

SOMETHING OLD, SOMETHING NEW:
ENGLISH ORTHOGRAPHY IN THE THIRTEENTH-CENTURY
SOUTH-WEST MIDLANDS*

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“In East Anglia (especially Norfolk), and also in Lincolnshire, an individual writer’s range of variant spellings for a single word is generally greater than in most other counties ...; the contrast with the more disciplined orthographies of the West Midlands is particularly striking. Regional differences in the tradition and circumstances of vernacular literacy are perhaps to be inferred, and call for the attention of social historians no less than of philologists.” (*A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* [henceforth *LALME*] 2: x). The nature and origins of such regional disciplines do indeed call for attention, and some evidence for the development of South-West Midlands orthographies survives.

The maps of a synchronic survey like *LALME* present us with the practices of a particular period, in this case the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. A first impression of the thirteenth century evidence might be that at this stage South-West Midland orthographies too are still highly variable. If settled practices developed earlier in this region, the difference is presumably related to the circumstances in which English was copied, including the degree of continuity between different attempts to do so and the role of centres of local influence.

One relevant difference in the traditions and circumstances of vernacular literacy is that in the thirteenth century literary miscellanies rich in English texts appear in the South-West Midlands and nowhere else. Three miscellanies can be regarded as central: Cotton Caligula A.ix, Jesus College Oxford 29, and

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Digby 86.¹ The three are roughly contemporary: Jesus was produced somewhere between 1256 and about the end of the century,² C about the same time,³ and Digby can be dated to the period 1272-1282 (Miller 1963: 25-28). Geographically, too, they are close: more will be said below about localisations, but all three are from the South-West Midlands. Caligula and Jesus are close textually as well: most of Caligula's texts occur also in Jesus (though one that does not is Lazamon's massive *Brut*, which constitutes the bulk of the manuscript), and in versions so similar that they certainly derive from a proximate common exemplar.

The English texts of Caligula other than the *Brut* are in the hand of a single scribe, best known for the faithfulness with which he has reproduced two sharply distinct orthographies in *The Owl and the Nightingale*. In his copies of the remaining English texts, which I shall refer to as the Minor Poems, he further shows his tendency to reproduce, evidently *literatim*, different varieties of English. The appearance of a *literatim* copyist at this date is of interest, in the light of observations by Jeremy Smith (1991: 54) and Margaret Laing (1991: 38-42) that the Early Middle English period shows the breakdown of Late West Saxon habits of *literatim* copying, in favour of scribal translation.

One result of the faithfulness of the Caligula scribe is that we are quite unable to say where he worked. (There is no non-linguistic evidence for provenance either, and the customary classification of this and related manuscripts as "friars' miscellanies" is unfounded.)⁴ On the other hand, his faithfulness

¹ Of the other collections consistently linked with these in the scholarship, Harley 2253 is much later and Trinity B.14.39, as a preaching collection of a religious community of some size, is different in genre and milieu. Other collections have rightly been treated as peripheral to the grouping: Egerton 613 was made for devout women, Digby 2 belonged to a scholarly Franciscan, Harley 913 is Irish.

² Betty Hill (1975: 105) sets out the reasons for the 1256 *terminus*, but then argues that J is to be dated to the last three decades of the thirteenth century, on the ground that it contains the expanded version of *Doctrinal Sauvage*, the original version of which was composed "about 1260, probably by 1267". But in this she relies on the questionable dating of that work by Sakari (1967: 36-37). His reasons are that a poet who died in 1305 cannot have been born before 1230, and that a poet who presented an educational work to the public must have at least been in his thirties at the time. Neither assumption is certain; and the desirability of an earlier *terminus post* is underlined by the erroneously late dates he gives (1967: 39, 52) for three copies of the expanded version: Jesus to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, Digby to the mid-fourteenth, and Harley 978 to the late thirteenth century. (While the last is not necessarily wrong, the evidence assembled by Meier-Ewert (1971: 79) points specifically to a dating in the 1260s for the relevant part of this commonplace-book.)

