The poem printed below occurs uniquely in Trinity College Cambridge, MS R. 3. 20, p. 367; my transcript is verbatim:

Adam scryveyne / if euer it þee byfalle
Boece or Troylus / for to wryten nuwe
Vnder þy long lokkes / þowe most haue þe scalle
But after my makyng þowe wryt more truwe
So oﬀt adaye I mot þy werk renuwe
It to corect and eke to rubbe and scrape /
And al is thorugh þy neeglygence and rape

The poem is headed ‘Chanciers wordes a Geﬀrey vn to Adame his owen scryveyne.’

This poem has enjoyed an unquestioned place in the Chaucer canon since it was first printed by John Stow in his 1561 edition of The workes of Geﬀrey Chaucer, newly printed (STC 5075), fol. ccclv. But there seem to be substantial grounds, some of a previously unremarked kind, for doubting that it is by Chaucer.

Trinity College R. 3. 20 is copied in the hand of John Shirley (c.1366–c.1456), who is perforce the sole authority for the attribution of this poem to Chaucer. Shirley is a crucial ﬁgure in establishing the canon of Chaucer’s shorter poems, a number of which are also included in modern editions on his authority alone, including ‘The complaint of Mars’ and ‘The complaint of Venus’, and ‘Fortune’, as well as possibly other poems that appear in manuscripts that seem to be Shirley-derived.

But Shirley has not been seen as uniformly reliable as an attributor. A number of poems he ascribes to Chaucer, included in manuscripts he himself copied, or which seem to derive from his own, now lost, originals, have never gained canonical acceptance: the ascription to Chaucer of ‘The balade of a reeve’ in BL, Add. MS 16165 has not been endorsed by modern scholarship; nor has the ‘cronycle made by Chaucier’ in Bodleian Library, Ashmole 59. Other poems with which he is associated have excited similar unease in terms of their attribution. And there are other grounds for being doubtful about Shirley’s attributional reliability, especially in relation to Lydgate.

The inclusion of ‘Adam Scriveyn’ (I will use this short form of the title) within the Chaucer canon is open to doubt on a variety of grounds other than the substantial one of the uncertain authority of Shirley’s attribution. Some of these grounds are of limited force: it is, for example, the only poem included in the Chaucer canon that comprises a single rhyme royal stanza.

More signiﬁcant may be lexical evidence. In the seven lines of the poem, there are ﬁve words that appear nowhere else in the canon – ‘scryveyne’ (line
1), ‘scalle’ (line 3), ‘renuwe’ (line 5), ‘scrape’ (line 6), ‘rape’ (line 7) – and four that are used in senses that occur nowhere else in the canon – ‘truwe’ (line 4) in the sense of ‘accurately’; ‘corect’ (line 6) in the sense of ‘remove errors’; ‘rubbe’ (line 6) in the sense of ‘erase’. The last word in this second category, ‘makyng’ (line 4), is discussed below. Such a dense accumulation of unique occurrences in such a brief compass is without parallel in Chaucer’s canonical lexis; it seems potentially significant.

To this evidence may be added that of the situation the poem appears to describe. The speaking voice complains about the errors of a scribe, errors that entail the necessity of the speaker engaging in ‘rubbing and scraping’. The general assumption seems to have been that the complaint was directed by Chaucer to his ‘own’ scribe. But put in such terms it is not easy to envision the situation: rubbing and scraping are specialist activities that would normally be undertaken by a scribe to a finished manuscript, that is one that has been completed in fair copy by (generally) a trained copyist, as Adam seems, at least notionally, to have been. At earlier stages in the compositional process such careful efforts at correction would lack necessity since less labour-intensive means of signalling correction would be appropriate: deletion, interlineation, or marginal corrections. Why would Chaucer, at the latest stage in production, be involved in the actual preparation of the final manuscript, doing tasks that fall within the purview of the skilled artisan?

The chief objection to my line of argument must rest on the allusion in the poem to ‘Boece or Troylus’ (line 2), and the mention of ‘my makyng’ (line 4). The allusion to ‘Boece or Troylus’ falls short of ownership of the poem by Chaucer himself: not my ‘Boece and Troylus’. And the conjunction of the two works here may perhaps be a result of their chronological proximity – both are generally dated to the first half of the 1380s. It is not therefore implausible that a scribe might be copying them in close sequence; but it is not necessary to suppose that such a person has a direct connection with Chaucer.

