Nu is þeo Leore For-Leten: Conventionality, Complexity and Substitution Sets in Historical English Spelling

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This paper considers some assumptions about historical English spelling, in particular the idea that historical orthographies, in the absence of standardisation, naturally tend to a close spelling-sound correspondence. It focuses on the group of Early Middle English texts copied by the Tremulous Hand of Worcester in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, and addresses the question to what extent it is fair to consider them representative of an archaising strategy, a product of antiquarian interest. It is suggested that, while the texts copied by the Tremulous Hand, like most Middle English copied texts, are likely to carry over some features from their exemplars, they reflect a competent use of English as a living written medium and are consistent with other twelfth- and thirteenth-century writing systems. Accordingly, there seems to be no reason to assume a specifically antiquarian motivation behind the Tremulous Hand's spelling choices. Rather, they reflect three basic features that are present throughout the history of English writing: conventionality, complexity and the use of substitution sets.

Keywords: Early Middle English; Tremulous Hand of Worcester; orthography; archaism; medieval scribes

1. Introduction

Present-day English spelling is known both for its complexity and its conservative character. It is generally expected that the spelling patterns of earlier periods were more directly related to speech: in the absence of standardized spelling, it is easy to assume that writers, in Karl Luick's words, "wrote as they spoke" (1921, §27). However, it may be argued that writing is (virtually) always based on convention, often making complex spelling a more natural option compared to an attempt to transcribe speech faithfully. Conservative orthographies may also have strong social and identity-marking functions irrespective of whether they are enforced as standards. This point may be considered uncontroversial with regard to modern writing, but is far less so for earlier historical periods.

There has been an implicit expectation in much modern scholarship that early writing would naturally tend towards reproducing speech as directly and economically as possible. When it does not, some kind of explanation is called for. One such explanation, in particular for variable systems found in twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts, has been that they reflect some kind of conscious archaism. Most famously, Eric Stanley, in a classic article of 1969, suggested that the variable and conservative spelling system of the Caligula manuscript of Laȝamon's *Brut* reflected the author's "antiquarian sentiments" (Stanley 1969, passim). Similar statements have been made concerning

several texts from this early period (see e.g. references in Stanley 1969, 26–27; Treharne 2012, 180–81).

This paper considers the spelling of a group of texts copied by the so-called Tremulous Hand of Worcester, found in Worcester Cathedral MS F.174 and Bodleian MS Junius 121. Several scholars have suggested that the language of these texts is archaic for their date, perhaps showing an archaizing tendency (Smith 1991, 58; Franzen 1991, 190; Drout and Kleinman 2010, passim). The latter argument builds in particular on a small number of unhistorical spellings, as well as the combination of seemingly old and new forms in the same text. A practical challenge is that the Tremulous Hand's work is difficult to date precisely, an issue shared with most English texts assumed to belong to the same period. However, it is argued here that, even if a relatively late date is assumed for the texts copied by the Tremulous Hand, his spellings, while conservative, are not exceptional for their period. Rather, it is suggested that the orthography of the Tremulous Hand's copied texts reflects three basic features that are present throughout the history of English writing: conventionality, complexity and the use of substitution sets.

2.   Archaism in the Early Middle English period?

2.1 The twelfth and early thirteenth centuries

The twelfth century is often seen as a time when English writing and literary culture were virtually absent, the post-Conquest period representing a discontinuity between the Old and Middle English cultures and literacies (see e.g. Cannon 2004). Anderson and Britton (1999, 303) in their study of the *Ormulum* suggested that Early Middle English writers largely had to develop their own writing systems: "[i]t must have been the case, wherever and whenever scribes had a need to write in contemporary English, that new systems had to be devised." On the other hand, the idea of a cultural discontinuity has been opposed, and to a large extent disproved, by scholars such as Elaine Treharne, who have shown that English writing and copying continued throughout the post-Conquest period (e.g. Treharne 2012, 8; see also Faulkner 2012). While a large proportion of the vernacular text production in the twelfth century consisted of copying pre-Conquest texts, new texts were also produced, including, most famously, the *Ormulum* and the continuations of the *Peterborough Chronicle*. Several texts which survive in thirteenth-century copies are also assumed to have been composed in the twelfth century; such texts include the *Proverbs of Alfred* and the Katherine Group *Life of St Margaret* (Arngart 1978; Dobson 1976). The production of new English writing picks up considerably during the thirteenth century: *A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* (*LAEME*) contains eight texts dated to the twelfth century and 118 to the thirteenth, with two texts dated to either. However, it should be noted that virtually all dates suggested, for compositions as well as for surviving literary manuscripts from this early period, are controversial (Faulkner 2012).

Considering the low number of English texts from this period, and their uncertain dating, it is striking how many have been described as exceptional with regard to their spelling. Most famously, the *Ormulum,* with its regular spelling system and innovative use of consonant doubling, is usually assumed to be an isolated piece of work by an eccentric scholar, never copied or used by anyone else (e.g. Baugh 1967, 160). On the other hand, the similarly regular spelling system found in two West Midland

manuscripts, Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 402 and Oxford, Bodley 34, named "language AB" by Tolkien (1929), was for a long time assumed to reflect a thirteenth-century literary standard (Hulbert 1946; for a critical discussion, see Black 1999). Other texts, with highly variable spelling, such as those copied by scribes A and D of Cambridge, Trinity College, MS B.14.39 (323),[1] were traditionally considered the work of scribes who did not know English; this assumption was shown to be untenable by Clark (1992).