³ The only substantial evidence is paleographic; Ker (1963: ix) thought a dating to a little after 1250 "on the early side". Current opinion favors a date late in the century: Malcolm Parkes (quoted in Laing 1993: 70) finds marked resemblances to two manuscripts of respectively 1283-1300 and ca. 1284; Ruth Dean in a personal communication designates the manuscript "XIII/XIV" (with reference to the Anglo-Norman prose chronicle, but this is approximately contemporary with the rest); and Brewer (1994: 190) cites G. C. Mercatanti, in a work I have not seen (*Il "Brut" di Lazamon: Analisi Linguistica e Paleografica, condotta sul MS B. M. Cotton Caligula A LX*), as agreeing on a date for the writing of the Caligula manuscript between 1280 and 1300.

⁴ See Frankis (1986: 179-184).

allows us to say a great deal about his exemplar (which I shall refer to as X), and something about the earlier transmission of the materials that fed into this collection. The two orthographies of *The Owl and the Nightingale* are generally denoted I and II. II has close resemblances to the AB language that is the nearest approach to a standardised written English in the Early Middle English period. Unexpectedly, in spite of its archaic air, II can I believe be shown to be an innovation, introduced into the X copy, a scribal translation of an exemplar that was in something resembling orthography I.⁵ This is no aberration: such standardisation, necessarily of a conservative kind, has been identified in various Early Middle English manuscripts, particularly those from the South-West Midlands.

Such standardising tendencies may be shared by scribes from different locations, and not shared by scribes from the same location. It must be asked whether differences like those between I and II necessarily have a geographical dimension: could they be attributed to differences between scribal "schools"? The converse problem arises if we consider the divergences of II from I: if they are all in the direction of the AB language, we cannot separate the provenance of II from that of AB. In fact, one feature of II is not found in AB: the spelling *þurb* for 'through' (when the word is not abbreviated as *þ*). Its only appearance in *LALME* is as a minority form in Harley 2253, which is placed in Leominster.⁶ This is in agreement with the tracing of AB to northern Herefordshire or southern Shropshire.⁷ Yet an orthography involves conventions for representing sounds, and there are conventions shared by II and AB which can be no simple outgrowth of any local phonology. Such are the use of *ea* for the descendants of OE *ēa* and Anglian *æ* (though AB's use of this graph for the short sound has been lost), *h* for a voiced spirant, and retention of *a* for the reflex of OE *ā* (in something over 20% of the cases in II, consistently in AB). The retention of *ð* and *þ* and the avoidance of *q* are less distinctive, but they show a conservatism in purely orthographic details coinciding with the practices of AB. II, in other words, agrees with AB not just in the (local) sound-system being represented, but in the (sometimes quite distinctive) conventions used to represent it. The II layer in Caligula may derive from Northern Herefordshire, but a diluted standardising influence such as AB is likely to have been felt beyond its place of origin.

The centre that produced X and had a scribe who wrote an AB-like orthog-

⁵ The arguments are set out in Scahill (1990: ch. 3) and outlined in Scahill (1994), with further references to Early Middle English archaisation.

⁶ If we leave aside its purely graphetic conservatisms, there are similarities between II and the language of Harley, some half a century later: for example, the forms *ʒef* and *ʒah*, for 'if' and 'though', agree.

⁷ The present position is summarised by Millett (1996: 11); see further the views of Jeremy Smith, cited in Millett (1996: 11, fn. 7). The onomastic evidence surveyed by Kristensson (1987) is unfortunately very scanty for Herefordshire.

raphy also drew upon texts or scribes in four further traditions of writing English. The Minor Poems that are long enough to be grouped with confidence fall into three groups linguistically. The first group, *Doomsday* and *The last day*, is remarkable for closeness to II: *ea*, and *a* for the reflex of OE *ā* occur, though they are proportionately rarer; on the other hand, *ð* and *ƿ* are even more common. Though there are points of divergence, this orthography is the product of the same tradition as II. A scribe so similar in his practices to the one that introduced orthography II into *The Owl* is likely to have worked in the same centre that X was produced in, though we cannot rule out the possibility that his activity occurred at some anterior stage of transmission. The second pair, *An orison to Our Lady* and *Death's wither-clench*, show *qu* exclusively and *w* frequently, and they lack *ea* and *a* for the reflex of OE *ā*. In almost all other respects they resemble the previous pair, and we seem to have a scribe less familiar with the more distinctive practices of II, but in the same broad local tradition. (This colouring is at any rate not that of the original texts, which Dobson (Dobson – Harrison 1979: 124, 132) shows came from elsewhere in England.) The final group consists of a single text, *A lutel soth sermun*. It diverges a little further from the pattern in the absence of *ð* and the occasional appearance of *u* for the reflex of OE initial *f*, and *sc* for the sound spelt *sch* in the other texts.

