

Dealing with Complex Possessors in Early English: Split and Group Genitives  
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1 The investigation

1.1 Complex Possessors

Complex possessor: the Possessor Phrase (PossP) consists of more than a simple NP/DP. This investigation looked at possessors in which possessor N is not at end of PossP, i.e. ‘group’ genitives (1) and ‘split genitives’ (2).

- (1) but þe kyng of Fraunces men weren i-slawe  
 ‘But the king of France’s men were slain’  
 (CMPOLYCH, VIII,349.380)
- (2) Also he 3af hym þe eorles dou3ter of Gloucetre to wif,  
 also he gave him the earl’s daughter of Gloucester for wife  
 ‘also, he gave him the earl of Gloucester’s daughter as his wife’  
 (CMPOLYCH, VIII,87.3556)

Will focus on complex possessors containing PP.

1.2. Corpora Used

<b>Period</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Corpora</b>	<b>Words</b>
<b>M1</b>	<b>1150-1250</b>	<b>PPCME2</b>	<b>195,494</b>
<b>M2</b>	<b>1250-1350</b>	<b>PPCME2</b>	<b>93,999</b>
<b>M3</b>	<b>1350-1419</b>	<b>Corpora</b>	<b>405,499</b>
		PCEEC	19,505
		PPCME2	385,994
<b>M4</b>	<b>1420-1499</b>	<b>Corpora</b>	<b>624,433</b>
		PCEEC	364,317
		PPCME2	260,116
<b>E1</b>	<b>1500-1569</b>	<b>Corpora</b>	<b>853,926</b>
		PCEEC	309,220
		Penn1	182,188
		Penn2	176,322
		Helsinki	186,196
<b>E2</b>	<b>1570-1639</b>	<b>Corpora</b>	<b>1526824</b>
		PCEEC	910675
		Penn1	209108
		Penn2	220666
		Helsinki	186375
<b>E3</b>	<b>1640-1710</b>	<b>Corpora</b>	<b>1108223</b>
		PCEEC	555,415
		Penn1	193,893
		Penn2	181,457
		Helsinki	177,458

**Table 1 ME and EModE Periods and Corpora**

## 2 Some Comments on Old English (OE)

### 2.1 Relevant facts about genitives in OE

- Agreement of modifiers of possessor N
- Possessor N always at end of PossP
- Possessor N always related to following N

### 2.2 Complex possessors in OE

Typical 'split genitives' of OE were not like the ME 'split genitive' (2). The 'extraposed' material was nearly always appositive to possessor (3) or conjunct of it (4):

(3) & þa wæron Cūþwines suna Ceauliniges  
and those were Cuthwine:(M)GEN.SG sons:NOM.PL Ceawlining:(M)GEN.SG  
'and they were the sons of Cuthwine, the son of Ceawlin'

ASC (A) 688.7

(4) butan ðæs cyninges leafe & his witena  
without the:M.GEN.SG king:(M)GEN.SG leave and his counsellor:GEN.PL  
'without the king and his counsellors' permission'

(cochronA-2b,ChronA\_[Plummer]:901.6.1163)

Relative clauses in PossP were regularly extraposed:

(5) þæt wundor gelamp þurh ðæs halgan mihte.  
that miracle happened through the:M.GEN.SG saint:(M)GEN.SG power  
ðe heo to fundode.

that she to travelled

'that miracle happened through the power of the saint to whom she had travelled'

(cocathom2,ÆCHom\_II,\_2:14.90.333)

This sort of 'split' genitive persists through the entire period of my study. The extraposition is usually to the end of the clause (5), (6), but not always (7), in EModE at least :

(6) wee had a large meetinge att a Constables house on whome ye Lord had wrought a great miracle as in ye booke of miracles may bee seene.

(FOX-E3-P2,106.73)

(7) & on ye day caled Christmas day att his house whoe had beene formerly ye Sheriffe of Lincolne wee had some men frendes of all ye meetinges in ye County

(FOX-E3-P2,112.222)

## 3 The transition to ME

### 3.1 Loss of morphology, loss of postnominal genitive and development of *of* genitive

Once-only marking appears on appositives and coordinated PossPs, but these are different from group genitive with P, which does not appear until much later:

(8) þe Laferrd Cristess are  
the Lord Christ:POSS mercy  
'the Lord Christ's mercy'

(CMORM,DED.L143.38)

(9) of wif & weres gederunge worldes weole awakeneð.  
of wife and man's union world's wealth awakens  
'the union of man and wife brings about secular wealth'

