Your *eigning hert*: A Hapax Legomenon in *Cursor Mundi*, Line 28339

B. S. W. Barootes[1]

Abstract The Middle English word *eigning* appears in a single line, in a single extant manuscript. After 125 years, it remains the sole undefined word from the glossary accompanying the published text of the *Cursor Mundi*. This paper provides an Anglo-Norman etymology for the word, one which makes a surprising connexion with secular romances, the very genre that the *Cursor*-poet and other penitential writers seek to condemn.

Keywords *Cursor Mundi* · *Book of Shrift* · Etymology · Middle English · Anglo-Norman · Old French

The sixth volume of Richard Morris's impressive variorum edition of the northern version of the *Cursor Mundi* contains a thorough glossary prepared by the German philologist Max Kaluza. This catalogue aims at comprehensiveness: its more than 8000 entries include many commonplace words such as *kind* (nature), *munk* (monk), and *ac* (but), alongside rare or obscure words like *snade* (bait or lure), *scep* (a basket made of rushes or straw), and *larechild* (scholar or apprentice). Nevertheless, Kaluza's glossary has six entries for which no definitions are given: *eigning*, *gains*, *mell*, *mik*, *quil*, and *thring* (Kaluza 1892). Each entry simply lists the line number after a lone question mark. In the 125 years since the Kaluza glossary first appeared, five of these six entries have been defined.[1] The meaning of *eigning*, a hapax

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[1] *Mell* (25038), *mik* (2807), and *thring* (11821) are all listed in the *Middle English Dictionary* (Kurath 2001), and each entry cites the corresponding line from the *Cursor Mundi* as evidence. In several cases

✉ B. S. W. Barootes
bsw.barootes@utoronto.ca

[1] Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto, 3rd Floor, Lillian Massey Building, 125 Queen's Park Crescent, Toronto, ON M5S 1A1, Canada

legomenon in all surviving Middle English manuscripts, has until now remained a mystery.

The phrase 'eigning hert' appears late in one extant manuscript of the *Book of Shrift*. This penitential text survives, in whole or in part, in three manuscripts of the northern version of the *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300): only London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian A. iii contains the *Book of Shrift* in full, while Göttingen, Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen Theol. 107r and London, British Library, Fairfax 14 contain different sections of it.[2] The phrase 'eigning hert' occurs in a section on how to confess to the sin of sloth. The imagined speaker, a penitent outlining the many lapses of a slothful life, explains several of the reasons for his inattention to familial, social, and religious obligations:

> Quen idel thoght me come and vain
> Wit will i stode þam noght again,
> Bot oft i lete þam on me rene,
> To þai me drogh to dede o sine.
> I ha me liked ai vm-quile
> In vnnait wordes, lath and vile,
> Til idel gammes, chess and tablis,
> Bot or eigning hert and rime and fablis. (28332–28339)[3]

This is but a short part of the 202-line excursus on the various ways in which a lazy or errant parishioner might avoid or otherwise neglect his spiritual duties. This particular passage, however, picks up on one of the recurring themes of the *Cursor Mundi* and the *Book of Shrift*: the indulgence in, and indeed the pairing of, 'idel thoght[s]', gaming, and story-telling (on which, more below).

The Middle English sense of *eigning* comes from Anglo-Norman noun *eines*, which carries the general sense of 'suspended', '[to be] suspended'.[4] We find a

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Footnote 1 continued

(such as *mik*), Morris's notes to the five volumes of *Cursor Mundi* text fill in Kaluza's blanks or substantiate his guesses. Morris likewise hypothesizes the meaning of *thring*, 'pleurisy, or a "stitch" or pricking (in the side)', by pointing to a similar context in *Hali Meidenhede*; this reading is confirmed by the editors of the Southern Version.

[2] In addition, BL, Cotton Galba E. ix, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Rawlinson poet. 175, and Wellesley, Wellesley College Library 8, which are not *Cursor Mundi* manuscripts, contain excerpts from the *Book of Shrift* alongside Latin and English devotional texts, including *The Pricke of Conscience*.

[3] All quotations from *Cursor Mundi* and the *Book of Shrift* are from Richard Morris's edition of the earlier, northern *Cursor Mundi*. See Morris (1874–1893). I quote from Cotton Vespasian A. iii. Where possible (lines 1–23898), I have also consulted the later Southern Version (c. 1340). See Horrall et al. (1978–2000), an edition which incorporates extensive notes and corrects most of Morris's misreadings and errors.