There remains orthography I of *The Owl*, which is rather unlike any of the foregoing. A number of its peculiarities suggest less influence from traditions of writing English. OE *ā* never appears as anything but *o*; OE initial *f* appears in about one case in three as *u*, and OE *hƿ* always appears as simple *ƿ*. All three features suggest that current phonetic developments are more influential than spelling traditions. Notable is its consistent representation of OE *eo* as *o*: this odd and otherwise rare spelling suggests French influence (Jordan 1974: 34) and a lack of contact with existing English conventions for writing the front-rounded sound. The absence of *ð* and some of II's archaisms point in the same direction. As in the case of II, no linguistic localisation seems to be available, and I can offer only cautious inferences from *LALME*,⁸ though most of the typical features of I are widely distributed. Its *bez* is confined to southern and north-west Gloucestershire (and adjacent parts of Wiltshire), and even *bey/pei*, which might be considered probable descendants of thirteenth-century *bez*, do not occur in the north-western half of Herefordshire; its *purz* seems to exclude Worcestershire, northern Herefordshire, and the central and western parts of northern Gloucestershire; its *sh* is not found in central Gloucestershire or the central part of eastern Herefordshire, and is rare in north-west Glouces-

⁸ Which does not offer clear cases of the general representation of OE *eo*, long and short, by *o*. Kristensson (1987: 159) finds only a scattered few of such spellings, and interprets them as instances of sporadic stress-shift.

tershire; while *ƿ* (for OE *hƿ*) is not recorded for northern Worcestershire and the eastern part of central Herefordshire. The clearest conclusion is that the I layer does not belong in northern Herefordshire (its *zif* is also rare there), while south-eastern Herefordshire gives the best fit; but at this early date the possibility of adjacent parts of southern Worcestershire or northern Gloucestershire can hardly be excluded on this evidence.

There is then a geographical element (say, south-eastern as against northern Herefordshire) in the differences between I and II, but the orthographies are different in kind as well. If my view that the I layer is anterior to II is correct (and the tendency of the Minor Poems added in X to side with II rather than I perhaps supports it), we find in the later thirteenth century our texts meeting a somewhat conservative orthographic influence, and then being reproduced by a *litteratim* copyist with a "professional"⁹ hand (and appended to an archaistic copy of Lazamon's antiquarian *Brut*). Though the Caligula scribe may seem to be the late representative of a fading tradition, and a "scribal fidelity ... verging on the eccentric" (Pearsall 1977: 112-113) has been seen in the work of the copyist¹⁰ of the *Brut*, the existence of AB-like tendencies in the related centre that produced X suggests a different interpretation. This conservatism may be no anachronism, but one orthographic mainstream of the later thirteenth-century South-West Midlands. Hereabouts may lie some of the seeds of the "more disciplined orthographies" of the fourteenth-century West Midlands.

The existence of the Jesus manuscript, copied probably at one remove from the same exemplar, gives some help in gauging this hypothesis. Geographically, it is not far removed: *LALME* puts it in south-east Herefordshire, close to the provenance I have proposed for orthography I of Caligula. What is of interest is the Jesus scribe's response to the language he found in his exemplar. This scribe, it should be mentioned, was an amateur clearly concerned with the sense of what he was copying to the point of emending away apparent difficulties.¹¹ Comparison with Caligula indicates that his interventionist approach extended to layout as well; altogether we should expect that the manuscript reproduces the forms of the exemplar only if they were acceptable to the scribe. He makes no use of *z*, *ƿ* or *ð*; he rejects *ea* for the most part, *h* for the voiced spirant, and the two rare forms of the word 'through'. These differences suggest unfamiliarity with the specific rather conservative orthographic tradition of II. The Jesus scribe likewise largely rejects the most striking idiosyncrasy of orthography I, the use of *o* for the front-rounded vowel. Similarly, where the exemplar has *f* for the reflex of OE initial *f*, Jesus gives *u*, in line no doubt with pronunciation, in about one-third of the cases. (The ratio is much the same in orthography I, suggesting that the two scribes concerned are at the

⁹ So described (within quotation marks) by Ker (1963: xvi).

