



Levelt, S. (2020). Marcus Boxhorn's misattribution of verses from Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* to John Gower. *Notes and Queries*, Article gjz164. <https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjz164>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1093/notesj/gjz164](https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjz164)

[Link to publication record on the Bristol Research Portal](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Oxford University Press at <https://academic.oup.com/nq/advance-article/doi/10.1093/notesj/gjz164/5719349>. Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol – Bristol Research Portal

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available: <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/brp-terms/>

SJOERD LEVELT

University of Bristol

MARCUS BOXHORN'S MISATTRIBUTION OF VERSES FROM CHAUCER'S CANTERBURY TALES TO JOHN GOWER

In his Dutch Chronijck van Zeelandt (Chronicle of Zeeland) of 1644, Leiden University professor of History and Rhetoric Marcus Zuerius Boxhorn (1602-53) cites four lines from Geoffrey Chaucer's General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales:

Te dezer tijdt heeft Middelburch seer ghefloereert in koopmanschappe, die van Engelandt op Zeelandt, ende van Zeelandt op Engelandt sterck ghedreven wierdt. Dit leert my een Engelsche Schrijver ende Ridder, ghenamt Ian Gouwer, die onder Ritsaert den tweeden van dien naeme, Coninck van Engelandt gheleeft, ende vele aerdighe Dichten gheschreven heeft, ghestorven in het jaer 1402. Onder andere van sijne wercken, is van hem overich een printe ofte Poëtische beschrijvinghe van een Coopman, in de welcke hy seght, dat de Engelsche kooplieden op die tijdt niet anders in de mondt hadden ende wenschten, als dat de Zee van Orwel tot Middelburch toe in Zeelandt, veyl ende verseeckert teghens alle vyandlijkecke attentaelen mochte ghehouden werden. Sijn eyghen woorden zijn dese;

His reasons spake hee full solemnely,
Shewing alway the encrease of his winning,
He would the Sea were kept for any thing
Betwixt Middleborough and Orewely.

Dat is te seggen; Als een koopman uytspreekt sijn swaerste reden, soo spreekt hy van het toenemen van sijn ghewin. Doch voor al wil hy ghelet hebben op de bescherminghe van de Zee tusschen Middelburch ende Orewell. Orewell is een Zeehaven van de Provincie van Suffolx in Engelandt.¹

[At this time (i.e., that of Albert I, Duke of Bavaria, d. 1404), Middelburg flourished in trade, which was thriving between England and Zeeland, and between Zeeland and England. This I have gathered from an English author and knight, named John Gower, who lived under King Richard II of England, and wrote many nice poems, and died in the year 1402. Among his works is an image or poetic description of a Merchant, in which he says that the English merchants of that time did not talk about anything nor wished for anything but that the sea from Orwell to Middelburg in Zeeland would be kept safe and secure against all hostile attacks. His own words are these:

His reasons spake hee full solemnely,
Shewing alway the encrease of his winning,
He would the Sea were kept for any thing
Betwixt Middleborough and Orewely.

¹ Marcus Z. Boxhorn, Chronijck van Zeelandt, eertijds beschreven door d'heer Johan Rygersbergen, nu verbeterd, ende vermeerderd (Middelburg, 1644), II, 170.

Which is to say: ‘When a merchant speaks of his principal concern, he speaks of increasing his profits. Yet before all else he would have guarantee of the security of the sea between Middelburg and Orwell.’ Orwell is a sea port of the province of Suffolk in England.]

The verses are from the description of the Merchant in Chaucer’s General Prologue,² and generally correspond to the text as first printed by William Caxton,³ but the rhyme scheme appears at some point to have been misunderstood. In their original context, the first line of this passage is the end of one couplet and the last line, ending on ‘Orewelle’ in Chaucer, is the first of another couplet. In Chaucer, then, the rhyme scheme of these lines is ABBC. Taken out of context, this rhyme scheme looks suspect, however, and Boxhorn’s ‘Orewely’ may be the result of an attempt to ‘correct’ the rhyme scheme to a more familiar enclosed-rhyme quatrain.