[4] See the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* (Rothwell et al. 2005), s.v. *eines, aines*. The etymology of *eines* is obscure, and the *Anglo-Norman Dictionary* provides no history. I suspect that the term comes to Norman French from its Germanic lineage rather than its Romance antecedents. Anglo-Norman *eines* has cognates, in the literal sense of 'to hang, to be suspended', in Middle High German *hâhen*, Middle Dutch *hangen*, Old English *hōn*, and Old Norse *hanga*. Gothic *hahan, which means both 'hang, suspend' and 'keep in suspense, leave in doubt', is closer to the multivalence of Anglo-Norman *eines*. Both are ultimately descended from Proto-Indo-European $\hat{k}enk$-, $\hat{k}onk$- 'to sway, to waver, to doubt'. (Compare Sanskrit *śaŋkatē* 'sways' and *śaŋkita-* 'doubt, be anxious'.) The Latin *cunctor, cunctari* 'delay, hesitate,

largely literal sense of the word in the *Petite philosophie* (c. 1225), a translation of the early part of the Latin cosmography *De imagine mundi*: 'Niule vent de muistes aleines, / Ke od terre e ewe sunt es eines [Clouds come from moist vapours that are suspended near the earth and waters]' (Threthewey 1939, vv. 1769–70).[5] A similarly literal sense, 'pendre en eines', 'to hang suspended', appears in a miracle of the Virgin in Adgar's *Gracial* (c. 1160). In the tale, an image of the Virgin is stolen by a Byzantine Jew who tries to defile it (much to his detriment). The image emerges from the privy where it had been cast, miraculously clean and emitting a shining beam. It is covered up by the governor of the city, but on Fridays at Vespers the image reveals itself that the pious may adore it until Saturday at Nones: 'Dunc se lieve li veilz amunt / E pent, ke ne seivent par unt. / Ultre l'ymage en eines pent [So the veil rises up (from where it sat on the image) and hangs there—no one knew how—above the image it hangs suspended]'(Adgar 1982, p. 296, v. 153).[6] These comparable, literal senses may have been known to the *Cursor*-poet, just as the texts quoted above may have been minor sources for the *Cursor*,[7] but for the figurative meaning that the *Book of Shrift*'s penitential passage exploits, we need to look beyond didactic and devotional literature.

Two figurative senses of Old French *eines* appear in Hue de Rotelande's romance *Ipomedon* (c. 1180). The first of these approximates the modern notions of being at a loss for words, of one's mind going blank, of losing one's train of thought: 'Li reis se effreie un poi de l'ire, / En eines est, ne set ke dire [The king is provoked to anger; he is flabbergasted and knows not what to say]' (1979, vv. 3047–48). The Middle English redactor recognises and maintains this sense in the tail-rhyme *Ipomadon* (c. 1400), even as he rearranges the narrative of the bargaining scene and uses a more familiar, almost stock, phrase: 'The kyng *stoode in a stody* stille' (Purdie 2001, v. 2720; emphasis added).[8] In this sense of *eines*, we see a shift from the purely literal sense of physical hanging or suspension to an abstract one of pause, doubt, or mental uncertainty.[9]

The second figurative sense of Anglo-Norman *eines* applies specifically to hearts and means 'to stand still' or 'to hang suspended, without movement'. (We might

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Footnote 4 continued

be undecided' matches the more figurative sense of *eines* found in the Anglo-Norman romance *Ipomedon* discussed below and in the Middle English *eigning* of the *Cursor Mundi*.

See Seebold (2002), s.v. *hangen*; Pokorny (1969), s.v. *k̂enk-*, *k̂onk-*; Lehmann (1986), s.v. **hahan*.

[5] On the translation of 'Ke od' as 'that near', see Threthewey's note, p. 125. Unless otherwise noted, all translations (and any errors therein) are my own.

[6] The editor, Pierre Kunstmann, comments, '[J]e pense que cette expression traduit le latin *libratum* ≪en équilibre≫' (1982, p. 356).

[7] On the *Cursor*-poet's reliance on French sources, see Haenisch (1893).

