

THE ETYMOLOGY OF 'RÍME' IN THE 'ORMULUM'

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Introduction

Standard reference works have regarded the word *ríme* in the Middle English *Ormulum* as a French loanword meaning 'metre'. In this article, it will be argued that this interpretation of *ríme*, as well as the accompanying etymology, are erroneous; it is based on a misunderstanding of Orm's methods as a homilist. The article will present an alternative interpretation and an alternative etymology, based on a careful reading of the author's own account of his methods. According to this interpretation, the word is not borrowed from Old French but derived from Old English; its sense in the *Ormulum* is 'story' or 'text'.

The etymology of Orm's *ríme*

The *Ormulum* is a Middle English homily collection written in the second half of the twelfth century in southern Lincolnshire by the Augustinian canon Orm and surviving in a single manuscript (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 1), the author's holograph.¹ The work is written in a metrically bound form known as the *septenarius*: a long verse is made up of seven feet (fifteen syllables), with a caesura after the eighth syllable splitting the long verse into two short verses. The extant text comprises over 20,000 short verses (roughly 125,000 words) and is invaluable for the light it sheds on the properties of the English language in the late twelfth century, partly because the text remains as its author wrote (and subsequently corrected) it, partly because of Orm's consistent use of the orthographic system he had developed. In this article the text of the *Ormulum*

The *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (ODEE) lists the word, as used in these quotations, as the earliest instance of a borrowing of OF *rime* (“—medL. *rithmus*, *rythmus* (used spec. of accentual verse which was usu. rhymed), for L. *rhythmus* rhythm.” ODEE s.v. **rime**³). As such, it antedates the next occurrence by about a century. However, it is clearly used in a different sense: since Orm does not use rhyme as a structuring device in his verse, his *rime* has been interpreted as ‘metre’ rather than ‘rhyming verse’.⁴

Immediately after the passage quoted in (1), Orm admits that he has been unable to fill his *ferris* with the words of the Gospel, and therefore has been obliged to add words of his own as well:

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| (3) | <p>7 icc ne mihte nohht min ferris.
 Aȝȝ wiþþ goddspelless wordess.
 Wel fillenn all. 7 all forr þi.
 Sholde icc well ofte nede.
 Among goddspelless wordess don.
 Min word. min ferris to fillenn.</p> | <p>And I could not my verse
 always with the words of the Gospel
 well fill all, and therefore
 I very often had to
 among the words of the Gospel place
 my word(s), in order to fill my verse.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(<i>Dedication</i> 59–64)</p> |
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It seems to be generally held that (1) and (3) constitute Orm’s apology for his use of words like *acc*, *all*, *annd*, *þatt*, and *wel* in order to achieve the right number of syllables per verse (e.g. Bennett and Smithers 1966: 174, “Its literary merits are few: tedious repetitions (cf. ll. 50–60), cumbersome conjunctions and otiose adverbs characterize Orm’s style, and the monotony of the language is equalled by the regularity of the verse line, which, as Orm says in the dedication to his brother Walter, an Augustinian canon, is often padded”). It must be on the basis of such a reading that the interpretation of *rime* that is to be found in ODEE was arrived at.

This interpretation presupposes that Orm would say the same thing twice in (1) and (3). For all the accusations of “tedious repetition”, Orm

hardly ever repeats a sequence without introducing some kind of variation. It would be very unlike him to say twice, with slightly different wording, 'I have inserted my own words into the Gospel text, because that was the only way I could get the right number of syllables per verse'. On the other hand, it would be typical of his use of repetition with variation to say 'I have inserted my own words into the Gospel text, because that was the only way I could get the right number of syllables per verse, and I have inserted my own words into the Gospel text for some other purpose'. The question is thus: what other purpose?

When Orm points out that he has added words of his own to the Gospel text in order to fill the *rime*, he justifies the additions by claiming that they will enable readers to understand the Gospel text better (quotation 1). No similar claim is made for the words added in order to fill the *ferrs* (quotation 3). It should be clear, therefore, that the two types of addition differ in nature: the addition to the *ferrs* serves a purely technical purpose, namely that of padding the line, whereas the addition to the *rime* serves an exegetical or explanatory purpose.

We may consider Orm's Gospel text vii, taken from the first mass on Christmas Day and comprising Luke 2:1–15a, as an example of such an explanatory addition to a Gospel text.⁵ In Orm's rendering, the Gospel text is made up of 10 paragraphs (ll. 3270–3387).⁶ The correspondence between Gospel verses and paragraphs is shown in Table 1 on the opposite page.