The quotation has been cited as evidence for acquaintance with Chaucer’s work in the Netherlands in the seventeenth-century, though scholars have expressed surprise that Boxhorn attributed the verses not to Chaucer, but to his contemporary John Gower.⁴ No works by Chaucer or Gower appear in the catalogue of Boxhorn’s library, however,⁵ and his misattribution of the quote to Gower and his apparent ignorance of the underlying rhyme scheme in fact suggest that he was unfamiliar with Middle English literature. This conclusion is confirmed when we consider Boxton’s probable source for these lines, which is not Geoffrey Chaucer, but John Selden.

The legacy sales catalogue of Boxhorn’s books includes a significant number of volumes in English, including titles that could have helped learning the language,⁶ and Boxhorn owned one Old English manuscript,⁷ but no Middle English text. There is one English author whose work had a particular appeal to Boxhorn: of John Selden, he owned three titles: the English History of Tithes,⁸ and the Latin De dis Syris⁹ and Mare clausum.¹⁰ That Boxhorn owned the latter is no surprise: Mare clausum was a response to Mare liberum by the Dutch jurist and philosopher Hugo Grotius. Grotius’ treatise dealt with topics (such as fishing in and trade across the North Sea) that were bones of contention between the neighbouring nations of England and the Dutch Republic. This

² Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales, ed. Larry D. Benson, The Riverside Chaucer, I (A) 273-7.

³ Geoffrey Chaucer, Canterbury Tales (Westminster: William Caxton, 1477), 3: ‘His reasons spake he full solemnly, / Shewing alway the increase of his winning: / He would the see were kept for any thing / Betwixe Middleborough and Orewell.’

⁴ Kees Dekker, The Origins of Old Germanic Studies in the Low Countries (Leiden, 1999), 213-14, n. 97; Rolf H. Bremmer, ‘Franciscus Junius reads Chaucer: But Why? and How?’, in: Appropriating the Middle Ages Scholarship, Politics, Fraud, ed. Tom Shippey and Martin Arnold, Studies in Medievalism xi (2001), 37-72, at 42.

⁵ As noted by Bremmer, ‘Franciscus Junius Reads Chaucer’, 66-7, n. 24.

⁶ Catalogus variorum & insignium librorum, celeberrimi ac eruditissimi viri Marci Zueri Boxhornii (Leiden: Petrus Leffen, 1654). It contains four English dictionaries: Rider’s Dictionarie (libri in quarto 238), Rastell’s Les termes de la ley (libri in quarto 419), an English/Italian dictionary (libri in octavo 368), and an English/Latin one (libri in octavo 422); three English phrase and composition books and a joke collection: Smith’s De recta et emendata linguae Anglicae scriptione, dialogus (libri in quarto 272), Fulwood’s Enemie of Idleness (libri in octavo 546), The Academy of Complements (libri in octavo 607) and A Banquet of Jests (libri in octavo 604); two historical studies (one in duplicate): Selden’s Historie of Tithes (libri in quarto 395) and Richard Verstegan’s Restitution of Decayed Intelligence (libri in quarto 254 and 259); two political tracts: Roger Williams’ Actions of the Low Countries (libri in quarto 396) and Conference About the Next Succession (libri in octavo 544); Purchas’ Pilgrimage (libri in folio 202) and a small book referred to as England’s Elizabeth (libri in duodecimo 235).

⁷ ‘Veterum Anglorum Leges. Saxonicum cum interlineari versione Latina & Notis marginal. viri Erudit. in Script.’ (libri rariores & manuscripti in folio 6).

⁸ Libri in quarto 395.

⁹ Libri in octavo 466.

