

*‘Who so wilneþ to be wijs?’**
**Concerning some major features of
Orm’s orthographical system of Middle English**

by

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I. Early medieval orthography and Old English

Writing and speaking may both be viewed as ways of encoding mental ideas in specific patterns. The peculiarity of the written mode lies in its twofold use of graphic symbols, on the one hand permitting a particular form of communication while on the other hand being used for recording language material. Knowledge of the language background allows contemporary readers to phonetically reproduce such encoded messages.¹ So, a graphic shape can be compared to speech production, or the Chomskyan concept of performance, and therefore may be equally defective. Consequently, many linguists would refrain from regarding orthography as being part of proper linguistic investigation. Why, then, should we still want to ponder on graphic realisations of language? The answer lies in the recording function of script allowing access to languages or stages of a particular language that have produced no other forms of records. Graphemic theory and the (comparative) study of orthographical systems are, thus, particularly legitimised in connection with historical linguistics.

According to McLaughlin symbols can mediate complex ideas directly, then termed ideographic, or indirectly, representing combinations of particular sound units.² The latter is called phonetic and its realisation is possible due to spoken and written modes being regarded as “coexistent, ‘mutually incongruent’ systems [expressing] the same language.”³ This is certainly one of the core features of orthography and allows access to the reconstruction of not directly available language material. So far, this sounds quite straightforward, but it is crucial not to forget that phonetic representation does

* OE. ‘Who desires to be wise?’

¹ Cf. JOHN C. MCLAUGHLIN, *A Graphemic-Phonemic Study of a Middle English Manuscript*. 1963, p. 18f., for his discussion of Bloomfield’s graphemic theory.

² Cf. MCLAUGHLIN, *A Graphemic-Phonemic Study* (see note 1), p. 21.

³ H.J. ULDALL, *Speech and writing*, in: *Acta linguistica: Revue internationale de linguistique structurale* 4 (1944) p. 15.

not overrule the primary function of a spelling system, namely mediating semantic ideas; at least, as long as we are not dealing with phonetic transcription.⁴ Thorough awareness of the correlative restrictions of written and spoken systems is therefore inevitable before starting an investigation of historical writings “as evidence about the spoken language.”⁵

For further elaboration on orthographical aspects, let us choose a source from a particular historical period of English. It is generally supposed that towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, the late West Saxon variety of Old English (hereafter: OE), almost acquired standard language status. Yet, due to various societal modifications following the extra-linguistic, historical events of 1066, its continuation was prevented.⁶ Though the new bureaucratic discourse was mainly carried out in Romance languages, notably Latin and Norman-French (hereafter: NF), English continued to be spoken by the majority of the English people, and was even continued to be written and copied in several ecclesiastical institutions. The absence of fixed orthographic standards, however, does not imply that spelling conventions did not exist. These rather tended to arise on a more regional level around specific monasteries, scriptoria or even single teachers following particular conventions drawn from their surrounding dialectal variety of English.⁷

II. Some innovative devices within the Ormulum

Particularly interesting is therefore MS Bodleian Junius 1, an allegedly autographical text written by an Augustinian canon called Orm, including the original draft as well as subsequent revisions.⁸ The MS is most likely to represent an author’s lengthy pre-

⁴ Cf. MCLAUGHLIN, A Graphemic-Phonemic Study (see note 1) p. 23, n. 13, on Bolinger’s visual morphemes in analogy to tactile morphemes of sign languages.

⁵ ANGUS MCINTOSH, The Analysis of written Middle English, in: Transactions of the Philological Society (1956) p. 28.

⁶ Cf. NORMAN BLAKE, Introduction, in: NORMAN BLAKE (ed.), The Cambridge History of the English Language 2. 1992, p. 10f., explaining the loss of a standard orthography as the result of crucial changes ‘in the conventions of writing’ rather than providing evidence of substantial language change.