(CMHALI,147.275)

### 3.2 Separated genitives ('his genitives', 'detached genitives')

(10) ðe was adam is sune  
who was Adam POSS son  
'who was Adam's son'

Gen.&Ex. 493 (a1325, c.1250)

## Allen-Complex Possessors in Early English

Examples are found from late 13thC, but not in all texts. The possessive marker is indeclinable until the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and has the same distributional possibilities as *-(e)s*:

(11) ...to your hurt and othyr men ys grete avaylle  
 ‘to your hurt and other men’s great benefit’  
 J. Paston I 53.8 (1458)

(12) Item, the Erle of Arundell ys son hath weddyd the Quyne ys sustere.  
 (PASTON,II,375.444.11429)

In the later period, there is always agreement (in the unusual case of feminine or plural):

(13) to the Queen of Bohemia her service,  
 ‘to the queen of Bohemia’s service’  
 (HOLLES,III,452.130.3658) (e2)

The later examples look like the possessor doubling found in other Germanic languages, but the other ones don’t. Most important: group genitives with separated marking did not antedate group genitives with attached marking.

### 4 Split and group genitives: ME and EModE

#### 4.1 Split

Split genitives using the preposition *of* become common in the texts nearly as soon as *of* genitives themselves become common:

(14) for *ðas* *sades* *ʒekinde of ðare* *eorða.*  
 for the:N.GEN.SG seed:(N)GEN.SG nature of the:F.DAT.SG earth:(F)DAT.SG  
 because of the nature of the seed of the earth’  
 (CMVICES1,27.309)

#### 4.2 Group

Earlier group genitives appear in late 14<sup>th</sup> century, e.g. (1) and (15):

(15) þte kyng of Engelond his eldest sone Edward seilled into Gascoyne  
 ‘that the king of England’s eldest son Edward sailed into Gascony’  
 (CMPOLYCH,VIII,348.3758)

By the end of the m4 period, i.e. the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the group genitive was well-established as an alternative to the split genitive.

Text	Split Total	Gp Total	Total	% Split	%Gp
m1	23	0	23	100%	0%
m2	1	0	1	100%	0%
Total m3	30	5	35	86%	14%
Total m4	66	77	143	46%	54%
Total e1	5	102	107	5%	95%
Total e2	24	251	275	9%	91%
Total e3	12	90	102	12%	88%

**Table 2: Split vs. Group genitives (PP) in ME and ModE by periods**

## Allen-Complex Possessors in Early English

Text	Split Total	Gp Total	Total	% Split	%Gp
m3 letters	0	0	0	-	-
PPCME2 m3	30	5	35	86%	14%
m4 letters	23	63	86	27%	73%
PPCME2 m4	43	14	57	73%	27%
e1 letters	2	55	57	4%	96%
penn1_e1	1	26	27	4%	96%
penn2_e1	2	8	10	20%	80%
hels_e1	0	13	13	0%	100%
e2 letters	16	180	196	8%	92%
penn1_e2	6	23	29	21%	79%
penn2_e2	1	28	29	3%	97%
helsinki_e2	1	20	21	5%	95%
e3 letters	11	59	70	16%	84%
penn1_e3	0	8	8	0%	100%
penn2_e3	0	15	15	0%	100%
hels_e3	1	8	9	11%	89%

**Table 3 Split and Group genitives (PP) by corpus**

### 4.3 Marking

#### 4.3.1 Split genitives

Possessive marker usually written attached, but can be separated:

- (16) Aboute þat tyme Cesarea, þe kyng his wif of Pers, come wiþ fewe Cristen men to Con-stantynnoble for to be y-cristened:  
‘about that time Cesarea, the king of Persia’s wife, came with a few Christians to Constantinoble in order to be christened’.  
(CMPOLYCH,VI,63.437) (m3, 1397)
- (17) to the byschoppe ys palys of London,  
‘to the bishop of London’s palace’  
(CMGREGOR,208.1851)
- (18) that I wrote a remembraunce to yow ... by Richard, the parson ys seruaunt of Blofeld,  
‘that I wrote a memorandum to you by way of Richard, the parson of Blofeld’s servant’  
(PASTON,II,171.341.9274) (m4 letter)
- (19) and as for the Fekerey ys hawke of Watford, yt prevyt well:  
‘and as for the vicar of Watford’s hawk, it proves well’  
(CELY,37.032.665) (m4 letter)
- (20) by Mr Pickerell his sonne of Intwood  
‘by Mr. Pickerell of Intwood’s son’  
(PASTONK,50.014.226) (e2 letter)
- (21) at one Mr. Frauncis Downes his house of Tuddenham  
‘at one Mr. Francis Downes of Tuddenham’s house’  
(PARKHUR,177.040.682) (e2 letter)

No separated examples found in the agreeing period of the separated genitive.

