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TWELFTH-CENTURY RISE OF SPELLING REFORMS: THE ORMULUM AND THE FIRST GRAMMATICAL TREATISE

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THE *ORMULUM* AND THE *FIRST GRAMMATICAL TREATISE*

The twelfth-century renaissance was a new stage in European intellectual life. This paper examines the works of two distinguished medieval phonologists and spelling reformers of the time, namely Orm's *Ormulum* and the so-called *First Grammatical Treatise*, which mark a significant step in medieval grammatical theory and show a number of similarities in the intellectual background, governing principles, and sources of their orthography.

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Introduction

England, Iceland and the twelfth-century renaissance

The twelfth-century renaissance saw new developments occurring in European intellectual life. The term "renaissance of the twelfth century" was coined by Haskins who gives the following description of this period:

> This century, the very century of St. Bernard and his mule, was in many respects an age of fresh and vigorous life. The epoch of the Crusades, of the rise of towns, and of the earliest bureaucratic states of the West, it saw the culmination of Romanesque art and the beginnings of Gothic; the emergence of the vernacular literatures; the revival of the Latin classics and of Latin poetry and Roman law; the recovery of Greek science, with its Arabic additions, and of much of Greek philosophy; and the origin of the first European universities. The twelfth century left its signature on higher education, on the scholastic philosophy, on European systems of law, on architecture and sculpture, on the liturgical drama, on Latin and vernacular poetry. (vi)

Haskins states that he has no interest in this precise and controversial wording (5), therefore, he uses the words "renaissance" and "revival" interchangeably: whereas the title of his influential book contains the word "renaissance", four of the twelve chapters are called "The Revival of" – ". . . the Latin Classics", ". . . Jurisprudence", ". . . Science", and ". . . Philosophy". Indeed, this intellectual movement was characterized by both renewal and revival. Two reservations must be made at this point.

It was first thought that France and Italy were the center of this new movement, providing its cultural impulse, and such countries as England and Iceland were on the periphery. As Southern puts it, "[i]n the great matters of the twelfth century . . . England played a part so secondary and derivative that only an excess of national pride could impel one to insist on it" (201). However, this view is challenged by Southern himself, who points to four important contributions made by English scholars to European intellectual life, namely, in the fields of historiography, science, literature (Mary-legends), and governmental practices (209-15). Furthermore, Thomson emphasizes England's upsurge in book production and decoration (15-7), in the study of grammar, logic, etymology, and the literature of pagan Rome, all of which were advanced by English scholars (8, 11-4), claiming that "a 'scholastic consciousness' was nurtured on English soil, and among English institutions" (8) of the time.

Iceland, which was settled in the ninth century, was one of the least urbanized and poorest European countries. Although literacy was introduced there only in the eleventh century, the pursuit of knowledge was strong in the following years. Nordal argues that "the renaissance of the twelfth century reached the shores of Iceland" (19), which can be attested by a number of facts. First Icelandic bishops were educated on the continent and subsequently set up schools in Iceland to educate both priests and noblemen. These schools were concerned with teaching *grammatica* and had libraries that gave their students access to earlier historiographical works and classical learning (Nordal 20-1), which led, in its turn, to native intellectual achievements.

Thus, both countries had their distinctive place in the vast intellectual movement of the twelfth-century renaissance, though their role may be slightly different from that of France and Italy. I believe that the following lines by Southern can be applied to English and Icelandic scholars of the time alike: "Their effort was more dispersed, less immediately effective, but sometimes full of suggestion for the future" (204). Another unique and transformative trait of these scholars was their concern for the unlearned laity. In this way, the English scholars of the twelfth century were strongly influenced by earlier Anglo-Saxon practices: "while the tendency of the secular schools of Northern France in the eleventh century was to make learning more technical, more professional and more remote from the understanding of ordinary people, the works of the scholars of the late Anglo-Saxon period made the wider audience outside the schools the special point and focus of their attention" (Southern 206). As for Iceland, the society there was from the very beginning quite uniform and largely devoid of internal boundaries: schools gave education both to laymen and clergy, and the audience of many of the written works was also mixed.

