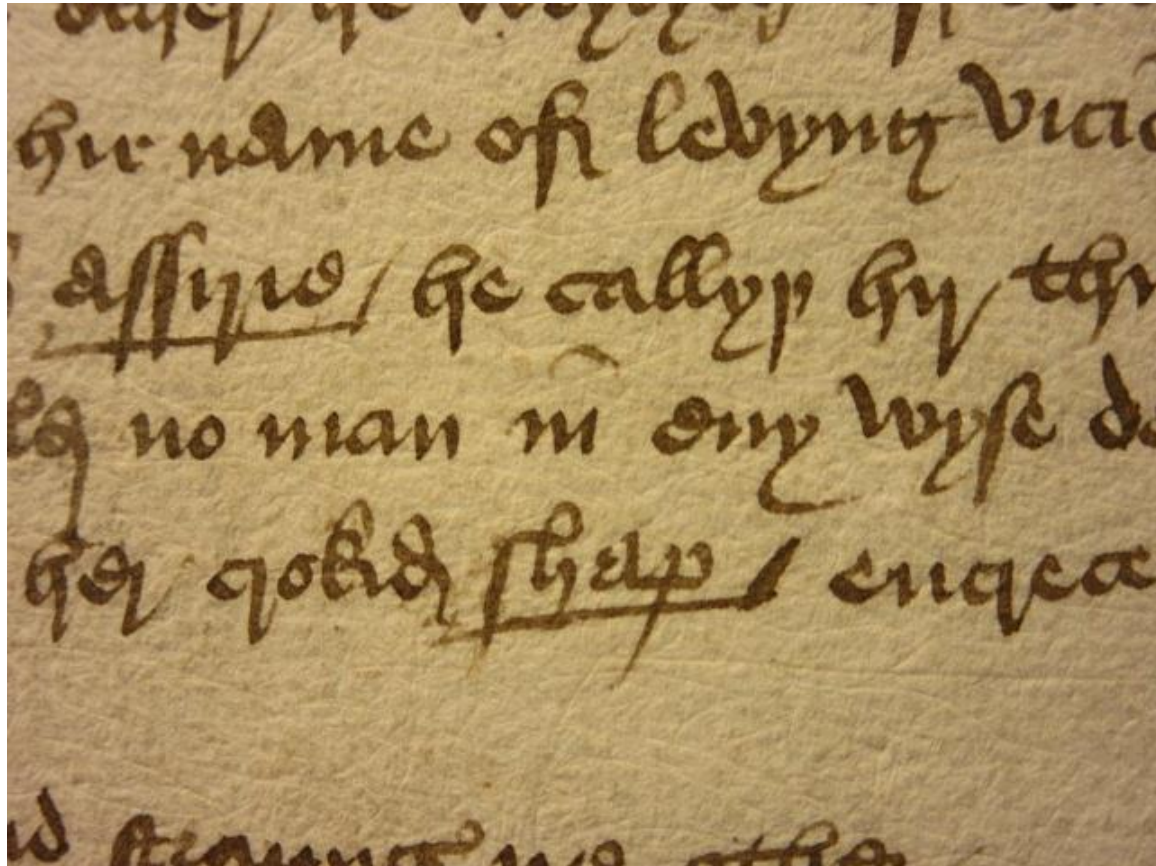
Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 416,  
fol. 18v.



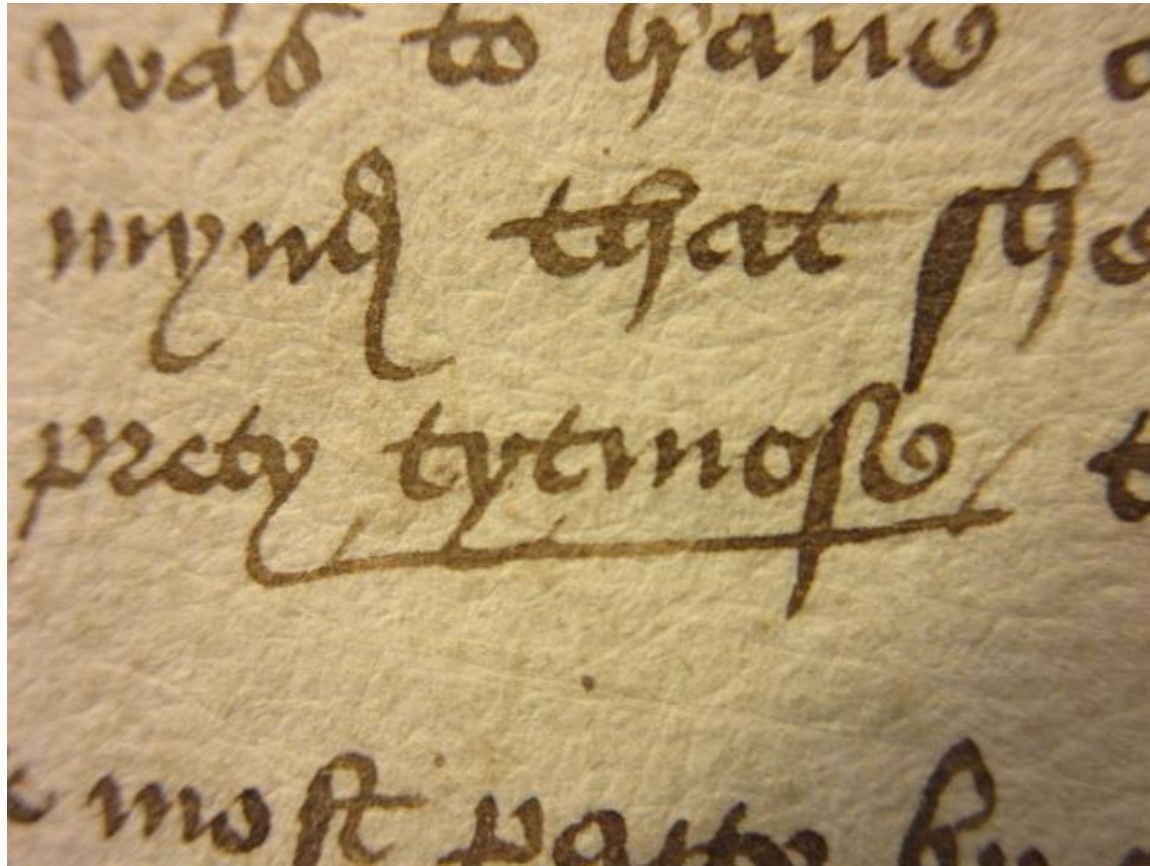
“lytyll whetyngcorn” [little grain  
of wheat]



“twachyll” [a small, narrow passage  
between houses, walls, or hedges]



“her crokid shap” [her crafty/treacherous genitalia]



“prety tytmouse” [pretty tit-mouse, a small songbird]

then to have y of the wite fast pncelw  
and if that she have it not ye must sey <sup>for</sup> way  
or els wyth twachyll <sup>witt</sup> enqce & multply

bochas reherseth of wysis many oon  
whiche to sey husbondis wed contions  
Among all othe he wryteth of oon  
Semeran her name of ledynge vicious  
Quene of Assirie he callp hy thus  
whiche wolq no man in any wyse denyo  
and <sup>but</sup> wyth twachyll shap enqce & multply

Se ne spawd

Underlined words: "twachyll," "bochas"  
[Boccaccio], "Semeranus" [Semiramis],  
"Assirie" [Assyria], "shap"

To be goung by  
This is ye very  
Adam and Eve  
and weye put from  
for lack of dew of

“Adam and Eve”