Finally, several texts have been described as reflecting some kind of archaism or antiquarianism. These include the First Continuation of the *Peterborough Chronicle* and the English texts in the Eadwine Psalter, both of the twelfth century, as well as thirteenth-century texts such as the Caligula manuscript of Laȝamon's *Brut*, the Proclamation of Henry III (1258), as well as the texts copied by the Tremulous Hand of Worcester (references in Stanley 1969, 26–27; Treharne 2012, 180–81). The common denominator for these texts seems to be that, while showing a generally conservative written usage, they include spellings that appear unhistorical and unlikely to correspond to spoken forms. Whether these characteristics are enough to suggest an actual archaizing strategy is a question that will be considered in what follows.

2.2 *Conservatism and archaism*

In order to evaluate the idea of archaism in twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts, it makes sense to, first of all, consider the term *archaism* and its use in present-day contexts. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) defines *archaism* as follows: "the retention or imitation of what is old or obsolete; the employment in language, art, etc., of the characteristics of an earlier period; archaic style."

Retention and imitation are, of course, quite different things, and these two meanings may be related to the adjectives *archaic* and *archaistic*. The *OED* defines *archaic* as follows: "marked by the characteristics of an earlier period; old-fashioned, primitive, antiquated. *esp.* of language: Belonging to an earlier period, no longer in common use, though still retained either by individuals, or generally, for special purposes, poetical, liturgical, etc." The term *archaistic*, on the other hand, is defined as "imitatively archaic or affectedly antique," suggesting that the forms are not ones that come naturally to the user but are intended to create an old impression. Following the *OED* definition, if something is archaic, it is genuinely old-fashioned, rather than imitative; however, not all scholars make this distinction, and other terms have been suggested (e.g. see Traxel 2012 for the term *pseudo-archaic* for unhistorical archaism). Archaism as archaistic usage has also been referred to as "deliberate archaism," recreating "the appearance of art from [a] distant time" (Le Sueur 1977, 194).

While usages vary, any definition of archaism tends to include the feature "no longer in common use" (cf. Traxel 2012, 42; Costin-Gabriel and Rebedea 2014). Accordingly, even if Present-Day English spelling is highly conservative, it could not be called archaic, since it is, indeed, in common use. An archaic feature of English spelling might be a form such as *focussing* or *mediaeval*: spellings that are becoming rare in English world-wide but still considered accepted standard spellings and used by many individuals. Archaistic

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[1] For a discussion of the spelling of Scribe A, see Laing and Lass (2003).

spellings, on the other hand, are those of the *olde worlde* type, intended to give a text an archaic flavour, usually by fairly simplistic means (Traxel 2012, 41–42).

English spelling is standardised at the word level. We assume that there is only one, or at most two, correct spellings for each word; however, there is no such expectation regarding sounds or syllables. Accordingly, the sound–spelling correspondences of English are complex, with any spoken unit potentially corresponding to numerous spellings, and vice versa. It has been said that English spelling prioritizes historical information at the expense of sound–spelling correspondences (even if some spellings reflect false histories: for example, the <l> in *could* and the etymological respelling of *debt* and *doubt* on a Latin model). It has been suggested that this complexity is useful because it helps readers recognize words. The drawback is that it takes time to learn, and most adult writers of English make mistakes. At the same time, English spelling has shown itself extremely resistant to reform: it seems to have very strong social and identity-marking functions, perhaps precisely because of its complexity and its links to tradition.

Since even the strangest English spellings are not archaic as long as they are in common use, it might be asked how we decide whether a written form was archaic, or even archaistic, in historical periods. If we use the same definitions as for Present-Day English, we should be able to relate the form to some kind of *mainstream* spelling. The problem is that, in much earlier periods, spelling was variable and there may be little surviving material for comparison. Both considerations are relevant for early Middle English, making the use of the terms *archaic* and *archaistic* problematic in the first place. However, assuming that looser definitions might be acceptable when dealing with historical periods, it is worth considering what evidence there is, as the question of archaism in early Middle English is highly relevant for our understanding of this formative period. The preliminary discussion which is presented in this paper focusses on the relatively limited text material produced by the Tremulous Hand of Worcester.