Secondly, as Latin clerical culture was pan-European, understanding Latin grammar was of vital importance at the time. This fact led Swanson to even claim that "'[g]rammar' in the twelfth century specifically means *Latin* grammar" (108). He continues, "[a]lthough vernacular languages existed, and by 1200 had their own literatures, there is no sign of concern, or even awareness, that they might be subjected to grammatical analysis . . . Latin, the universal authoritative language, the common tongue among educated classes in western Europe, was so analysed" (108-9). However, a generalization like this may be misleading, for it neglects a number of important earlier and contemporaneous works. One instance may be Ælfric's *Grammar*, which was written in English at the end of the tenth century and is considered the first vernacular grammar of Latin. In his work, Ælfric examines the morphology and syntax of both languages, Latin and (Old) English, inventing English equivalents for Latin terms and giving parallel example sentences. He claims that his work can be used for elementary studies "in both

languages, Latin and English" (qtd. in Gretsch 117). Therefore, subjecting Old English to grammatical analysis was a prerequisite for his *Grammar*.

Another achievement overlooked by Swanson's claim is the twelfth-century search for acceptable spelling that would reflect the pronunciation and thus provide the basis for correct orthography for vernacular languages. While Latin orthography and pronunciation had been of concern to a number of scholars from Cassiodorus to Alcuin, it was the twelfth century that saw a growing interest and first attempts to devise a consistent spelling system for vernacular languages. This article discusses the works of two distinguished medieval phonologists and spelling reformers of the time, namely the so-called *First Grammatical Treatise*, written in Iceland, sometime between 1125 and 1175, and Orm's *Ormulum*, written in Lincolnshire, England, c. 1180. These concurrent, though disconnected – any direct influence is obviously out of the question – works mark a significant step in medieval grammatical theory.

The *First Grammatical Treatise* and the *Ormulum*: preliminary notes

What makes the First Grammarian unique is that he clearly explains his linguistic observations and the reasons behind his proposals for orthographic reform. He also states his goal explicitly: "til þess at hægra verði at rita ok lesa sem nv tiðiz ok a þessv landi <. . .> þa hefir ek ok ritað oss islendíngvm staf rof" / "in order that it may become easier to write and read, as it is now customary in this country [= Iceland] as well <. . .> I have composed an alphabet for us Icelanders as well" (Benediktsson 208-9[2]).

The *First Grammatical Treatise* is deeply connected with the medieval grammatical scholarship. Its terminology follows the current grammatical theory. However, unlike many other grammarians, the First Grammarian does not explain his basic notions or give any conventional definitions. He does not quote any Latin grammarians either. "He simply takes the basic terminological apparatus for granted and then proceeds directly to the applying of this apparatus to the Icelandic material into which he wants to bring order" (Benediktsson 41-2). He is writing primarily for the learned, who share the same terminological background.

As far as the *Ormulum* is concerned, it may seem that apart from several rather general statements the author gives us no key either to his linguistic terminology or to his methods. Any insights into the principles that Orm adheres to in his spelling practice are deduced from the analysis of the said practice and its subsequent interpretation. The *Ormulum*, obviously, is a work of biblical exegesis, and the discussion of the orthography adopted by its author is for the

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[2] All the examples and translations from the *First Grammatical Treatise* cited in this article follow Hreinn Benediktsson's edition.

most part beyond its scope, whereas the *First Grammatical Treatise* is a grammatical treatise proper. What follows is an attempt to compare typologically these two, at first sight incomparable, works, bearing the obvious differences in mind. To the best of my knowledge, no such comparison has been made, although it could have shed light on Orm's methods and principles.

The individual spelling practice of the First Grammarian and Orm has been subject to much debate (see, for example, Benediktsson 33-174, Fulk 482-96 respectively). However, in the present study I would like to examine the authors' approach to orthography, and, through it, phonology, in other words, to focus on the similarities and differences in the theoretical background, governing principles, and sources of their orthography.