#### 4.3.2 Group genitives

The marking is usually at the right edge of PossP. But sometimes only on head (22)-(23):

(22) and nough my lordes of Suffolk men come from Claxton to Norwich  
'and now my lord of Suffolk's men came from Claxton to Norwich'  
(PASTON,II,311.421.10916) (m4 letter)

(23) and that the bishoppes of Rome perswasions therein shold be of  
small effect  
'and that the bishop of Rome's persuasions therein should be of small effect'  
(WYATT,148.024.786) (e1 letter)

And sometimes marked twice:

(24) My lordys of Warwykys shyp, the Mary Grace, ...hadde the  
grettest hurt,  
My lord of Warkwick's ship, the Mary Grace... sustained the greatest damage'  
(PASTON,II,287.412.10615) (m4)

(25) To my veray loving Freend Sir Thomas Wyat Knight The kinges of  
Englandes his maiestes ambassadour Resydent with Themperour.  
'To my true loving friend Sir Thomas Wyatt, knight, the king of England's majesty's  
ambassador resident with the emperor'  
(CROMWEL,II,61.046.497) (e1 letter)

There might be no marking with a sibilant:

(26) The Duke of Cleves man that is here  
(WYATT,143.023.744)

Or an abbreviation might make marking unrecoverable:

(27) Dr. Tenison now told me there would suddainly be some greate thing  
discovered, which happened to be the P: of O: intended coming:  
(EVELYN-E3-P2,885.211)

Or there might be simply no marking:

(28) my lord Thomas Gray, the duke of Suffoke-Dasset brodur  
(MACHYN-E1-P1,61.212)

## Allen-Complex Possessors in Early English

Text	Split-PP	Split-his	Split-sib	Split-no mark	Split total
<b>m3</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>m4</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>66</b>
e1letters	2	0	0	0	2
penn1_e1	1	0	0	0	1
penn2_e1	2	0	0	0	2
hels_e1	0	0	0	0	0
<b>Total e1</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>
e2letters	13	3	0	0	16
penn1_e2	6	0	0	0	6
penn2_e2	1	0	0	0	1
hels_e2	1	0	0	0	1
<b>Total e2</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>24</b>
e3letters	11	0	0	0	11
penn1_e3	0	0	0	0	0
penn2_e3	0	0	0	0	0
hels_e3	1	0	0	0	1
<b>e3 Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>12</b>

Table 4 Marking Types: Split Genitives

Text	Gp	Gp-sep	Gp-sib	abbr.	Gp-no mark	Gp-int. mk	Gp-dbl mark	Gp total
<b>m3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>m4</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>77</b>
e1letters	41	8	4	0	0	1	1	55
penn1_e1	17	1	2	0	3	3	0	26
penn2_e1	6	0	0	0	1	1	0	8
hels_e1	9	0	0	0	3	1	0	13
<b>Total e1</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>102</b>
e2letters	139	29	6	1	4	0	0	180
penn1_e2	22	1	0	0	0	0	0	23
penn2_e2	26	1	1	0	0	0	0	28
hels_e2	8	7	5	0	0	0	0	20
<b>Total e2</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>251</b>
e3letters	51	6	1	0	1	0	0	59
penn1_e3	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
penn2_e3	14	0	0	1	0	0	0	15
hels_e3	8	0	0	0	0	0	0	8
<b>e3 Total</b>	<b>81</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>90</b>

Table 5 Marking types: Group Genitives

## Allen-Complex Possessors in Early English

Head-only marking is restricted with group genitives, but persists through the EModE period when the possessum is unexpressed:

(29) and thereupon asked Mr. Udall whose writing they were; who answered, they are a Friend's of mine

(JUDALL-E2-P2,1,172.75)

(30) and she hathe promyseid me to be more at yowr comandment then at eny knyghtys in Inglond, my lord reseruyd,

(PASTON,I,583.192.6003)

