

THE FORM *wento* IN MIDDLE ENGLISH TEXTS

When Mayumi Taguchi and I edited the Middle English text *Pepysian Meditations on the Passion of Christ* from MS Pepys 2125, Magdalene College, Cambridge,¹ we came across the anomalous form *wento* in the manuscript. I intended at first to emend it as *wente* in the edited text, but it ended up staying as *wento* in the published version, as several people with expertise in medieval palaeography stated that they had come across the form in various Middle English manuscripts. Eventually, the edited lines in our printed text are as follows:

And whenne the sonne was go down and hit was leful to wurchen, Marie
 Maudeleyne and other Maryes *wento* for to bye spicerye, with the whuche they
 wolde make an oynement for to anoynte the body of owre Lord Ihesu.
 (25/985-7)

On second thought, however, I feel that *wento* in these lines could have been altered to

¹ Mayumi Taguchi and Yoko Iyeiri (eds.), Pepysian Meditations on the Passion of Christ: Edited from Cambridge, Magdalene College, MS Pepys 2125 (Heidelberg, 2019).

wente, unless the approach to the text is strictly diplomatic.² On the other hand, I am interested in the fact that not a few medievalists have come across the form *wento*. It seems to be attested repeatedly, though not frequently, both with singular and plural subjects. In this short contribution, I will propose some possible explanations for its occurrence by drawing on material from databases.

In the above-mentioned edition, I wrote in the commentary section that ‘*e* and *o* were, on occasion, confused in manuscripts’.³ I also referred to James Morey, who commented on the occasional mingling of *e* and *o* that he came across while editing the *Prick of Conscience* (e.g. *tho* for *the*).⁴ This is certainly relevant, but I am now convinced that more is involved in the occurrence of *wento* in Middle English texts.

It is certain that the erroneous interchange between *e* and *o* took place in medieval texts. In addition to the above, I would also like to refer to Takako Kato, who classifies the interchange between *e* and *o* in manuscripts as errors due to ‘visual memory’.⁵ She explores MS Gg.4.27 at the Cambridge University Library,⁶ pointing out some cases where the scribe erroneously wrote *o* for *e* or *e* for *o* and then he himself

² Our edition is fairly diplomatic, but we have corrected obvious errors.

³ Taguchi and Iyeiri, 58. I was in charge of this line, though the edition is a collaborative work. For details of our division of work, see Taguchi and Iyeiri, vi.

⁴ James H. Morey (ed.), *Prick of Conscience* (Kalamazoo, MI, 2012), 8.

⁵ Takako Kato, ‘Corrected Mistakes in Cambridge University Library MS Gg.4.27’, *Design and Distribution of Late Medieval Manuscripts in England*, ed. Margaret Connolly and Linne R. Mooney (York, 2008), 78-83.

⁶ This manuscript goes back to the early fifteenth century. For further details of the manuscript, see Kato.

corrected the error (e.g. *ho* for *he*). Apparently, it was a fairly common pen slip, which may or may not have been corrected in a number of extant texts. As Kato notes, the reason for the mingling can be visual, since *e* and *o* have visual similarity.

The second possible factor behind the occurrence of *wento* is the existence of the preterite plural form *wenton* in Middle English, which is acknowledged in the existing literature to a larger extent, at least in comparison to *wento*. It is, unlike *wento*, recorded in the *Middle English Dictionary* (MED) (s.v. *wenden*).⁷ Indeed, its occurrence is not particularly isolated: the simple search string ‘wenton*’ in the MED Corpus gives 36 relevant examples, though three quarters of them are found in *S. Editha*, including the following:⁸

Erllys and barrons in the halle / Wenton to the emperour alle, / And sayed, ...

(*The seven sages in English verse* [MED Corpus])

Anon as þus was do, þe King and alle his meyne made hem redy, and *wenton* to

schyppe, & sayled forth ... (*The Brut, or The chronicles of England* [MED

⁷ <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/middle-english-dictionary/dictionary>

⁸ A number of the examples from *S. Editha* are repeatedly counted in this result, since the MED Corpus (<https://quod.lib.umich.edu/c/cme/>) includes two copies of it. This, however, does not affect my point that the form is simply more acknowledged than *wento*.

Corpus]).

In view of the fact that *wenton* can easily be emended as *wenten* in editions, one can surmise that it appears more widely in manuscripts than represented by the MED Corpus, which is based on editions, though I do not mean to say that *wenton* was frequent.⁹ The plural ending *-on*, whether or not its phonological value was reduced by the time of Middle English, is a justifiable form inherited from Old English, though *wenton* rather than *wendon* is attested mainly from the Middle English period according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) (s.v. *wend*, v.).¹⁰ The loss of *-n* from *wenton* would simply yield *wento*, which is most appropriate for the plural, again however reduced the pronunciation of *-o* may have been. This process may have led to the occurrence of the same form in the singular.

The third possibility is that *wento* arose as a result of a kind of haplology. A simple search of the form ‘wento’ in the MED Corpus provides the following two examples:

⁹ I have investigated the LAEME Corpus (http://www.amc.lel.ed.ac.uk/?page_id=492), which is manuscript-based, and found no examples of *wenton*.