3.   The tremulous hand of Worcester

The precise identity of the Tremulous Hand is unknown; he is known entirely from the work which he left behind. This work consists of a considerable amount of annotation, both in Latin and English, with some 50,000 glosses in all, as well as copied texts and notes. His writing is found in at least 20 manuscripts (Franzen 1991, 29). His handwriting is relatively easy to recognize because of its characteristic tremor, less marked in what Franzen (1991, 11–14) in her seminal study has identified as the earliest stages of his work, including the texts concerned here. While earlier scholars assumed that he wrote in the late twelfth century, as an old man attempting to make accessible the language of his youth for younger generations (e.g. Zupitza 1878; James 1912), later scholarship, following Ker (1937) have dated his life and work to the period from the last decade of the twelfth century to well into the thirteenth, perhaps as late as 1250 (Collier 1997, 153). The length of his active period is unknown: while his large output suggests a

long timespan, Franzen (1991, 2) assumes "a career which was unnaturally telescoped by his infirmity."[2]

The Tremulous Hand worked with at least 17 manuscripts written in Old English, glossing them in Middle English and, increasingly, in Latin. Franzen (2003, 14) has identified some 3,200 vernacular glosses, mainly in English, with a few in French. However, the Tremulous Hand did not only gloss texts: he also wrote short notes and copied texts. Altogether, he produced four pieces of continuous writing, three of which are found in a single MS, Worcester Cathedral F 174, while one short text, a version of the Nicene Creed, is found in Bodleian Library, MS Junius 121. Franzen (1991, 27–28), in her classification of the different states of the Tremulous Hand's work, defines these texts as representing states T and D. The T state is represented by the three Worcester Cathedral texts only, while the D state includes the earliest stage of glosses in several manuscripts as well as the *Creed*. The main differences between the two states are, it seems, orthographic, and they may be approximately contemporary. The other states represent later phases of glossing, with varying degrees of tremor and a dominant use of Latin.

The first text copied in Worcester Cathedral F 174, and by far the longest one copied by the Tremulous Hand, is a copy of Ælfric's Grammar and Glossary, translated from Old English. The other two texts are known as the Worcester Fragments. The first fragment is a little verse text known as "St Bede lament" or "On the disuse of English," which laments the loss of the earlier, English-based, tradition of learning; the second is an Early Middle English poem known as "The Soul's Address to the Body."

It is perhaps, above all, the content of the "St Bede lament" which has coloured modern scholars' ideas of the Tremulous Hand. The poem opens with a historically inaccurate list of pre-Conquest scholars and bishops and their accomplishments:

> *sanctus* beda was iboren her on breotene mid us
> & he wisliche [books] awende
> ð' þeo englise leoden þurh weren ilerde .

> "Saint Bede was born here in Britain with us and he wisely translated books through which the English people were taught."

It goes on to lament their passing and the current state of learning in English:

> þeos læ[reden] ure leodan on englisc .
> næs deorc heore liht . ac hit fæire glod .
> [nu is] þeo leore for-leten . and þet folc is forloren .
> nu beoþ oþre leoden þeo læ[ren] ure folc .
> & feole of þen lorþeines losiæþ . & ð' folc forþ mid.

> "these taught our people in English, their light was not dark but it shone brightly; now the learning is abandoned and the people are lost; now there are others who teach our people and many of the leaders are lost, and the people with them."

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[2] The characteristic tremor is assumed to reflect a condition known as essential tremor (Franzen 1991, 198–99), which is not life-threatening but which slowly becomes worse over time, affecting the ability to write.

It is probably fair to say that the idea of the Tremulous Hand as an antiquarian is to a large extent based on this poem, and much has been made of its theme in the discussion of his motives. Drout and Kleinman (2010, §26), for example, write that the Worcester Fragments are "in essence laments for the passing of Old English literary greats." It may, however, be worth noting that the poem is not assumed to have been composed by the Tremulous Hand himself, and that the other, much longer, texts in Worcester Cathedral F 174 deal with completely different topics.

All three texts in the manuscript are copies based on earlier exemplars. A study by Moffat (1987, 21) concludes that "the scribe was neither a mirror copyist nor a wholesale 'translator' of his exemplar"; he notes both a "potential to preserve old spellings" and "a clear tendency toward regularization of certain phonological and lexical features." Moffat identifies several features which he considers to represent "the language of the scribe" while he notes that other forms "preserve older spelling." Following Moffat, Franzen (2003, 16) describes the language of the copied texts as "a very peculiar mixture of old and new forms."

That the language of the Grammar and Glossary should retain many old forms is not surprising, both bearing in mind the length of the text and its nature. The text contains a vast repository of Old English vocabulary, and as the continuous part of the text is also highly technical and repetitive, it makes sense that, as Franzen (1991, 89) notes, "most of [the] alterations are fairly straightforward respellings." In her edition of the Grammar and Glossary, Butler (1981, 80) notes that the inflectional system of the text is "conservative for the end of the twelfth century"; however, she suggests that much of this conservatism is "simply orthographic or conventional." In what follows, the focus is on the orthography, and in particular its assumed archaism.

4. The case for archaism

A brief discussion of the Tremulous Hand by Smith (1991, 57–58), based on the "St Bede lament," notes what seem to be unhistorical uses, notably the use of <æ> in an unstressed syllable (*losiæþ*) and an appearance of <eo> in *leore,* assumed to represent OE *lar* "teaching." While Smith considers these forms "back spellings" in the sense that they "indicate an unhistorical spread of <eo> and <æ> to contexts which never had them in OE," he suggests that, "especially given the subject matter of the poem, and the antiquarianism of the 'tremulous hand' already noted, it is also tempting to call them 'archaistic' . . . for <eo> and <æ> are distinctively 'Anglo-Saxon' graphs" (Smith 1991, 58).