Basic terminology

The notion of letter

Most scholars now agree that in the time when the relations between sound and letter were instable, Orm's and the First Grammarian's purpose was to adapt the Latin alphabet to the native phonemic structure, so that, in modern terminology, the graphic symbols used had references to the phonemic level of language.

Both works rely on an alphabetic writing system, i.e. the system which represents phonological structure as a sequence of graphemes. Each grapheme corresponds to a segment and may be accompanied by certain diacritics. Therefore, the basic concept for both the First Grammarian and Orm is the letter. The term *stafr* is used throughout the *First Grammatical Treatise*, for example: "Enn þo rita enskir menn enskv na latinv **stǫfvm** [emphasis mine] ǫllvm þeim er rettrǽðir verða i enskvnni. en þar er þeir vinnaz ǽigi til þa hafa þeir við aðra **stafi**" / "Thus Englishmen write English with all those Latin letters that can be rightly pronounced in English, but where these do not suffice, they apply other letters" (Benediktsson 208-9).

Bocstaff is the term used by Orm in the Dedication: "an **bocstaff** wrīte twiȝȝess"[3] / "[he should look well that he] every letter writes twice" (D 104). He also uses it later:

> & tiss name off þe Laferrd Crist,
> Þatt ȝe nemmnenn Hælennde,
> Iss writenn o Grickisshe boc
> Rihht wiþþ **bocstafess** sexe;

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[3] All the examples from the *Ormulum* cited in this article follow Robert Holt's 1878 edition. "D" stands for "Dedication". Translations are my own.

& itt iss nemmnedd IESOẎS

Affterr Grickisshe spæche. . . (4302-7)

"And this name of the Lord Christ, whom you call the Savior, is written in [a] Greek book with six letters and is called IESOẎS in Greek."

The base form, the word *staff*, is also used by Orm several times. For the first time it occurs in his description of numerical values assigned to each letter in the name *Jesus*: "Þe firrste **staff** iss nemmnedd I / & tacneþþ tăle off tene..." (4312-3) / "The first letter is called I and stands for number ten…" Next time this word is used in the story of how God gave Adam his name, for instance:

Suþdale off all þiss werelld iss

Mysimmbriōn ȝehatenn,

& off þatt name toc Drihhtin,

Þatt witt tu wel to soþe,

An **staff** þatt iss ȝehatenn MY

Affterr Gricclandess spæche,

To timmbrenn till þe firrste mann

Hiss name off **stafess** fowwre. (16418-25)

"The southern part of this world is called Mysimbrion, and God took of that name, you should know that forsooth, a letter that is called MY in Greek speech to make a name of four letters for the first man."

According to the *Middle English Dictionary*, these words were rare in Middle English. The compound (*bōk* (N (1)) ~*staf* "a letter of the alphabet") occurs only in Layamon's *Brut* (Cotton Caligula A.9), an alliterative poem that had strong links with Old English literature. In Old English, though, the compound was frequently used in religious works, such as *Solomon and Saturn*, *Daniel*, *Elene*. The word *staf* (N) "an alphabetic character, a letter" occurs in Layamon's *Brut* and *The Gospel of Nicodemu*s (Cotton Vespasian D.14), a copy of an Old English homily, only. It was far more common in Old English and was used by, among others, Ælfric in his *Grammar*. This lexical distribution, therefore, may point to Orm's terminology being partly derived from Old English works, as the words were not common in his times.

On the other hand, this usage of the words *stafr/(boc)staff* correlates with medieval grammatical theory. Aelius Donatus maintains at the beginning of his chapter *De littera* in Book I of *Ars maior*: "Littera est pars minima vocis articulatae" / "The letter is the smallest part of

articulated sound." Similarly, Ælfric says: "Littera is stæf on englisc and is se læsta dæl on bōcum and untōdæledlīc" / "Littera is letter in English and is the smallest part in books and indivisible" (both examples qtd. in Benediktsson 42-3).

