



Interchangeability in historical punctuation:

The *punctus* and the *virgula*

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It has long been held that historical punctuation marks are “practically interchangeable” (Jenkinson, 1926, p. 154), a supposition that may be particularly true as it concerns the *punctus* and the *virgula suspensiva*. The two historical marks appear to be similar in function, denoting any kind of pause, and during the late Middle English period, they are generally held to have been interchangeable (Parkes, 1992, p. 46). However, early printers appear to have perceived “an existing convention” in the use of the two marks that suggest some distinction in their functions (Parkes, 1992, p. 46). Additionally, instances in which a *virgula suspensiva* has been superimposed over a *punctus* appear to indicate a correction, potentially indicating a distinction in the functions of the two marks.

In this talk, I will explore the use of the *punctus* and the *virgula suspensiva* as they appear in ten different ME texts. The data collected from the ten texts suggests that the two marks are unlikely to occur interchangeably within a single text, instead showing a clear preference for one of the two marks throughout the texts studied. In addition, a study of modern editors’ understanding of the two marks indicates a perceived difference in function, whereby the *virgula suspensiva* indicates a heavier pause than that indicated by the *punctus*—interestingly, this understanding of the *virgula suspensiva* appears to be the opposite of the distinction of the two marks recognised by early printers.

While far from comprehensive, this talk will outline the history of the two marks, their use in medieval manuscripts, and, ultimately, the potential distinction between them during the Middle English period. By doing so, it may be possible to date the existing convention recognised by early printers to an earlier date than previously believed.

References

Jenkinson, H. (1926). Notes on the study of English punctuation of the sixteenth century. *The Review*



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