The idea of antiquarianism is based on the Tremulous Hand's glossing of Old English manuscripts, showing him to be "aware of and deeply concerned with Anglo-Saxon traditions" (Smith 1991, 57). Smith goes on to contrast the Tremulous Hand's written usage with those of the Cleopatra and Nero scribes of the *Ancrene Riwle.* [3] In particular, he describes the latter as "a new, dialectally-confident handling of the vernacular" (Smith 1991, 65).

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[3] British Library MSS Cotton Cleopatra C.vi and Cotton Nero A.xiv.

Smith's brief assessment of the Tremulous Hand draws a parallel to the 1969 paper by Stanley, which dealt with Laȝamon, another Worcestershire writer and possible contemporary of the Tremulous Hand. While both surviving manuscripts of Laȝamon's *Brut* are scribal copies, Stanley assumed that the text in British Library MS Cotton Caligula A.ix largely reflects the author's orthography. He drew attention to what he termed the *archaistic* use of the spellings <æ> and <eo>, as well as to spellings of the reflex of OE /ɑː/: the same features which Smith (1991) discusses.

A full consideration of Stanley's paper, and the question of the Caligula version of the *Brut* as archaistic, merits a discussion of its own and falls outside the present paper. However, as Stanley's arguments form an explicit basis for Smith's discussion of the Tremulous Hand, they will be returned to below.

Smith's argument is followed up by Franzen (2003), who notes a difference between the language of the four copied texts by the Tremulous Hand and what she considers the "early layer" of his glosses, which may be contemporary to the copied texts. In the early glosses, she suggests, "[h]is spellings are up to date and consistent and bear little resemblance to the spellings in the *Worcester Fragments*" (Franzen 2003, 17). She also notes that the language of these early glosses differs from the later states (the B and M layers), which are "more like those in his copied texts." According to Franzen (2003, 18), the early glosses show a more "progressive" and also more consistent language, which she describes as very similar to that of the Nero scribe of the *Ancrene Riwle*.

The data presented by Franzen do not, however, seem to demonstrate such a major difference (Franzen 2003, 17). Most differences listed are ones of proportion, and difficult to interpret out of context. Perhaps the clearest difference is that the D layer does not contain OE <sc> and <c> spellings, showing only <sch> and <ch>, while the later glosses show a mixture; similarly, medial <f> does not appear in the D layer, but varies with <u> in the later glosses. The table suggests a lesser degree of retention of the letter <æ> in the D glosses. However, as the comparison does not take into consideration lexical variation or the effect of the Second Fronting (see Section 5), this is difficult to interpret.

On the whole, the data presented in Franzen (2003, 17) suggest that the different sets of text produced by the Tremulous Hand show somewhat varying selections from a general orthographic repertoire. For some features, the early glosses seem to show a less conservative usage, while the later glosses incorporate spellings that seem older, such as <sc> and medial <f>. Franzen raises the question why the later writing of the Tremulous Hand looks more conservative: she suggests that it "may be archaized, consciously or unconsciously, as the result of his reading and studying of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts" (Franzen 2003, 27). She comments that "[i]t seems very odd that a scribe who could write a consistent form of his early Middle English dialect later chose not to" (Franzen 2003, 19).

While the present paper necessarily focusses on the four copied texts, these arguments raise a number of questions of more general relevance: what do we expect of historical English spelling in terms of regularity, and should we consider it strange if a writer who is capable of writing progressively chooses not to? It is probably fair to describe the orthography of the Tremulous Hand, as shown in the copied texts, as largely conservative, even with the caveats needed because of the unknown dates of both these and other contemporary texts. However, it may be asked whether the choice of conservative forms should be seen as a mark of antiquarianism, or a lack of dialectal

confidence. A further question is to what extent we can distinguish a mainstream against which a particular usage may be defined as archaic or even archaistic. In order to address the question of archaism, it will make sense to consider in turn the arguments outlined above. The following main points were noted:

1. Variation between old and new forms
2. The use of unhistorical spellings
3. The use of "distinctively Anglo-Saxon" (Smith 1991, 58) graphs or digraphs: <æ>, <eo>
4. A more archaic orthography than that of other contemporary texts
5. Unnecessary complexity when more economical and up-to-date forms are available

Points 1 and 2 are considered in Section 5, which presents an orthographic study of the four copied texts, focussing on the aspects that have been considered archaistic. Section 6 then places the Tremulous Hand's usage in relation to that of other broadly contemporary texts, in order to consider points 3–5.

5.   The writing system: variation and unhistorical spellings?

5.1 Background: sound changes and their effects on spelling

The writing system of the four copied texts by the Tremulous Hand includes the four Old English letters <æ>, <þ>, <ð>, <p> as well as the digraphs <ea> and <eo>. Of these, <ð> is used relatively rarely and appears mainly in Ælfric's *Grammar and Glossary*. A distinction is made between Carolingian and insular <g>, showing the development of Middle English yogh. The spelling <ch> has entirely superseded Old English <c> initially in words such as *chestre, chiken, child, chirche*. On the other hand, <sc> is completely dominant in the *sh* set, with spellings such as *scal, sceaft, scearp, scip* and *sculen* and only two occurrences of initial <sch> (*schal, scheaweþ*), both in the *Grammar and Glossary*. More variation is shown in the realization of Old English intravocalic <f>, which appears both as <f> and <u> in all the texts. Such patterns, which may indeed appear as a mix of old and new are to be expected in a period of change.