It should be noted that the medieval term shares some features with both the modern "letter" and "phoneme", as, according to Donatus, each *littera* has three qualities – *nomen, figura, potestas*, or the name by which it is identified, the shape or symbol (= modern "letter"), and the (sound) value. Therefore, the authors may emphasize the written aspect of their *littera*, or the aural, or both. For instance, the First Grammarian thus characterizes one of the letters: "Ø hann er af hlioðí *e*s ok *o*s felldr saman minnr opnvm mvnní **kveðínn** en *e* ok meiRR enn *o* Enda **ritinn** af því með kvistí *e*[s] ok með *o*sens hríng" / "Ø is composed of the sounds of *e* and *o*, **pronounced** with the mouth less open than *e*, but more than *o*, and therefore in fact **written** with the cross-bar of ɛ and the circle of o" (Benediktsson 210-1). The same qualities are brought out by Orm in the above-mentioned excerpt:

> & tiss name off þe Laferrd Crist,
> Þatt ȝe nemmnenn Hælennde,
> Iss **writenn** o Grickisshe boc
> Rihht wiþþ bocstafess sexe;
> & itt iss **nemmnedd** IESOY̆S
> **Affterr Grickisshe spæche**. . . (4302-7)

> "And this name of the Lord Christ, whom you call the Savior, is **written** in [a] Greek book with six letters and is **called** IESOY̆S **in Greek**."

The meaning of the verb *nemnen* relates to the process of speaking, calling, saying aloud. Thus, the visual symbol and the sound are viewed as different aspects of the same entity in both works.

The notion of "rightness"

Another similarity is that both writers seem preoccupied with the idea of "rightness" (correctness), in other words, the inherent values assigned to each grapheme. The First Grammarian uses the terms *réttr* (ADJ) "right, correct" (214; cf. Go. *raihts*, OE *riht*) and *rétt-ræðr* (ADJ) "right-read" (the second component derives from the verb *ráða* "to read'): "sva at **rett ræðir** mættí verða" / "in such a way that they could retain their **proper** pronunciation" (Benediktsson 208-9).

A similar idea about the ontological correspondence between correct spelling and "rightness" is put forward by Orm in the following lines:

> & whase wilenn shall þiss boc
> Efft oþerr siþe writenn,
> Himm bidde icc þatt hĕt wrīte **rihht**,
> Swa summ þiss boc himm tæcheþþ. . . (D 95-8)

"And whoever will wish to write this book again, I beg him to write it **right**, as this book teaches him."

> Loke he well þatt hĕt write swa,
> Forr he ne maȝȝ nohht elless
> Onn Ennglissh wrītten **rihht** te word,
> Þatt wite he wel to soþe. (D 107-10)

"He should look well that he writes it so, because he may not write the word **right** in any other way in English – that he should know forsooth."

Therefore, both authors share this concept of correctness, that is, orthography (the Latin word *orthographia*, which frequently figured in the titles of the works by such scholars, as Bede and Alcuin, derives from Greek ὀρθός "correct" and γράφειν "to write") – a concept most probably influenced by their similar Latin learning.

Minimal pairs and allophonic distinctions

Both authors, therefore, follow Latin grammarians' notion of *littera* in their use of *stafr/(boc)staff* and are preoccupied with a certain set of rules governing the correspondences between the graphemes and phonemes. But they also need to adapt the Latin alphabet to the native phonemic structure.

In order to stress the necessity for new letters, the First Grammarian consistently applies the procedure that is now called the commutation test – the systematic substitution of one segment for another to show that it leads to a change of meaning. He uses this procedure both for consonants and vowels, giving a list of minimal pairs and illustrative contexts, for example:

> En nv elr hverr þessa stafa nív annan staf vndir sér ef hann verðr í nef kveðinn
> enda verðr sv græín sva skyr að hon ma ok mali skípta sem ek syní her nv eptir ok

set[c] pvnct fyrir ofan þa er ínef erv kveðnir. *har hàr rǫ rǫ̇ þel þėl fęr fę̇r ısa isa orar ȯrar øra ø̇ra þuat þu̇at syna sẏna.*

Har vex a kvíkendvm enn *hàr* er fiskr. . .