⁷ Cf. BLAKE, Introduction (see note 6) p. 12, on ME orthographies as being primarily phonetic and largely dependant on former OE spelling conventions until about 1150. See also HERMANN M. FLASDIECK, Die sprachliche Einheitlichkeit des Ormulum, in: Anglia 47 (1923) p. 292.

⁸ Cf. R.W. BURCHFIELD, The Language and Orthography of the Ormulum MS, in: Transactions of the Philological Society (1956) p. 57, explaining that ‘almost each square inch’ of the MS had been written on, and revised content had been inserted into the original text. On additional leaves see HEINRICH CHRISTOPH MATTHES, Die Einheitlichkeit des Ormulum: Studien zur Textkritik, zu den Quellen und zur sprachlichen Form von Ormins Evangelienbuch. 1933, p. 5-11, dealing with the original structure

occupation with creating an almost homogeneous orthography; taking into consideration⁹ even various linguistic changes of his specific dialect.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the roughly 20.000 lines of verse surviving are a mere fraction of the original length of about 160.000 lines.¹¹ In assessing some of the *Ormulum*'s specific orthographic aspects, we may mention that creating new or revising already existing orthographic systems was rather unusual, even at times lacking a widely acknowledged standard.

Orm, however, found a useful basis for his task in three alphabetical systems (OE, Latin and NF) and two types of script (insular and Carolingian minuscule [hereafter: CM]), so it was particularly important for him not to exaggerate the number of individual graphic representatives. Nevertheless did he desire to visualise phonemic and allophonic distinctions/developments on a graphic level.¹² Consequently, we may understand that Orm's spelling has been widely acknowledged for its phonemic-graphemic correlation: McLaughlin accepts the notion of allophones of a particular phoneme which (ideally) corresponds to the application of allographs of a respective grapheme.¹³ Two graphemes can also join to form compound graphemes representing a single phoneme. The graphic surroundings influencing the prevailing production of a particular allograph are exemplified by Burchfield who observes a consequent change of <ð>:<þ> in word-initial position, with less occurring <ð> being prevalent almost

of the *Ormulum*. After a palaeographical/semantic analysis, he argues in favour of an original arrangement of the double leaves in six quires. See SIGURD HOLM, *Corrections and Additions in the Ormulum Manuscript*. 1922, p. 65-83, and FLASDIECK, *Sprachliche Einheitlichkeit* (see note 7) p. 293, who refer to Orm's dedication and its explicit emphasis on orthographical features to instruct future copyists. For potential orthographical problem-fields see BURCHFIELD, *Language and Orthography* (see note 8) p. 70-78, and D.G. SCRAGG, *A history of English spelling*. 1974, p. 29-31.

⁹ Parkes restricts the MS production to a single decade (1170-1180) and the East-Midland monastery of Bourne applying comparative palaeographic/semantic methods. Cf. M.B PARKES, *On the presumed date and possible origin of the Ormulum*: Oxford Bodleian Library, MS Junius 1, in: E.G. STANLEY, D. GRAY (eds.), *Five hundred years of words and sounds: a festschrift for Eric Dobson*. 1983, p.115-127.

¹⁰ For a detailed discussion of phonetic developments in East-Midland dialects see FLASDIECK, *Sprachliche Einheitlichkeit* (see note 7) p. 298-324, and ROGER LASS, *Phonology and Morphology*, in: NORMAN BLAKE (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language* 2. 1992, p. 36-38.

¹¹ Cf. MATTHES, *Einheitlichkeit* (see note 8) p. 16, who estimates the remaining part of the MS as comprising between about a sixth and an eighth of the original length. So, Burchfield's 160.000 lines of verse are rather the upper limit. Cf. BURCHFIELD, *Language and Orthography* (see note 8) p. 58.