¹⁰ Libri in octavo 461.

topicality made it a particularly widely read text in the Netherlands: the English edition of this work, printed in London in 1635, was quickly followed by three smaller pirated editions from Holland, one of which had a treatise from Boxhorn (previously published in conjunction with Grotius' Mare liberum) appended to it.¹¹ Boxhorn owned this edition of Mare clausum: it is listed among the books in octavo in his legacy sales catalogue, whereas the other two editions that had appeared in Holland were in quarto, and the English edition was a lavish folio.¹²

Selden's Mare clausum was in fact the most likely place for seventeenth-century Dutch readers to be confronted with Middle English, and the verses cited by Boxhorn are found in this work, in book 2, chapter 14. In the first edition, Selden (and his printers) correctly spell Orewell,¹³ but it is in the octavo edition that we find the 'corrected' Orewely:

His reasons spake he full solemnly
Shewing alway the encrease of his winning;
He would the See were kept for any thing
Betwixt Middleborough and Orewely.¹⁴

The context in which Selden cited the verses is, like Boxhorn's, a discussion of the protection of the North Sea trade.

In one crucial respect, however, Selden's account differs from Boxhorn's: Selden correctly identifies the author of the verses as 'Galfredus Chaucerus', Geoffrey Chaucer. Boxhorn, while citing the lines verbatim from his edition of Selden's Mare clausum, managed to misattribute them to an in the Netherlands even lesser known author, John Gower, while also supplying the year of this author's death, 1402. I know of no evidence for acquaintance with Gower's works in the seventeenth-century Dutch Low Countries. The source for Gower's year of death as 1402, however, is John Bale's mid-sixteenth century Scriptorium illustrium majoris Britanniae ... Catalogus (Catalogue of the Famous Writers of Great Britain).¹⁵ Bale's work provides a comprehensive collection of biblio-biographies of British authors, and was therefore perfectly suited to satisfy Boxhorn's need for information about a Middle English author with whom he was unfamiliar. Bale's work also provides us with an explanation for Boxhorn's confusion of Chaucer with Gower: looking for Geoffrey Chaucer, turning to volume 1 of the expanded edition of 1557-9, on page 525, Boxhorn would have found a potted biography. Chaucer's biography, here, directly follows Gower's on page 524; the two are found on opposing pages, Gower's on the left, continuing for ten lines on the right page above Chaucer's. After finding Chaucer, Boxhorn somehow skipped to the wrong page, and it is from there that he took the information concerning Gower, including the date of his death, 1402, and his characterization as 'Ridder' ('knight') - as Bale writes, 'uir equestris ordinis'.¹⁶

The misattribution shows that Boxhorn was acquainted with neither Chaucer nor Gower, yet wished to present an informed account to his readers. When confronted with the name 'Galfredus Chaucerus', who was unknown to him, as the author of Middle English verses which he cited second-hand from John Selden, Boxhorn therefore consulted an appropriate reference work to find more information. Boxhorn's citation of Chaucer thus shows an interest in English historical literature; it does not, however, provide evidence of acquaintance with Chaucer in the

¹¹ STC 22176; it includes Boxhorn's Apologia pro Navigationibus Hollandorum.

¹² For the publication history, see Peter J. Lucas, 'Printing Anglo-Saxon in Holland and John Selden's Mare Clausum seu de Dominio Maris', Quaerendo, xxxi (2001), 120-36, at 125.

¹³ John Selden, Mare clausum (London: William Stanesby for Richard Meighen, 1635), 187.

¹⁴ John Selden, Mare clausum (1636) [STC 22176], 320.

¹⁵ John Bale, Scriptorium illustrium maioris Brytannie quam nunc Angliam & Scotiam uocant catalogus, 2 vols (Basel: Johannes Oporinus, 1557-9).

¹⁶ There is no copy of Bale's Scriptorium listed among Boxhorn's books; rapid note-taking in someone else's library may account for Boxhorn's error.

Dutch Low Countries - rather, it attests to the opposite, even among the learned circle that Boxhorn was part of; a circle of scholars who showed an interest in the origins of the English language, and who acquired both books in English and books which could aid in learning the language. Historians on both sides of the North Sea eagerly explored the ways in which they could accord a role to the other in their own histories. The two literary cultures were related and linked to such an extent that one can truly speak of Anglo-Dutch historical writing in both languages. Marcus Zuerius Boxhorn's misattribution of Chaucer's verses to Gower, however, should serve to alert us that, however deep the familiarity ran, with regards to specific aspects of each other's cultures, Dutch and English speakers were also always alien to each other.