In Luke 2, verses 1–7 form one narrative unit (the arrival of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem and the birth of the child), verses 8–15a another (the appearance of the angels to the shepherds).

Table 1

The correspondences between Luke 2:1–15a and Orm’s Gospel text vii

Verses in Luke ii	Paragraphs in the <i>Ormulum</i> , Gospel text vii
1	1
2	—
3	2
4–5	3
6–7	4
—	5–6
8–11	7
12	8
13–14	9
15a	10

In paragraphs 5 and 6, Orm explains the relationship between the two events: though God was thus born in secrecy, he would not remain hidden (paragraph 5); for as soon as he was born, a great sign was seen in the vicinity (paragraph 6). In this way the abrupt narrative transition in Luke is made smoother, requiring less processing work on the part of the listeners or readers. This pattern is repeated over and over again throughout the *Ormulum*, and a picture of Orm’s stylistic preferences emerges clearly: he aims at a narrative style that is considerably more explicit and requires considerably less inference on the part of the listeners and readers. It seems reasonable to assume that this greater explicitness was part of the effort to make the Gospel text easy to understand, which he mentions in the *Dedication*, ll. 45–50 (quotation 1).

Another, and somewhat different, example is found in Orm's rendering of Luke 1:16–17 in Gospel text i. Here Orm interlards the Gospel text with his own additions (placed within square brackets in quotation 4 below), as well as interpolating reminiscences of Luke 1:76 and Malachi 4:5 (placed in braces):

- (4) 1:16 et multos filiorum Israhel convertet
ad Dominum Deum ipsorum
- 1:76 et tu puer propheta Altissimi vocaberis
praeibis enim ante faciem Domini parare vias
eius
- 1:17 et ipse praecedet ante illum in spiritu
et virtute Heliae
- Malachi 4:5 ecce ego mittam vobis Heliam
prophetam antequam veniat dies Domini
magnus et horribilis*
ut convertat corda patrum in filios
- et incredibiles ad prudentiam iustorum
- parare Domino plebem perfectam
- 7 he shall turnnenn mikell flocc:
Off þiss iudisskenn þe<o>de.
Till godess sune iesu crist:
[7 till þe rihhte læfe.]
- {7 he shall newenn cumenn forþ:
Till mann kinn her o life.
Biforenn crist allmahhtiȝ godd:
To ȝarrkenn hise weȝȝess.}
- 7 he shall newenn cumenn forþ:
Biforenn cristess côme.
Rihht i þatt illke gode gast:
7 i þatt illke mahhte.
- Þatt helyas {shall cumenn efft:
Biforenn cristess come.}
- 7 he shall newenn cumenn forþ:
To turnnenn. 7 to wendenn.
Þe sunes [þurh hiss hallȝe spell;]
Till þeȝre faderr herrte.
- [7 he shall turnnenn þurh hiss spell;]
Þe trowwþelæse le<o>de.
Till all þe rihhte witt off þa:
Þatt all rihhtwise wærenn.
- [7 he shall newenn cumenn forþ:
Biforenn cristess come.]
- To ȝarrkenn her onnȝaeness crist:
All þwerrt út haliȝ le<o>de.
[Þurh fulluhht. 7 þurh haliȝ spell;
7 ec þurh haliȝ bisne;]
- (Gospel text i, ll. 169–196)

A third type of addition involves fleshing out dialogue so that it becomes easier for the audience of the *Ormulum* to follow the argument. A case in point is the dialogue between John the Baptist and various groups of people from Jerusalem coming out to him in the desert, as described in Luke 3:10–14 (added by Orm to continue the story line from Gospel text xvii, Matthew 3:1–14). The publicans ask John, *magister quid faciemus*. In Orm’s rendering, this brief question is expanded to four verses (5). The term of address is given a polite modifier and becomes *lef maḡḡstre*. The simple question ‘what shall we do?’ is turned into an indirect question embedded under an explicit request for advice and guidance, *seḡḡ uss nu þi rap̃: / 7 seḡḡ uss nu þi lare*. A temporal adverbial, *forrþwarrd* ‘henceforth’, as well as an adverbial of purpose, *To betenn ure sinness*, have been added to the question. All these changes make it clearer what the publicans want to know (as interpreted by Orm).

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| (5) Lef maḡḡstre seḡḡ uss nu þi rap̃:
7 seḡḡ uss nu þi lare.
Whatt we nu forrþwarrd shulenn don.
To betenn ure sinness. | Dear master, say us now thy advice
and say us now thy teaching,
what we now henceforth shall do
to atone for our sins.