But now each of these nine letters will produce a new one if it is pronounced through the nose, and this distinction is in fact so clear that it can change the discourse, as I shall now show in what follows, and I shall place a dot above those that are pronounced through the nose: <. . .>

Hair (har) grows on living creatures, but the *shark (hàr)* is a fish. . . (Benediktsson 216)

It has been suggested that the First Grammarian may have got acquainted with the notions of distinctive opposition and minimal pair via Latin learning, for example, through the works of Isidore, Bishop of Seville (Benediktsson 77). However, no exact parallels have been found for his particular use of minimal pairs, as "wordpairs in other medieval texts were for the purpose of teaching homonyms and homographs" (Haugen 59). His illustrative sentences, as Smirnickaja and Kuz'menko argue, show significant influence of native Icelandic literature - skaldic poetry, thula poetry and runic tradition.

Though nowhere in the *Ormulum* such a method is stated directly, several pairs of words that differ in only one phonological element due to Orm's spelling conventions can be found in the text:

Godd "God" – *god* "good"
bridd "young bird" – *brid* "bride"
wunnenn (PAST PTCP of *winnenn* "win") - *wunenn* "[to] dwell"
full "very" – *ful* "foul"
wille (N) "will" - *wile* "[I] wish"
werre "worse" - *were* "man"

One may argue, though, that these words are not opposed in the context, as in the *First Grammatical Treatise*, therefore they are no evidence for conscious linguistic analysis. But I would like to point out that the same procedure underlies Orm's use of such phrases (the list is not exhaustive) as "bidde . . . & bede" (18337), "bedess & . . . dedess" (698), "dom . . . demmd" (17703), "ʒemenn . . . & gætenn" (3765), "hutenn . . . & þutenn" (2034), "læredd & . . . læwedd" (967), "lufenn . . . & lofenn" (3880-1), showing extensive use of rhyme and alliteration. In such

phrases phonetic differences are brought out by contrast. They are also clearly marked in Orm's writing: separate words in "bidde . . . & bede" or "dom . . . demmd" have different vowel quality *and* quantity, as indicated by the use of reduplicated consonants.

The following passages from the *Ormulum* may indicate that the author is well aware of a procedure similar to that used by the First Grammarian, though he does not deem it necessary to state it explicitly: "Þa mihht tu **Godd** & **gode** men. . ." / "Then you might [please] **God** and **good** men" (5268, variation in 8975); "Þiss illke mann þatt cumeþþ her / Iss **god**, & **Godd** full cweme. . ." / "That same man that comes here is **good** and pleasing to **God**" (13646-7, variation in 19367-8). In these passages the author clearly plays upon the contrast between *god* "good" and *godd* "God".

What follows from the use of minimal pairs is that both writers are quite attuned to the distinctive phonetic differences. Therefore, it is not surprising that they ignore non-distinctive ones. Both Orm and the First Grammarian tend to avoid different symbols for allophonic distinctions.

Thus, the First Grammarian creates only one symbol, <g>, for the stop and fricative [g] and [γ], or <þ> – for the voiced and unvoiced variants [þ] and [ð] (cf. Benediktsson 172; Haugen 42).

Orm notably uses the symbols <f>, <þ>, <s> for the allophones [f] and [v], [þ] and [ð], [s] and [z]:

> *follc* "folk" (D 19) – *lufe* "love" (D 19) – *lif* "life" (D 199)
> *þu* "thou" (D 11) – *broþerr* "brother" (D 3) – *soþ* "true" (D 138)
> *sawle* "soul" (D 138) – *wise* "manner" (D 6) – *hus* "house" (D 5)

There is some level of redundancy (for example, apart from <þ> Orm also uses <ð> and once <th>; he writes <v> for [v] in *serrvenn* "serve" (497) (cf. *serrfenn* (471)) or <z> in *Zacariȝe* "Zacharias" (2004)), but it can be attributed to the fact that the whole work is extremely long – a little over 20,000 half-lines. Several instances seem to be mere inconsistencies left out during the revision process; thus, in the parts thought to be written last, the Dedication and Preface (Burchfield 72), there are no instances of <ð>. All in all, Orm avoids the use of <v> or <z> as well.