¹⁰ Some would say copyists. See Laing (1993: 70).

same stage in the loosening of a traditional spelling-system.) On the other hand, where I has P for OE hP , its near-neighbour Jesus gives *hp* throughout. The extent of the loss of */hw/* in the thirteenth century is not certain, though the evidence of *LALME* and Kristensson's *Survey*, as well as spellings like those in I, suggest that the development was general in the South-West Midlands. The consistent historical regularity of Jesus here indicates acquaintance with orthographic tradition, or conceivably with conservative pronunciations maintained in some locality or in formal register.

In summary, what we have in the Jesus scribe is someone whose acquaintance with written English is derived not from professional copying but from reading – rather wide-ranging reading, to judge from the scope of his anthology. He rejects many of exemplar's practices grounded in traditional spelling that are unrelated to current spoken language or to the orthography of French or Latin (for so I interpret the rejection of z , P and ð). Yet he does have well-established notions about how English is to be written, strong enough for him largely to eliminate the differences between orthographies I and II, and to give consistently traditional spellings for the reflex of OE hP .

Within a generation or so of Caligula and Jesus (and their common exemplar) and in the same part of the country, Digby 86 was produced. It has frequently been linked with them as another multilingual collection including secular texts, and the three actually share *Doomsday* and *The last day*; Digby and Jesus also have in common *Les vnze peynes de enfern* and *Le doctrinal Sauvage*; and they are further linked by resemblances to other miscellanies, such as those mentioned in footnote 1. *LALME* places Digby in southern Worcestershire or the adjacent part of Gloucestershire, and there is non-linguistic evidence corroborating this. This is only a little east of Jesus and the I orthography.

Yet it is hard to find a single distinctive trait that Digby has in common with any of the orthographies examined so far.¹² At the most, there is a minor tendency for Digby to agree with I. In having *w* and (as a common minority form) *u* for reflexes of OE hP and initial *f* respectively, it follows non-traditional developments widespread regionally. More distinctive points of agreement are *zif* for 'if' – invariable in I and a common minority form in Digby, *sh* (rather than *sch*) – the majority form in I and normal in Digby.¹³ There is nothing here that would not be expected in scribes reasonably close in provenance, as

¹¹ The grounds for this view are set out in Scahill (1992: 8-10).

¹² The detailed description of Digby in Stengel (1871) is supplemented by Macray (1883), Miller (1963) and Reichl (1973: 73-79). It contains some 23 items partly or wholly in English, clearly diverse in origins and transmission, and there is a wide variety of forms that the single scribe of the English texts is prepared to reproduce. In what follows I treat forms that appear across a range of texts in Digby as belonging to the scribe's active repertoire.

¹³ I shares with Digby's copies of *Doomsday*, *The last day* and *Dame Sirith* spellings that suggest another local sound-change; see Scahill (1997).

these I believe these are. Links with its near neighbor, Jesus, are even harder to find. The only point of any weight is the forms of the word 'though'. The Jesus scribe will reproduce *pah* from his exemplar, but appears to favour *peyh* (sometimes *pey*) and *pauh*; *pey* and *pau* are Digby's preferred forms. But this combination of forms also, on the showing of *LALME*, is to be expected in southern Herefordshire and Worcestershire.