It is, however, the vowel spellings, and especially the use of <æ> and <eo>, which have been held to represent archaistic usage. In fact, it is the use of these two graphs, as well as the reflexes of OE /ɑ:/ that seem to appear in more or less all discussions of archaism in Early Middle English (Stanley 1969, 26–27), with the most important argument concerning their extension to unhistorical contexts. It is therefore worth considering these features in detail.

Any consideration of Early Middle English vowel spellings needs to take account of the changes to the vowel system, in particular the low vowels and diphthongs, that took place during the late Old and early Middle periods (see Lass 1992, 42–48). The earliest changes resulted in a merger of the vowels spelt <a, æ, ea> in Old English, referred to as "æ-merger" in *A Corpus of Narrative Etymologies* (henceforth *CoNE*). Similarly, the vowels spelt <e, eo> in Old English, both long and short, merged, probably into /e/. The phonemes resulting of these two mergers eventually came to correspond to the spellings <a> and <e> respectively. However, in the West Midland area, the situation was complicated by varieties showing the results of the sound change known as *Second*

Fronting, which manifested in <e> spellings for West Saxon /æ/ (for studies of the Second Fronting, see Hogg 1977; Kristensson 1983; Jack 1990). In addition, OE long /ɑ:/ was raised and rounded, a change that is reflected in a transfer from <a> to <o> spellings; this change, which did not happen in Northern dialects, seems to have taken place during the thirteenth century in the West Midland area.

Finally, it may be noted that most of the Old English unstressed vowels merged, a development that probably started well before the Conquest, resulting in a vowel that was most commonly spelt <e> but may have varied considerably between varieties (Lass 2009, passim; "weak vowel neutralisation" in *CoNE*).

The fact that all these early sound changes involve mergers is highly relevant to the discussion of Early Middle English spelling. In the absence of a standard spelling system, a merger results in any one of the earlier spellings being in principle equally available: accordingly, for the sound resulting from the merger of the short low vowels, any of the spellings <a>, <æ> and <ea> would in principle have been acceptable. Traditional pre-merger spellings for individual words would tend to be retained wherever there is a continuous written tradition, and could then be generalized in either direction. In other words, after the merger of <a, æ, ea> we might expect all three spellings to appear, not only in those words in which they appeared historically, but generalized to the other two sets.

Such post-merger variation forms an important source for the kind of orthographic complexity that was described by Laing and Lass in a series of papers in the 2000s (especially Laing and Lass 2003, 2009). The concept of *substitution sets*, introduced by Laing (1999), makes sense of the highly complex ways in which Middle English spelling relates to phonology, with multiple but not random mappings between speech and sound. The basic mechanism of substitution sets is functional equivalence: if two spellings are equivalent in one context, the equivalence may be extended to other contexts. The substitutions may form complex chains, as demonstrated e.g. in Laing and Lass (2009, 2), making sense of otherwise seemingly unhistorical spellings.

To consider the potential archaism of the spellings of the Tremulous Hand, they should, first of all, be evaluated against these sources of variation. For the present purpose, a study of the relevant vowel groups was carried out, based on the complete transcriptions of the four copied texts by the Tremulous Hand available in *LAEME*. In the Atlas, the texts are divided into three scribal texts: Ælfric's *Grammar and Glossary* (*LALME* code 173; here referred to as Æ), the two "Worcester Fragments" (172; here referred to as F) and the Nicene Creed (171, here referred to as N). The texts were searched, first, for all occurrences of the letters <æ> and <eo>, and, secondly, for spellings of the reflexes of OE /a/, /æ/, /ea/, /eo/ and /ɑ:/. The first search was carried out using the *LAEME* search option. The second search was carried out manually, using the concordancer AntConc (version 3.2.1) to extract the data. The OE vowel categories were checked against two major dictionaries of Old English (Bosworth-Toller Online 2014; Clark Hall 1960) as needed. It should be noted that some of the words contained in the *Glossary* are difficult to interpret, and it is not always clear to what extent the Tremulous Hand himself understood them (Franzen 1991, 90); only the relatively uncontroversial cases are included here.

5.2 *The spelling of Old English low vowels and diphthongs in the copied texts of the Tremulous Hand*

With very few exceptions, the letter <æ> appears in those contexts where it is expected historically. Of 649 occurrences of words that show <æ> in stressed syllables, only seven involve words for which dictionaries of Old English do not list an <æ> or <ea> spelling; the listed spelling for all seven is <e>: *ihændor, næ, mæreswin, ihænde, wrænches, iræcchednesse, færses.*[4]

In addition, there are a handful of occurrences of <æ> used as a spelling of unstressed syllables (*driæn, geræs, losiæn, þeræ*) besides thousands of occurrences of <e>. There are good historical grounds for variation between <æ> and <e> in the orthography of the Tremulous Hand. Worcester forms part of the Second Fronting area, and this sound change is highly evident in the orthography. The reflexes of OE short /æ/ in the material appear spelt with <æ>, <e> and <a>, the first two groups being dominant (Table 1).