¹² See also MCLAUGHLIN, *A Graphemic-Phonemic Study* (see note 1) p. 35, on the graphemic neutralisation of <þ> and <ð> due to the phonemic split of OE /T/. Compared to the Peterborough Chronicle the *Ormulum* lacks any realisations of [th]. Cf. FLASDIECK, *Sprachliche Einheitlichkeit* (see note 7) p. 293f.

¹³ Cf. MCLAUGHLIN, *A Graphemic-Phonemic Study* (see note 1) p. 29.

exclusively in line-initial positions.¹⁴ My purpose, however, was to examine aspects of its innovatory application of graphic symbols.

A highly conspicuous feature of Orm's typeface is the relation between written language and its respective script. The MS meticulously distinguishes between Latin and English, the first being always represented in CM, whereas the insular script serves to depict the far longer English passages.¹⁵ Such application surely requires thorough preparation on part of the author as the differentiation is kept throughout the text.¹⁶ Orm considered it equally necessary to emphasise several phonetic developments of his contemporary language. Unfortunately, the OE alphabet was only fit for limited service in this respect, due to numerous phonetically ambivalent graphs opposing Orm's desire for transparency. A logical consequence would have been the invention of required new graphs; at Orm's times, however, this meant risky business. As soon as a medieval author dared to cherish the thought of widely distributing his MS, he was obliged to build on a common basis of graphic understanding: readers surely should be capable of deciphering his text without difficulties. Consequently, Orm again resorts to orthographical conventions at his disposal. Particularly, NF conventions appeared useful on this occasion: Since e.g. the OE graph <c> did not allow phonetic distinction of [k]:[tʃ] before front vowels, Orm made use of NF <k>.¹⁷ These two graphemes would have made further distinction between <c> and <k> superfluous. Yet, Orm retained both graphs, applying <c> in unambiguous contexts of its phonetic value being [k];¹⁸ whereas <k> was employed in word-initial positions preceding <e, i, æ>, as well as inter-vocally.¹⁹ Before <a> and <o>, however, the use varies, allowing a considerable number of doubles, as e.g. <callde(o)wisse> (line 3436) vs. <kallde(o)wisse> (13 times from line 3470 to line 11091), <cariteþ> (line 3008) vs.

¹⁴ Cf. BURCHFIELD, *Language and Orthography* (see note 8) p. 67.

¹⁵ Cf. DEREK BRITTON, John ANDERSON, *The orthography and phonology of the Ormulum*, in: *English Language and Linguistics* 3.2 (1999) p. 304. For only 150 Norse loans in the Ormulum see DAVID BURNLEY, *Lexis and Semantics*, in: NORMAN BLAKE (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language* 2. 1992, c. 5, p. 419 and p. 422f. Cf. SIMON HOROBIN, JEREMY SMITH, *An Introduction to Middle English*. 2002, p. 129-131 and p. 166, for the adoption of the Norse 3rd p. Pl. pronoun <þeZZ>.

¹⁶ Cf. the restricted application of certain graphs in particular languages. <y> e.g. is only found in French or Latin words, whereas <æ> appears almost exclusively in English. For the use of <qu> and <cw> cf. BURCHFIELD, *Language and Orthography* (see note 8) p. 69f., and ROGER LASS, *Phonology and Morphology*, in: NORMAN BLAKE (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language* 2. 1992, p. 54.

¹⁷ [tʃ], represented by the compound grapheme <ch>, was a likewise introduced NF convention.

¹⁸ FLASDIECK, *Sprachliche Einheitlichkeit* (see note 7) p. 294, discovers <c> predominately word-initially preceding <l, w, r, n, u, o>, inter-consonantly, and word-finally.

¹⁹ The only exception is <publicaness>. Cf. FLASDIECK, *Sprachliche Einheitlichkeit* (see note 7) p. 294.

<kariteþ> (lines 2998, 3000 and 3007), <casstell> (line 18113) vs. <kasstell> (lines 18102, 19501 and 19941), <callf> (lines 1138, 5858, 5982 and 7803) vs. <kallf> (6 times from line 5851 to line 6040), or <care> (line 4852) vs. <kare> (line 4563). Among these, French loans predominate, so the prevailing <k>-forms are understandable.