On the other hand, Digby's most characteristic forms are absent in Caligula and Jesus. Such are *ui* for the high front-rounded vowels as in *huide* ('hide'), *oe* for the long high back vowel as in *woed* ('mad'), *ou* for short */u/* as in *ounderstonde* ('understand') and two-syllable forms of 'through' such as *poru*. Its *ui* is an early instance of a spelling that persists – it is common in the fourteenth-century Vernon manuscript, and sporadic in the West Midland onomastic material for 1290-1350 surveyed by Kristensson (1987: 81-95, 99); *oe* is also an innovation, attributed by Jordan (1974: 34) to French influence, which persists as a variant in the West Midlands, as Dot Map 433 for *goed* in Volume Two of *LALME* attests. The use of *ou* was also due to French; for long */u/* it has proved a very durable innovation; for short */u/* it is more distinctive, but Kristensson's materials (1987: 73-79) show numerous such spellings throughout the West Midlands in the early fourteenth century. It is also striking that by the period of *LALME* monosyllabic forms of 'through' have become quite rare in this region. The appearance of gallicising innovations might be explained by the greater familiarity of the scribe, who is also the compiler, with writing in French. The structure and organisation of Digby suggest that it started out as a French and Latin anthology. The English texts follow, and they seem to be included as a parallel to French ones. But Digby's propensity for innovations that catch on indicates not foresight of course but a particular place in the orthographic currents of the time, and an avoidance of archaising forms that go against the grain of the contemporary sound-system. If we are thinking of the relationships between centres where English was copied, it is pertinent to note that although the persistent linking of these three manuscripts in twentieth-century scholarship is justified by similarity in compilatory style as well as the presence of texts in common, those shared texts do not show the kind of stemmatic closeness that links Caligula and Jesus.¹⁴

Recent work on Middle English dialect has focused, very successfully, on localisation. This involves a logically prior relative mapping of texts against each other according to degree of overlap in forms, which produces a "rubber map"; and a subsequent linking of this to a real map of England through "anchor

¹⁴ This is evident in the four-text edition of the two English poems in Reichl (1973: 415-436) (see particularly the discussion of textual relationships, 1973: 416-418), and in Sakari's account of the manuscripts of *Doctrinal Sauvage*, (1967: 52-53, 56-61).

texts". Though "rubber map" may be glossed a "as diatopic typology of texts",¹⁵ the space in question is merely an abstract one until anchors are found. The shortage of anchor texts is a recognised obstacle in Early Middle English dialectology; documentary evidence is very scarce for Herefordshire, for example. But there is a second, more fundamental, limitation. No orthography can be a mere crystallisation of a local phonology; conventions for representing that phonology are needed. Regardless of the availability of anchors, the degree to which the "rubber map" of linguistic forms can be directly correlated with a geographical map will vary from one period to another. *LALME* presents a period in which three factors coincide: high local differentiation of spoken English, little in the way of standardising influences on written English, and considerable localism in the spelling conventions themselves. Standardising processes that set in late in the Middle Ages are responsible for the mid-fifteenth century horizon of *LALME*. Whether in the fifteenth century or the thirteenth, standardisation is essentially a super-local phenomenon. And on the other hand isolation and pioneering give some contemporary orthographies idiosyncratic qualities that might be termed "sub-local": one doubts that anyone else at Bourne spelt like Orm. Indeed, even for the period covered by *LALME*, one-to-one correlation of place and orthography is not to be expected; McIntosh points out that "two or more scribes writing even in the same place at the same time are unlikely to have identical habits" ([1989]: 41).

But localisation is only one part of the significance the orthographies of these manuscripts may have for linguistic and literary history. A fuller characterisation of a variety of written English involves identifying the linguistic, cultural and social factors that shaped it. And even among the linguistic factors, though phonologies are essentially local, innovative or idiosyncratic orthographic conventions are not, and archaizing or gallicising conventions have an intrinsically non-local element.

Caligula, Jesus and Digby exhibit tendencies characteristic of later thirteenth-century written English. The particularism, the representation – at times through idiosyncratic conventions – of the sounds of the specific locality, is present; but more than mere locality separates the orthographies of these collections, so close in time and place of origin: in some cases the conventions utilised and even the sounds represented are those of a tradition of writing in English; in other cases contact with that tradition is evidently attenuated, and other conventions, some of them from non-English sources, are harnessed. A broad historical development has been traced from late Old English *literatim* copying to translation into regional orthographies; and this has been correlated with contextual changes: the tradition of *literatim* copying was sustained by Anglo-

¹⁵ These phrases are Jeremy Smith's, cited in Millett (1996: 11, fn. 7).

Saxon monasticism, while wider vernacular literacy lies behind the later strengthening of written dialect. The evidence of these three manuscripts helps us refine this picture in two regards.