	NoN end mk	No N head mk	No N dbl mk	NoN No Mk	NoN sep	NoN sib	No N total
e1letters	2	1	0	0	0	0	3
penn1_e1	2	4	1	0	0	0	7
penn2_e1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
helsi_e1	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total e1	6	5	1	0	0	0	12
e2letters	25	2	0	0	0	4	31
penn1_e2	4	1	0	0	0	0	5
penn2_e2	3	1	0	0	0	0	4
hels_e2	3	1	0	0	0	0	4
E2 total	35	5	0	0	0	4	44
e3letters	5	1	0	0	0	0	6
penn1_e3	0	1	0	0	0	1	2
penn2_e3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
hels_e3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
e3 Total	5	2	0	0	0	1	8

**Table 6 Marking of Groups with No Expressed Possessum**

### 5 Split vs. Group

Preposition in split limited to *of*? Not quite:

(31) ...forto speke wiþ his cosyn Edward þe outelaw, þat was Edmond's son  
...to speak with his cousin Edward the outlaw, that was Edmund's son  
wiþ þe Irencide.

with the Ironside

'to speak with his cousin Edward the Exile, that was Edmund Ironside's son'

(CMBRUT3,126.3817)

(32) that his ambassador should give way nor place to no king's ambassador in  
the world so long as he hath his sword in his hand,

(BARRING,240.181.3151) (e2 letter)

But don't get excited. Prepositions other than *of* are also rare in groups:

## Allen-Complex Possessors in Early English

Text	Split-of	Split-Other	Gp-of	Gp-other
2 m1	23	0	0	0
2 m2	1	0	0	0
Total m3	29	1	5	0
Total m4	66	0	77	0
Total e1	5	0	101	1
Total e2	23	1	246	5
Total e3	12	0	89	1

**Table 7 Prepositions used in Split and Group Genitives**

Most group genitives have this structure:

(33) (det/posspro) N of N

(34) I haue received your graces and others of the counsailles lettres  
(PAGET,34.010.215)(e1 period)

(35) The xiiij day of May was the Fyssmongers and sant Peters in Cornhyll  
prossessyon,  
(MACHYN-E1-P1,62.243)

When the preposition is not *of*, it is in what should probably be regarded as a fixed expression:

(36) I will not fayle to bringe the rente and your father in lawe's letter to  
shewe you his further pleasure written to me in this behaulf.  
(BACON,I,38.021.387) (e2 letter)

(37) Doctor Cosens is in a Sergeant at Armes hands  
(OXINDE,I,188.114.1724) (e3 letter)

Text	Simplest	More complex	Excluded	Total Gp
e2 letters	142	34	4	180
penn1_e2	21	2	0	23
penn2_e2	25	3	0	28
hels_e2	15	3	2	20
total e2	203	42	6	251

**Table 8: Simpler and More Complex Group Genitives in the E2 Period**

The 'more complex' groups may involve greater complexity of the possessor:

(38) the goodman of the house his name being Petricke Pettcarne, where my  
entertainment was with good cheere.  
(JOTAYLOR-E2-H,1,134.C1.179)

But more often, the possessum is more complex (not always very much more):

(39) of my Lord of Essex's making his House a Guard  
(ESSEXSTATE-E2-P2,202.76)

(40) obiectinge to the E. of Essex his cold hipocrisie,  
(ESSEX-E2-H,16.192)

It is notable that all the group genitives of ME are of the simplest type:

(41) For I, that God of Loves servantz serve  
For I that god of Love's servants serve  
'For I, who serve the servants of the god of love...'  
(TC I.15)

With split genitives, greater complexity of the possessor seems to be the key:

(42) It is Mr. Carew, Sir Francis Carew's son of Beddington in Surrey  
(DUPPA,116.055.930) (e3 letter)

(43) in another mans mynde of more scrupelous disposicon  
(BRYSKET,21.002.39) (e2 letter)

Text	Simplest	More Complex	Total Split
total e1	2	3	5
total e2	12	12	24
total e3	4	8	12
Total EModE	18	23	41

**Table 9 Simpler and More Complex Split Genitives in EModE**

## 6 Conclusions

- English speakers/writers have always preferred to have both head marking and right edge marking of prenominal possessors. This causes problems with complex possessors.
- The most common type of group genitive has always been the simplest type.
- No theoretical argument can be based on the putative restriction of the split genitive to *of*.
- The head-marking principle was not utterly defeated in the EModE period. Nevertheless, there was a significant change in frequencies starting in the m4 period. The split genitive remains at a low frequency all through the EModE period (in writing). The disappearance of the split genitive with PPs from writing (if true!) presumably indicates another change.
- More attention needs to be paid to the position of the ‘extraposed’ material in the split genitive in studies of contemporary speech (and writing).

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