These early grammarians have "an implicit recognition of the need to abstract away from non-meaning differentiating phonetic properties" (MacMahon 169). Though they may have done

it, as native speakers, "without being conscious of what [they were] doing" (Benediktsson 49), the consistency with which they apply this principle is striking.

Traditions and sources

Furthermore, both authors do not turn to orthographic innovations *per se*, but rather standardize and use systematically existing sporadic tendencies. Many aspects of their orthographic systems have parallels within the traditions. Benediktsson claims that four new vowel symbols used by the First Grammarian (<ę>, <y>, <ø>, <ǫ>) already existed in medieval European writing ("all his four new vowel symbols existed elsewhere" (26)); thus, what the First Grammarian tries to do in most cases is not "[trying] to invent new spelling devices, but to regularize or systematize what had been irregular or only sporadic before" (26).

According to Anderson and Britton, "there were in England of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries lesser Orms and perhaps even scriptorial committees who were faced with tasks identical to Orm's and who often came up with solutions that were similar in detail and in orderliness. . ." (303). Therefore, the features of Orm's orthography all have parallels in the usage of other English scribes of the time. This includes even Orm's most famous technique, the use of reduplicated consonant graphemes as indicators of vowel shortness. As shown by Mokrowiecki, two Late Old English manuscripts examined frequently employ non-etymological reduplication of consonants as markers of vowel shortness, for example, *miccle*, *onn*, *scipp* (MS Gg 3.28), or *abbiddan*, *stocc*, *ciriccan* (MS William H. Scheide). What makes Orm's work unique is his consistency in marking short vowels – he is the only one to apply reduplicated consonants on such a large scale in one text.

Thus, the First Grammarian and Orm seem to draw from a tradition, although the level of regularization points to the authors' conscious attempt to represent sound contrasts more consistently than previously and in the meantime not to depart too far from the familiar and remain transparent to contemporary readers.

Finally, I would like to turn briefly to the possible sources for the authors' writing systems. On the one hand, both authors seem to draw upon medieval grammatical tradition. The First Grammarian, as it is obvious from his work, has a wide knowledge of the traditional Latin grammar of his time. On the other hand, he supplements his traditional grammatical learning and applies it to new material. He cites Icelandic poets, is familiar with the technique of skaldic verse, which probably influenced his ideas, and respects its practitioners.

As for the *Ormulum*, its author does not identify his sources either for the interpretations of the gospel texts or for his spelling innovations. However, the search for possible Latin texts used by Orm has been carried out by Matthes and, recently, Johannesson, proving the poet's extensive reading. I believe it is not too far-fetched to suggest that Orm may have taken from grammatical treatises as well[4].

Moreover, it seems that poetry enhances the principle of phonemic contrastivity, intuitively understood by the speakers, complementing one's Latin learning. Indeed, it seems probable that Orm's rigorous iambic syllable-counting could have brought out phonological differences more clearly, with rhyming phrases acting as a catalyst for the subsequent linguistic analysis.

Conclusion

The following fate of these two works provides a striking contrast between them. The *First Grammatical Treatise*, though extant in only one copy contained in the Codex Wormianus, is at least the second remove from the original, and some of the features proposed in it were followed in practice in other manuscripts (Benediktsson 22, 25-8). The only preserved manuscript of the *Ormulum*, though expected to be widely recopied, is obviously a draft, the author's autograph copy. Thus, Orm's spelling system, despite the author's belief in its "rightness", had no influence on the English orthographic tradition.

However, what emerges from this discussion is that the *First Grammatical Treatise* and *Ormulum* share the same approach to orthography and phonology that may point to the fact that Orm's book was created in conditions similar to the First Grammarian's, combining Latin learning and local poetic practice. Both works were the product of the upsurge in European intellectual life that was later called the renaissance of the twelfth-century.

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[4] Cf. also Sisam's claim made earlier: "Orm, too, must have been steeped in the current teaching of Latin. His sermons are translated from old-fashioned sources; he gives his title a flavor of modesty and Latinity by clapping *-ulum* on to his own name; he abandons native metres for a Latin type without rhyme or alliteration. So he might be expected to look at English from the standpoint of Latin grammar…" (190).

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