[8] For *stody*, which Purdie glosses as '*in a* ∼, lost in thought', see the *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. 'studī(e)' 4(c), 'a state of mental perplexity, doubt, anxiety, agitation; also, a state of amazement or wonder'. The redactor's choice of 'stoode in a stody' echoes similar moments in contemporary chivalric stories such as Chaucer's *Knight's Tale* (I.1530) and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* (2369). See Chaucer (1988) and Tolkien et al. (1967).

[9] The English use of 'suspense' in this sense would not occur until the middle of the fifteenth century in John Capgrave's *Nova legenda angliæ*. See especially the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. 'suspense' (n.) 3a, and s.v. 'suspense' (adj.) 2a.

compare the modern English expression of anxiety or tension 'with our hearts in our throats' or 'my heart skipped a beat'.) Two examples of this usage appear in the Old French *Ipomedon*, both carrying some of the feeling of suspense of the earlier quotation. In a tournament scene, La Fiere watches brave Sir Ipomedon ride toward the day's lists:

> Sis quers asez en eines pent,
> Mut dute le turneiement,
> Kar el ne set k'en avendra
> Ne ki ert ke a seignur prendra.
> [Her heart hangs in great suspense; she greatly fears the tournament, for she knows not what will come of it, nor who it will be whom she will take for her husband] (1979, vv. 3605–3608)[10]

Given the cruel turns of Fortuna's wheel, La Fiere cannot be certain who will win (or survive) the jousts, and so her heart hangs in the balance—just as her matrimonial fate remains undecided.

In a much later episode, after Ipomedon has fled France and thus avoided his impending marriage to the king's daughter, the knight comes upon his errant messenger Egeon. Ipomedon is thrilled—if unnerved—by this chance encounter:

> Ipomedon l'at cuneü,
> Sis quers tressaut, en eines fu
> Kar ben set ke il orrat nuveles,
> Mes ne set quels, leides u beles
> [Ipomedon recognises him: his heart leaps up—and it hangs there—for he knows very well that he will hear news, but he does not know what kind, foul or fair.] (1979, vv. 7657–7660)

The trepidation Ipomedon feels here stems from an anxiety about the news Egeon bears concerning La Fiere: how has her tale progressed in his absence? is she whole and hale? is she married or is she waiting for him? Such anxiety—as unsettling as it is addictive—is a feeling as familiar to enrapt readers of romance, *rimes*, and *fablis* as it is to players at 'idel gammes, chess and tablis'.

The *Cursor*-poet's adaptation of this Anglo-Norman word for suspense—one found repeatedly in chivalric romance—is particularly clever, given that he inserts it into the speech of a figure identified with a fondness for fables. Throughout the historical narrative of the *Cursor Mundi* and in the *Book of Shrift*, as in other penitential texts of the early fourteenth-century and their later fifteenth-century inheritors, there is a clear link between sinful negligence on the one hand and a

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[10] Compare the lines from the Middle English redaction (Purdie 2001, vv. 3104–7):

> In grette care is she brought,
> So ne she wyst at that day
> On whome she shuld her love laye,
> For in hur h[e]rtte she thought
> [whether the emperor or the knight would win the day].

literary dalliance with romances and secular storybooks on the other.[11] Indeed, the *Cursor*-poet begins his great undertaking by citing the deplorable popularity of heroic tales and courtly romances:

> Man yhernes rimes for to here,
> And romans red of maner*es* sere,
> …
> Storis als o ferekin thinges
> O princes, p*r*elates, and o kynges;
> Sanges sere of selcuth rime,
> Inglis, frankys, and latine (Morris 1874, vv. 1–2, 21–24)

The poet offers his history of the world as an antidote to the corrupted and corrupting pastime of reading romances. How delightful, then, to discover the source of the phrase *eigning hert* in a romance (albeit one in *frankys*).[12]

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[11] Similar passages occur in Robert Mannyng's *Handlyng Synne* (1303), the Kentish *Ayenbite of Inwyt* (c. 1340) and in *Jacob's Well* (c. 1440). See, respectively, Mannyng (1901, vv. 4527–46), Morris (1866, p. 207), and Brandeis (1900, p. 105).

[12] I wish to thank Lucas Wood for his generous comments and suggestions, particularly for his expert advice on the Old French translations. Any remaining errors are my own.

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