Similarly, OE <Z> could indicate [j]:[g].²⁰ By means of the CM <g> this ambivalence could have been cured, but Orm had also noticed its representation of the palato-alveolar fricative [dʒ] in NF. Therefore, Orm resorted to the CM <g>, but modified its shape to <ȝ> to represent the velar stop [g]. The unchanged graph could then be used for the orthographical accomplishment of [dʒ], as in <biggen>. So, the remaining OE yogh-graph allowed the representation of the palatal approximant [j], as in <Zer>, and the compound grapheme with <h> as <Z^h>. A thorough innovation was Orm's endeavour to illustrate phonemic quantity within his spelling. Far-sightedly, he resorted to OE and Latin consonantal geminates as encountered in <...VCCV...>. In such contexts, vowels preceding the geminate were realised as short,²¹ whereas a single consonant in a closed syllable graphically indicated a long vowel. Orm applied this paradigm even in cases of non-historic geminates dissolving several potential areas of ambivalence.²² Unfortunately, however, he could not unrestrictedly realise this concept in the highly equivocal context of <...VCV...>. Here, he would have unwillingly risked creating homographs/phonological geminates, as may be illustrated by indicating (a) a short and (b) a long vowel: (a) <bede> = 'prayer' (line 1156), (b) <bede> = 'command' [verb, 1stp. Sg. Pres.] (line 18337). Doubling the voiced dental stop in (a) would have composed the unwelcome homograph <bedde> = 'bed' (Dat. Sg.). Accordingly, Orm applied superscript diacritics in such complicated circumstances.²³ However, he

²⁰ For potential diphthongal qualities of yogh in the context <VZ> see DEREK BRITTON, JOHN ANDERSON, Double Trouble: Geminate versus simplex graphs in the Ormulum, in: JACEK FISIĄK (ed.), *Studies in Middle English Linguistics*. 1997, p. 37-48, and BRITTON/ANDERSON, Orthography and phonology (see note 15) p. 327-329.

²¹ HOROBIN/SMITH, Introduction (see note 15) p. 165, only acknowledge this for vowels in closed syllables, as was the case with historic geminates.

²² For a short selection of orthographic geminates see BRITTON/ANDERSON, Double Trouble (see note 20) p. 34. Concerning instances lacking orthographical gemination cf. HOLM, Corrections and Additions (see note 8), p. 92.

²³ <|> indicating a short and <ˆ> implying a long vowel. See also the small vertical strokes (single-triple) above graphs, regarded as *nota bene* by BRITTON/ANDERSON, Orthography and phonology (see note 15), p. 308 und p. 325. Do not confuse them with vertical dividing strokes, done by Orm as double mark, as <Zho^ˆ%ne> (line 2941), others being attributed to a more modern hand. Cf. BURCHFIELD, Language and Orthography (see note 8) p. 65f., and HOLM, Corrections and Additions (see note 8) p. 107.

faced further difficulties in his attempt to constantly apply his doubling paradigm. Certain symbols resisted doubling due to the danger of creating graphic ambivalence, as e.g. <v/u> potentially mistaken for <w>.²⁴ Likewise was it superfluous to create a geminate for bi-sonorant <x> representing /ks/, since vowels preceding this characteristic grapheme always were pronounced short.²⁵

The diacritic use of <h> indicating voiceless friction in compound graphemes is another unique specimen of the Ormulum. This feature could only enter Orm's orthography after introducing NF <ch>. In regard to <sh>, this application allowed to dissolve the uncertainty of OE <sc> having indicated [sk]:[ʃ].²⁶ In connection with <Z>, diacritic <h> always appears in superscript form²⁷; except for the feminine personal pronoun <Zho>. Concerning this, HOLM takes the view that <Z^h> could well be regarded as a ligature, adding a second graphical invention to Orm's modified CM <γ>. According to HOLM, Orm had endeavoured to represent both the palatal and the guttural spirant with <Z>, but in case of the latter decided on explicit orthographical differentiation because of equally existing <Zh>; consequently applied as in <boZ^hess> (line 10015) or <hiZ^henn> (line 2723).²⁸