Table 1. The reflexes of OE short /æ/

Spelling	Number of occurrences	Old English lexemes
<æ>	278 (41%)	*æfter, æhte, æghwæder, æcer, æghwylc, ænig, ænlipi, æps, æt(-), æx, æþel, æþeling, fæstnian, beæftan, dæg, fæc, fæder, fæger, flæschamod, frætwige, gæderian, gærsum, græf, græs, hæfde, hæftling, hæfð, hæt, hrædlice, hwæt, hwæþer, frætwian, læccan, gemæcca, mægen, sægde, smæccan, læfel, læte, mæg, mægden, mægen, mæstling, nægl, næsc, ræglhus, ræt, spærstan, stæfgefeg, stæpe, færeld, wæstm, wlæccan, wræc, wrænna, þæs, þæt*
<e>	259 (39%)	*beæftan, cræft, æfter, ænig, æt-, fæger, fæstan, fæstnian, mæsting, græs, hæfde, hæfð, hwæþer, frætwian, gesægd, smæccan, mæg, mægden, sægden, sægst, sægð, stæf, fæt, gesægendlice, wræcca, þæs, þæt*
<a>	131 (20%)	*æht, æcer, æghwylc, bæcern, bæcestre, dæg, hæfð, hæps, hwæs, hwæt, mæg, spærhende, wæs, wæstm, wæter, wræstlian*
Total	668	

A few lexemes, such as *say,* show all three spellings, but there is a degree of lexical differentiation, some of which seems to be phonologically conditioned: after immediately

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[4] OE *gehendor, ne, mereswin, gehende, wrenc, gerec(c)ednes, fers.*

preceding /w/, the vowel almost always appears as <a>. The variation between <æ> and <e> is best explained in terms of a Second Fronting dialect with variable usage.

Variation between <a> and <æ> is expected as the result of æ-merger, which would leave both letters equally acceptable as spellings of the reflexes of OE /æ/ and /a/. It may also be noted that the phonological status of /æ/ vs /a/ in this period has been described as highly uncertain, and Roger Lass suggests a "zone of indeterminacy" for the [æ/e] and [æ/a] vowel regions (*CoNE,* "after"). However, it may be noted that the total of 92 reflexes of OE short /a/ found in the material show virtually exclusively <a> spellings, with two exceptions only: the appearance of OE *scamu* "shame" as *sceome* and the spelling *deages* "days." It is notable that there seem to be no <æ> spellings for OE /a/. If the writer's tendency had been to expand the use of <æ> in order to archaize, this would seem to have been an obvious place to do so. As it is, the use of <æ> in the texts is almost entirely historical, while <e> and <a> appear relatively commonly as variant spellings of the reflex of OE /æ/. There is, accordingly, no indication of an expansion in the use of <æ> in these texts; rather, the spelling variation in the reflexes of OE /æ/ and /a/ seems quite in accordance with the phonological and orthographic developments in general, with <a> retained as the conventional spelling in OE /a/ words.

The spellings corresponding to West Saxon /ea/, finally, show <ea> and <a> as the dominant spellings, with 76 and 67 occurrences respectively out of a total of 189 (40% and 35%). Most <a> spellings appear in contexts with preceding /w/ or precede an *lC* cluster, suggesting an underlying /a/ from Mercian retraction rather than /ea/ from breaking. Spellings with <e> and <æ> are minor variants with 20 and 12 occurrences respectively, and forms of *hold* and *old* show <o>, reflecting lengthening before /ld/ and the subsequent change from /ɑː/ to /ɔː/.

On the whole, the short low vowels show a fairly regular picture. The orthography retains most of the distinctions of what is clearly a West Mercian variety of Old English, with variable effects of second fronting and retraction of /æ/ before *lC* groups. The variation found is mainly between <e> and <æ>, as expected in a variety with Second Fronting, and to a lesser extent between <æ>, <ea> and <a>, as expected from æ merger. Even within this predictable variation, <æ> seldom appears in words with the reflex of OE /e/ or /ea/ and never for OE /a/. There seem to be no examples of the use of the letter <æ> in other unhistorical contexts.

The search found altogether 1,496 occurrences of <eo> in stressed syllables. Of these, 1,453, or 97%, appear in words for which <eo> is recorded as a spelling in some variety of Old English. The remainder appear in a group of individual lexemes, most of which also appear with <eo> in other Early Middle English texts of the Southwest Midlands: so *icneowe* "know," *seorwe* "sorrow" and *sceolen* "shall," leaving a small residue of otherwise rare or unknown forms: so *weowe* "misery," *steouwe* "stow, place," *leore* ?"lore" and *leote* "let."

A total of 586 words containing the reflex of OE /eːo/ in stressed syllables were found in the material. All these appear spelt <eo> in the material, with the exception of three occurrences of *beþ* "are" in Æ. The results for /eo/ are almost equally regular: the exceptions consist mainly of frequent grammatical words such as *eom, heo, heore,* for which the forms *am, ho* and *hora/hore* appear, the latter two alongside more common

heo, heore. The forms *fower(-)*, *fowertene* reflect a change to /oː/, leaving only *hothortnes* as an exception.[5]

The <eo> spellings in these texts may, accordingly, be considered to maintain historical distinctions very regularly. The general lack of variation between <e> and <eo> suggests that the /e(ː)/ and /e(ː)o/ phonemes may still be distinguished in the underlying spoken system, which would make sense in light of the very long survival of historically accurate <eo> spellings in the West Midland area (see section 6 below). The single form *leore,* which Smith reads as OE *lar* "teaching" with unhistorical <eo>, may be a back spelling of *lore* (cf. *ho, hore* for *heo, heore*) but it could also be an otherwise unknown form (cf. *leornes* "learning"). Considering our incomplete record of Early English, the very small residue of unexplained <eo> spellings does not seem a strong argument for archaising spelling.