First, it suggests what may have happened between the stages of *literatim* copying and translation into regional dialect. Caligula and Jesus generally, and orthography II of the Caligula *Owl* above all, show relics of traditional orthographies and inherited spellings of particular sounds and classes of words, interspersed with idiosyncrasies, innovations, and apparent attempts to represent local phonologies. The effect of the whole ensemble is very different from either the earlier regularity of Late West-Saxon or the AB language, and distinct from the later relative regularity of the "new, dialectally-confident handling of the vernacular" Smith (1991: 65) finds in the Nero A.xiv manuscript of *Ancrene Wisse*.¹⁶ A remarkably similar combination of tendencies is found elsewhere in Caligula in a different hand: its copy of Laȝamon's *Brut* shows archaistic inclinations,¹⁷ but the overall orthography is "very variable as though the system had not yet settled into a coherent form" (Laing 1993: 70). It is from this that the subsequent more coherent regional systems emerge.

Secondly, these manuscripts are a warning against excessively teleological and evolutionary scenarios. Different, even contradictory, tendencies are at work simultaneously, even within the same region and manuscript genre. *Literatim* copying, innovative representations of local phonologies, conservative standardisation, and respelling on the basis of the dominant French and Latin literacies may coexist. The complexity of the process is borne out by Peter Kitson's analysis of twelfth-century manuscript from the same region: in Bodley 343 he finds an orthography in roughly the same area and line of descent as the remarkably regular AB language of certain manuscripts of *Ancrene Wisse* and the *Katherine* group, but some half a century earlier and more variable; interestingly, he identifies an "increase in dialectal intensity between the earlier sections and the last section of Bodley 343 [that] implies a time of pioneering work toward the establishing of a new standard" (Kitson 1990: 79). Evidently attempts to crystallise a local phonology in a set of spelling conventions from both old and new sources were repeated until the "circumstances of vernacular literacy" (including, presumably, the volume and circulation of writing in English) allowed consolidation. Circumstances were not right for the first consoli-

¹⁶ But a Nero-like state is nevertheless a natural sequel to the historical jumble of Caligula and Jesus; Nero's language has been described variously as "archaizing" (Dobson 1962: 133) and as including features that "show a later linguistic stage than that of [the Corpus manuscript of *Ancrene Wisse*]" (Wada 1994: liii). Though a fuller characterisation of the linguistic tendencies that led to such heavy alteration in the Nero text would be highly desirable, both views seem correct: Nero manifests a fresh consolidation on a basis of local phonology and inherited orthography of a southern cast.

¹⁷ Whether purely by inheritance from the poem's earlier transmission or reinforced by the makers of the Caligula copy itself is undecided. See Gibbs (1963: 235) and Stanley (1969: 25-28).

dition, the AB language, to survive intact for long.¹⁸ In the later thirteenth century, similar processes are again under way.

Richard Hogg (1988) has usefully raised the question of "ontological commitment" in dialectology.¹⁹ He has canvassed the relationship of abstract taxonomies of forms not only with geography, but also with socio-political entities. The forms of the South-West Midland miscellanies certainly do not manifest a simple pedigree, linguistic or cultural. Some of the relevant socio-political factors are evident: a nation²⁰ without a metropolitan centre dominant in the writing of English, religious houses with a need for English texts, an aristocracy that required vernacular writings, mediated by chaplains and the like, and a tradition of using written English specific to the South-West Midlands. Whatever the precise inheritance and affiliations that led the individual scribes to produce the English that they did, these miscellanies suggest the range of possibilities simultaneously available in at least one part of the country.

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¹⁸ Relevant here is the uncertainty about whether a coherent Mercian scribal language survived in the Late Old English period, or whether the scanty evidence merely testifies to Mercian-speaking scribes with a waning grasp of Standard Late West-Saxon. The latter view would indicate a situation similar to that evident in much of written Early Middle English. See Brunner (1940, 1956).

¹⁹ Hogg further considered the political assumptions behind Old English dialectology in a paper at the Ninth International Conference on English Historical Linguistics in Poznań, August 1996.

²⁰ On the appropriateness of this word, see Turville-Petre (1996).

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