The reference to ‘my making (line 4)’ raises other, lexical issues. The word ‘makyng’ is used to mean ‘my (literary) composition’ by Chaucer and others. But it had a wide range of other meanings, some of which Chaucer himself also employed. Among this range is the use of the word to signify ‘a piece of writing’ of whatever kind (although not used in this sense elsewhere by Chaucer). Hence the line ‘But after my makyng powe wryt more truwe’ may be paraphrased ‘unless you write more accurately in accord with what I have written’. Thus paraphrased, the complaint could be viewed as that of a supervisory scribe directed at the inaccuracy of another scribe under his direction.

It seems understandable that a person with overall responsibility for overseeing the writing of a manuscript or manuscripts of Chaucer’s works might venture a complaint about the competence of a scribe under his supervision and the tiresome number of corrections that such supervision might entail. Shorn of its Shirleian rubric the poem could properly be seen as a form of scribal malediction, a form for which there was an extensive tradition. Awareness of such a tradition, when taken in conjunction with the other evidence I have
presented, lessens the necessity for taking the reference to ‘Boece and Troilus’ and ‘my makynge’ as a basis for assuming Chaucer’s authorship of the poem.

If there is any force to this reading and the evidence on which it is based, it must suggest a greater degree of doubt is warranted about the place of ‘Adam Scriveyn’ in Chaucer’s canon than has hitherto been articulated. Such doubt may deepen when set in the context of recent efforts to extrapolate a biographical connection from this poem between Chaucer himself and a scribe named Adam Pynkhurst. Whether a scribe of this name copied manuscripts of Chaucer’s works is not an aspect of my concern. Clearly, however, if Chaucer did not write this poem then it does not provide any basis for assuming a direct connection between Chaucer, the ‘Adam’ addressed in this poem, and ‘Adam Pynkhurst’.

One objection to this line of enquiry might be that a number of the unique words and usages are part of a technical vocabulary to do with scribal activity. But the close collocation of so many unique lexical items does seem of some potential significance in a poem that would be, for Chaucer, uniquely brief; nor is there any parallel elsewhere in his lyric corpus for such a dense accumulation of them. And the evident intimacy of the poem’s speaker with forms of scribal activity could serve as evidence supporting the view that this is a form of scribal malediction belonging to a well-established genre. Admittedly arguments for de-attribution based on internal evidence rarely lead to a clearcut resolution. But the various criteria of evidence I have presented seem to possess a cumulative weight that casts doubt on the place of ‘Adam Scriveyn’ in the Chaucer canon.

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NOTES

I am very grateful for the comments and suggestions of an anonymous reader and of the editors of Medium Aevum.

1 The most accurate transcript of this text is in The Minor Poems, ed. George B. Pace and Alfred David, The Chaucer Variorum, volume V (Norman, Okla., 1982), pp. 136f. There are difficulties in my interpretation of some final flourishes that may be otiose, or which may be final -es (for example I read ‘wryt’ where Pace and David read ‘wryte’ (line 4) and also occasionally where they read such a flourish as a virgule, as with ‘corect’/ where I read ‘correct.’


3 ‘This is not the first occasion on which doubts have been expressed about the canonicity of ‘Adam Scriveyn’; see, for example, Seth Lerer, ‘The complaints of Adam Scriveyn: John Shirley and the canonicity of Chaucer’s short poems’, in Chaucer and his Readers (Princeton, NJ, 1993), pp. 117–46, and Alexandra Gillespie, ‘Reading Chaucer’s words to Adam’, Chaucer Review, 43 (2008), 269–73; see also Julia Booffey and A. S. G. Edwards, ‘Chaucer’s chronicle’: John Shirley and the canon of Chaucer’s minor poems’, Studies in the Age of Chaucer, 20 (1998), 201–18.
For discussions of Shirley’s reliability as an attributor see Julia Booffey, *Manuscripts of English Courtly Love Lyrics in the Later Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 1985), pp. 71–4, and Booffey and Edwards, “Chaucer’s chronicle”.


Chaucer uses it three times to mean ‘literary composition’: once in *Troilus & Criseyde* (V. 1789) and twice in the F Prologue to the *Legend of Good Women* (F 413, 485).

It is used in a technical, alchemical sense in the Canon’s Yeoman’s Tale (VIII. 922), in the sense of manufacture (*Legend of Good Women*, F 43), and in a verbal sense (*Troilus*, III. 289).

See *The Middle English Dictionary*, ed. S. M. Kuhn (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1975), s.v. making(e), ger. 3b. (a).