Finally, there are altogether 665 occurrences of words with the reflex of OE /ɑː/. Of these, 119 show <a> spellings while 540 have <o>, and there are two forms in <oa>: *roa, roadeor* "roe deer." Of the <a> spellings, 40 consist of the form *þa* "then," which appears in all three scribal texts, while another 30 are likely to represent shortened forms *(ax-* "ask," *twam* "two"). This leaves some 50 <a> spellings, including forms such as *hwa* "who," *walawa* "woe," *twa* "two," appearing in all three scribal texts. As variation between <a> and <o> in reflexes of OE /ɑː/ is considerable in thirteenth-century texts of the Southwest Midlands, it is likely that the variation here reflects the ongoing or recent rounding and raising of the vowel. The numerous <a> spellings of the highly frequent word *þa* are noteworthy and could indicate either a shortened variant or a purely orthographic tendency to retain the conventional spelling of a very common word. Again, there seem to be no unhistorical spellings except for the couple of occasional forms (*weowe, leore*) noted above.

In sum, this brief study has found very few unhistorical spellings that would suggest a tendency by the Tremulous Hand to extend the use of the spellings <æ> or <eo> in order to produce an archaic look. On the contrary, his use of these spellings seems extremely regular: while both <e> and <a> are found as alternative spellings for Old English /æ/ words, the spellings <æ> and <eo> are virtually always used historically in stressed syllables. Some variation in unstressed syllables is to be expected from the weak vowel neutralization (cf. *CoNE*), and the occasional use of <æ> in such contexts makes sense in view of the general tendency for <e> and <æ> to become interchangeable in a Second Fronting variety.

6. The archaic status of <æ> and <eo>

Smith (1991, 58) suggested that the Tremulous Hand might be extending his use of <æ> and <eo>, which are "distinctively Anglo-Saxon" graphs. It may also be noted that Stanley (1969, 27) was querying Laȝamon's use of these spellings, asking "why scribes preferred the cumbrous antique spellings with *æ* to the simpler spellings with *e*" and noting "the use of the spelling *eo* where simple *e* would have done and been more normal."

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[5] It should be noted that the small group of forms of the *yolk* type, which ended up as /o(ː)/ in Middle English and may never have had a diphthongal pronunciation, were not included in the search.

The study presented in the previous section concluded that the copied texts by the Tremulous Hand show a highly regular use of both graphs in the historically expected contexts: even the expected variation deriving from ongoing or recent mergers is minor, and unhistorical uses are so exceptional that an explanation invoking archaistic use is clearly unwarranted. It may, however, still be asked whether the use of <æ> and <eo> should in itself be considered archaic in this period: does the Tremulous Hand deliberately retain spellings that are no longer in current use?

In *LAEME*, which covers the period 1175–1325, the spelling <æ> appears in 41 texts out of a total of 169. Of these 41 texts, 26 show <æ> as a regularly occurring form, and by far most occurrences are in historically expected contexts such as the following: *æt, ær, æfter, æure, forlæte, dæi, græi, læi, mæi, fæder, astæih, þær, sæ, fæire, hæfde.*

In addition, <æ> appears occasionally in unstressed syllables. It may be noted that the vast majority of the texts that regularly show <æ>, 20 texts out of 26, are dated in *LAEME* to the thirteenth century; however, it should be remembered that virtually all the datings are highly uncertain. More importantly, over half the texts localized in Worcestershire in *LAEME* (nine out of 17 texts) show <æ> as a regularly occurring form. There is no reason to assume that the <æ> spellings necessarily relate to the survival of a spoken distinction. The important point here is that <æ> as a spelling is far from obsolete in the Worcestershire area, and may presumably be defined as in current use.

The data for <eo> show an even clearer picture of continued use. In *LAEME*, <eo> is used in 91 out of 169 texts over the entire country, and it appears in 15 out of the 17 Worcestershire texts. If the counties immediately surrounding Worcestershire are included, <eo> is used in 20 out of 24 texts. In the Southwest Midland area, there is in fact evidence for a continued, if gradually diminishing, use of <eo> through the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. In the Middle English Grammar Corpus (MEG-C), which consists of samples of texts localized in *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (*LALME*), with the approximate date range 1325–1475, <eo> is found in one third of all Southwest Midland texts, up to the late fifteenth century (Stenroos 2019, 144). *A Corpus of Middle English Local Documents* (*MELD*), which does not contain copies of earlier works, shows <eo> still appearing in historically expected contexts in a few mid-fifteenth century documents (e.g. Stenroos 2016, 119). It may also be noted that <eo> appears, alongside more common <u>, as a spelling of unstressed syllables in Southwest Midland texts in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, perhaps indicating a somewhat rounded or retracted realization of the vowel (Stenroos 2016, 118; 2019, 150–51). Accordingly, there is no doubt that <eo> is very much a Middle English digraph, even if it has become a regional one in the later period.