¹⁰ The second edition of the OED, which is available on CD-ROM (vers. 4), states that *-t* forms of the preterite tense is attested from the Middle English period onwards, while the current online version (<https://www.oed.com/>) gives a single example of the *-t* form (instead of *-d* forms) from late Old English.

Paire sauls went (t)o heuyn ful sone. [H *wento*, T went to.] (*Altenglische legenden* [MED Corpus])

It happenyd, that the kyng *wento* to the wode an huntyng, and a knyght lafte at home, ... (*Early English versions of the Gesta Romanorum* [MED Corpus])

Both these examples illustrate the clear relationship between *wento* and the preposition *to*, though of course it is natural in any case for verbs of ‘going’ to be accompanied by *to*. In the first of the above examples, the manuscript form *wento* (H) has been altered to *went (t)o* in the edition, perhaps with reference to the reading in the T manuscript *went to*, which is a full form without haplology. This particular case suggests that the form *wento* in the H manuscript resulted from the eliding of one of the duplicated *t* sounds. In the second of the above examples, *wento* is followed by *to*, suggesting that *wento* alone perhaps existed at some stage in the textual transmission, which itself would be a result of haplology, though this particular manuscript is a version with the insertion of additional *to*.¹¹ A similar case is found in the ICAMET (*Innsbruck Computer Archive of*

¹¹ When the addition of *to* took place is a different question. The scribe of this manuscript may have introduced *to*, or perhaps the exemplar that he used already had the preposition *to*. This is an interesting issue, but not relevant to the present discussion.

Machine-Readable English Texts), whose single example of *wento* runs as follows:¹²

he toke leve, and *wento* to Blase (*The Early History of King Arthur: A Prose Romance* [ICAMET])

This example again suggests the possible existence at some stage of a version with *wento*, though this particular version includes the preposition *to* in addition to *wento*, which alone probably meant ‘went to’.

Further evidence in favour of this inference is found in some early printed books, where word divisions are clearer than in manuscripts and where it is not too difficult to find examples of *wen to*. See the following example from *Early English Books Online* (EEBO):

so as he abandoned the place, and *wen to* bokara in despigh: ... (1615, *The estates, empires, & principallities of the world* [EEBO])¹³

¹² For details of the ICAMET, see the description in CoRD (<http://www.helsinki.fi/varieng/CoRD/corpora/ICoMEP/>).

¹³ The easiest way to find examples of the sequence *wen to* is to use the EEBO Online Corpus provided by Mark Davies (<https://www.english-corpora.org/eebo/>) or Lancaster University (CQP Web at Lancaster, <https://cqpweb.lancs.ac.uk/>). I have found, however, that it is essential to look at the original image in EEBO, since some of the examples of *wen to* in the EEBO Online Corpus are representations of *wen[...]* *to*. The example cited here is an authentic one, where *wen* is followed by *to* with a space in between.

This is a clear case of the deletion of one of the duplicated *t* sounds.

It is, therefore, likely that the essential mechanism for the rise of *wento* or *wen to* is similar to that for *use to* (rather than *used to*). Relevant examples of this are found quite easily, as the following quotations from the MED Corpus illustrate:

and all suche service as Chrysten men *use to* synge. (*St. Brandan* [MED Corpus])

assuming the Sarum *use to* be that of the southern, and the York *use to* be that of the northern (*Select English works of John Wyclif* [MED Corpus])

This phenomenon is more widely discussed than *wento* in previous studies, where *use to* and *used to* are usually treated within the framework of the present and preterite tenses. Considering the fact that the examples cited from Chaucer by J. Kerkhof illustrate the plural form *usen to*, it may well be a matter of the tense.¹⁴ Still, the possibility cannot be eliminated that it is, to some extent at least, a matter of the rather ‘accidental’

¹⁴ J. Kerkhof, *Studies in the Language of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 2nd, revised, and enlarged edition (Leiden, 1982), 161-2.

deletion of *d* by the process of haplology.

Finally, I would also like to stress that *wento*, when incorporated into the inventory of variant orthographic forms of ‘went’, could be used for *wente(n)* outside the original environment. The addition of *to* after *wento* as discussed above is a case in point. If *wento* means ‘went to’, it is not necessary, at least in theory, to add another *to*, but this sequence is attested in a number of cases. Furthermore, the example quoted at the very beginning of this note from *Pepysian Meditations on the Passion of Christ* shows the sequence of *wento for to*. Due to the intervention of *for*, the preposition *to* in this example no longer neighbours on *wento*. This is clearly a further step from the initial rise of *wento*. All these considered, it is not surprising that a number of medieval scholars have come across this anomalous form. It is likely that the form *wento* was, to some extent, established as an anomaly.

As hitherto discussed, there are some possible factors behind the occurrence of the form *wento* in Middle English. Among the three suggested above, the third factor seems to be essential, at least in my view, though certainly the first and second ones are also involved.

YOKO IYEIRI

Kyoto University