The same basic idea of the indication of voicelessness is found in combination with metathesis of OE compound graphemes in <lh, rh, wh>, as <lhude> (line 8142), <rhof> (line 11351) and <whatt> (line 1518); regarded as graphic realisations of a gradual shift from bi-segmental OE /xC/ to monosegmental, voiceless ME /C↓/. The Ormulum provides the earliest evidence of this paradigm regularly being taken into account.²⁹ In analogy, we may also assess the phonetic value of <Zh>³⁰ as [j↓]. Such considerations are further enhanced by interpreting its double <h(h)Z^h> as [ΞΞ] in

²⁴ Cf. SCRAGG, *A history* (see note 8) 50, n. 3.

²⁵ The only exception is <waxxenn> (l. 5131) resulting from its running over a line break. Cf. BRITTON/ANDERSON, *Orthography and phonology* (see note 15) p. 314, n. 27.

²⁶ Orm is the first who constantly applies <sh> for [ʃ]. Cf. SCRAGG, *A history* (see note 8) p. 46.

²⁷ For consonantal superscription see HOLM, *Corrections and Additions* (see note 8) p. 89-96, who is also dealing with the question in how far these could be regarded as subsequent corrections.

²⁸ See BRITTON/ANDERSON, *Orthography and phonology* (see note 15), p. 312. Forms lacking <^h> addressed as 'scribal error[s]' see HOLM, *Corrections and Additions* (see note 8) p. 94ff.

²⁹ Cf. BRITTON/ANDERSON, *Double Trouble* (see note 20) p. 31f., and BRITTON/ANDERSON, *Orthography and phonology* (see note 15) p. 316f. Also SCRAGG, *A history* (see note 8) p. 31.

³⁰ Regarding its phonetic value as velar fricative /ŋ/, cf. BRITTON/ANDERSON, *Double Trouble* (see note 20) p. 31f. Also LASS, *Phonology and Morphology* (see note 16) p. 118f.

forms such as <lah(h)Z^hen> (line 5663) or <neh(h)Z^hen> (line 4491).³¹ In studying Orm's orthography, we inevitably have to mention that three to four different hands (*A-D*) can be distinguished within the MS.³² *A* (regarded as the author) and *B* appear fairly similar in their respective orthographical typeface, whereas *C* and *D* distinctly deviate from the original hand. *C* almost appears as a fair copy and *D* re-corrects some subsequently homogenised words. Why do we attach importance to the appearance of several hands? Due to the characteristic feature of the Ormulum as an autographical text having been overworked for a longer period, diverging hands could be connected with later/supplementary additions.

For the sake of the argument, we refrain from a further elaboration on *A* and *B*, and concentrate on the more interesting behaviour of *C* instead who tried to follow Orm's established conventions, but repeatedly relapsed into another orthography. Holm discerned the re-occurrence of unintentional orthographic gemination in Latin *A* passages, whereas this is never the case with *C*. English *C* passages, however, deviate drastically from Orm's orthography, so that we repeatedly find <þurh> (instead of <þurhh>), <strengþe> (for <strenncþe>), <wit> (in place of <witt>), <watt> (contrasting with <whatt>), and <þer> and <slep> which in *A/B* texts are usually rendered with <æ>. Particularly because of the phonetic change depicted in the latter, Holm regards *C* as belonging to a later ME period.³³ It is also worth mentioning the deletions/re-insertions of the compound grapheme <eo>. Orm is supposed to have favoured <e> in words with historic <eo> only during the process of writing.³⁴ At least, thus, could we explain the curiosity that no <eo>-spelling is found after <eorþe> (line 13853)³⁵, in the few additions of *C*³⁶ and the finally produced dedication.³⁷ Orm deleted almost all instances of <eo>

³¹ See HOROBIN/SMITH, Introduction (see note 15) p. 130f. and p. 166. Cf. also BRITTON/ANDERSON, Orthography and phonology (see note 15) p. 316-320, for the complementary appearance of medial /Γ/ and non-medial /Ξ/, represented by <h(h)>.