In sum, there is no reason to assume that either <æ> or <eo> were considered Old English graphs in thirteenth-century Worcestershire. As <æ> appears in just over half of the LAEME texts localized in the county, it may be considered a recessive from a retrospective point of view. However, there is no way of knowing whether this would have been clear for writers at the time. The digraph <eo>, on the other hand, was used almost universally in the Southwest Midland area. Accordingly, going back to the *OED* definition of archaism, there would seem to be no reason to consider the use of these two spellings as either archaic or archaistic, seen against the mainstream usage of the time.

As for cumbrousness, it is not entirely clear why the graph <æ> should be more cumbrous to produce than any other letter. Its usual realization in twelfth- and thirteenth-century manuscripts is not a complicated one, and writers of present-day

Norwegian and Danish have no problems using the equivalent graph in handwriting. When it comes to <eo>, using a digraph for unstressed vowels, as seen occasionally in Laȝamon's *Brut* and in later Southwest Midland texts, might admittedly seem cumbersome, a point which leads to the final question to be considered here: why should anyone choose unnecessarily complex spellings, when more economical ones are available?

As pointed out numerous times (e.g. Vachek 1976, 128, 132), spelling does not work in the same way as phonemic transcription does. Rather, it is based on written convention, much faster to apply once learnt, and capable of transmitting other information besides the strictly phonological (for example, distinguishing between homophones). Orthographic variation may also be highly socially significant. Accordingly, writing frequently does not take the most economical route. The scholarly work related to *LAEME* (Laing 1999; Laing and Lass 2003, 2007, 2009, etc.) has clearly shown the abundance, and normality, of complex spelling systems, as well as cumbersome spellings, in Early Middle English.[6]

From this point of view, it might be asked whether a writer in the thirteenth century would necessarily see the attraction of new and dialectally-confident forms, or consider them superior to more traditional spellings. Surviving twelfth- and thirteenth-century texts in the Southwest Midland area show much retention of traditional spelling conventions, and the regularity with which scribes were applying spellings such as <æ>, <ea> and <eo> should make it difficult to label them as archaic. Instead, one might suggest that the scribes were using these spellings because they considered them appropriate for writing English. As in later periods, spellings which formed part of an existing tradition might have been seen as more prestigious than novel forms, and it would, then, make sense for the later Tremulous Hand to adopt spellings such as <sc> in his active repertoire.

7. Conclusion

The idea of deliberate archaism as a feature of the spelling of twelfth- and early thirteenth-century texts has largely been based on the following characteristics: variation between old and new forms; the use of complex or traditional spellings when more economical and up-to-date forms were available; and the use of spellings such as <æ> and <eo>, especially in unhistorical contexts. With regard to the Tremulous Hand of Worcester in particular, it has also been suggested that his spelling is more archaic than that of other, contemporary writers. This study has shown that none of these points constitute a valid argument for archaism in the texts copied by the Tremulous Hand.

The study of vowel spellings presented above does not indicate any tendency to use unhistorical <æ> or <eo> spellings, except for predictable variation such as that between <e> and <æ>. We cannot tell to what extent these spellings reflect surviving distinctions in the spoken mode. However, there is no reason to assume that Early Middle English spelling aimed at recording contemporary phonology (Laing and Lass 2003, 2009), and

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[6] It is, of course, hardly possible to find any period of English spelling in which cumbersome spellings would have been a problem: the trigraph <sch>, for example, was by far the most common spelling of the highly frequent phoneme /ʃ/ through most of the Middle English period, even though several shorter variants, such as <sc>, <sh> and <ss>, were available.

spellings reflecting lost phonemic distinctions are not necessarily more archaic than present-day <knight>.

There is also no indication that the <æ> and <eo> spellings would have been seen as antiquated in the text community to which the Tremulous Hand belonged. On the contrary, they are regularly used by the majority of twelfth- and thirteenth-century writers in the area. As the number of surviving texts from this period is relatively small, and most texts cannot be dated with any precision, it seems unwarranted to label this majority usage as archaic or archaistic. It also makes little sense to consider these (or any other) spellings as unnecessarily complex or cumbersome, as such an argument presupposes a general tendency towards economy for which there is no historical basis.

In general, the copied texts by the Tremulous Hand show a writing system that reflects both tradition and ongoing change: features such as the use of initial <ch> and (mostly) <o> for OE /ɑː/, may, indeed, be classified as new ones. However, as the changes which took place in phonology and orthography in this period were gradual, there should not be anything surprising about finding old and new forms in the same system. Most of the spellings used by the Tremulous Hand, probably in line with the majority of writers through history, were traditional rather than innovative. From our perspective, they may come across as old-fashioned. However, as neither economy nor innovation were necessarily seen as virtues in the Tremulous Hand's text community, there should be no reason to expect those: instead, the copied texts of the Tremulous Hand show a highly competent use of the traditional conventions of written English, conservative but no less a living medium.

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