³² The number of hands depends on the classification of *B* either being an autonomous hand or a potential later form of *A*. Cf. MATTHES, Einheitlichkeit (see note 8) p. 16-21, viewing *B* as being *A* at some later stage. See also HOLM, Corrections and Additions (see note 8) p. 83-106, calling *B* "doubtful" (p. 96), and Lass' use of the plural when referring to the "authors" of the Ormulum. Cf. LASS, Phonology and Morphology (see note 16) p. 24.

³³ Cf. HOLM, Corrections and Additions (see note 8) p.102.

³⁴ Cf. FLASDIECK, Sprachliche Einheitlichkeit (see note 7) p. 321f., on non-historic forms neighbouring labials, r or l, which is explained as vernacular rounding tendency.

³⁵ Cf. HOLM, Corrections and Additions (see note 8) p. 61, for evidence of deleted/overwritten <o> in <wel> (line 15400 and line 19690).

³⁶ Cf. FLASDIECK, Sprachliche Einheitlichkeit (see note 7) p. 317, and HOLM, Corrections and Additions (see note 8) p. 105, missing <eo> in <here> (line 7475), <herte> (line 4978-4981) and <ben> (line 8343-8346).

³⁷ See FLASDIECK, Sprachliche Einheitlichkeit (see note 7) p. 320, regarding the fluctuation of <e> and <eo> before the breach as Orm's unintentional deviation from initially planned <eo> representing [9].

for the sake of orthographic homogeneity preceding the said line. Here our focus may now be set on *D* whom, according to HOLM, we are to thank for numerous re-insertions of <o>.³⁸

III. Orm's achievement

Although having acknowledged only a few specifically interesting aspects of Orm's source text, we may still, in conclusion, characterise his orthographical practices as being essentially devoted to an ultimate principle of distinctiveness. Orm's primary pursuit of graphic standardisation resulting from largely ambivalent orthographic conditions at his time could not neutralise every equivocal instance within his MS. He, nevertheless, quite innovatively set to work; even compared to present-day standards. Neither was he afraid of introducing uncommon graphic devices, nor did he shrink from creating additional graphemic symbols out of familiar graphic shapes. Even if we shall not regard him as a "*spelling reformer*", which LASS unfortunately does,³⁹ since, despite all innovations, his orthography very much is still linked to OE tradition, we, nevertheless, may doubtlessly regard the otherwise unknown Lincolnshire Augustinian as being the earliest known insular linguist who managed to anticipate several later orthographical developments of English in his elaborated spelling system.

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Orm's reasons for eventually favouring <e> and the fact that <eo> prevails <e> before the breach remain untreated.

³⁸ Found between <eorþe> (line 2) and <beoðenn> (line 11627). Cf. HOLM, *Corrections and Additions* (see note 8) p. 60-65, also finding out that *D*'s corrections do not exceed line 13853. FLASDIECK, *Sprachliche Einheitlichkeit* (see note 7) p. 317f., is more careful in ascribing such alternations to *D*, but equally regards *D* as later hand, judging by orthography and by the paler ink of re-inserted <o>. His argumentation appears quite plausible, but cf. MATTHES, *Einheitlichkeit* (see note 8) p. 18, n. 1, on a comparable problem regarding *A/B*, explaining that the quality of the parchment and the ink, being used in already deleted places, may affect the graphic manifestation.

³⁹ Cf. LASS, *Phonology and Morphology* (see note 16) p. 31.

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