(<i>Gospel text xvii</i> , ll. 9299–9302) |
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On the basis of these and a host of similar examples, it becomes clear that Orm’s explanatory Gospel additions, which serve to fill the *rime*, are longer than the individual verses and would consequently not serve for padding the verse and manipulate the number of syllables to make them come out at fifteen. It follows that *rime* quite simply cannot mean ‘metre’, as claimed in *ODEE*.

What, then, should we make of *rime*? A much more reasonable interpretation is that *rime* is not a borrowing from Old French but a native English word, derived from the OE noun (*ge*)*rīm*, ‘number’, and the related verb (*ge*)*rīman*, ‘to count’, ‘to reckon’, ‘to number’. The noun *rime* ac-

tually occurs once in the *Ormulum* in the original sense, together with its synonym *tale*:

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| (6) | Her i þiss middell ærdess lif.
Þatt full wel iss bitacnedd.
Þurh tale 7 rime off fowwerttig.
Off fowwerr siþe tene. | Here in this worldly life
that is well signified
by the number of forty,
by four times ten. |
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(*Homily xix*, ll. 11246–9)

Furthermore, Orm uses *rimenn* as a synonym of *reccnenn*, e.g. *An mann 7 twigess rimedd* (l. 11213) ‘one man but counted twice’, *To reccnenn 7 to rimenn* (l. 11217) ‘to count’.

OE *geriman* would occasionally be used in the sense of ‘to enumerate’, and could in the right context be interpreted as a verb of saying ‘to mention’:

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| (7) | Is swa ðeah swiðe fremfullic. þæt gehwa hine gelome. and geornlice to gode gebidde. gif his mod bið to ðan swiðe onbryrd; Elles man sceal hine sceortlice. mid onbryrdnyse. and behreowsunge gebiddan; Ne sceole we tellan gif we hwæt lytles to góde gedoð. ac we sceolon geríman (‘enumerate’) ure misdæda mid wope and geomerunge. and þæra miltsunge gebiddan; Þeah ðe hwá micel to góde gedó. and siððan mid gylpe ætforan gode his weldæda geríme . þonne beoð hí gode swa gecweme. swa him wæron þæs gylpendan sunderhalgan; (<i>Ælfric, Catholic Homilies: Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost, Godden</i> 1979: 250–251) | It is still very beneficial that everybody often and eagerly should pray to God, if his mind is very contrite. Otherwise one should pray briefly with contrition and penitence. We should not tell it if we do some little good, but we should enumerate our misdeeds with weeping and moaning and ask for mercy for them. If anyone has done great good and then enumerates his good deeds with boasting before God, then they will be as pleasing to God as those of the boasting Pharisee. |
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More germane to the present discussion, however, is the use of the related verb *arīman* in senses spanning from ‘enumerate’ and ‘repeat’ to ‘mention’, ‘tell’, and ‘narrate’ as illustrated in quotations 8–11:

- (8) 7 þurh drihtnes þone halgan lichoman 7 þurh drihtnes þa halgan rode 7 þurh sancta marian mægþhad 7 þurh cristes acenned-nessesse 7 þurh his þæt halige fulwiht 7 þurh his halige festen 7 þurh his þrowunga 7 þurh his æriste 7 þurh his upastigenesse on heofonas 7 þurh þone halgan gast 7 þone heandom þe nu toward is eallan mancynne 7 þurh his þæt halige godspell 7 eal þa wundor þe þæron syn þurh þa ic me bebiode minum drihtne ðam ælmihtigum gode. And eac ic hine bidde þurh ealle þas ðe ic nu **arimde** (‘enumerated’; ‘mentioned’) þæt he me forgife ealle mine synna. (*Prayers at Tierce*, Banks 1965: 209)
- And through the Lord’s holy body & the Lord’s holy cross & St. Mary’s virginity & the birth of Christ & His holy baptism & His holy fast & His passion & His resurrection & His ascension to Heaven & the Holy Ghost & the judgement that awaits all mankind & His holy gospel & all the miracles related there, through those I pray to my Lord Almighty God. And also I pray Him through all these that I just mentioned that He forgive me all my sins.
- (9) me þincð nu þæt ic wite hwa Romeburh timbrode, and æac feala oðra þincga þe ær urum dagum geweordon wæs, þa ic ne mæg æalla **ariman** (‘enumerate’; ‘narrate’). (*St. Augustine, Soliloquies, Book 3*, Carnicelli 1969:97)
- It seems to me that I now know who founded Rome, and also many other things which happened before our days, of which I cannot narrate all.
- (10) Ac ðis ðæt we nu feam wordum **arimdon** (‘enumerated’; ‘narrated’) we willað hwene rumedlicor heræfter areccean (‘narrate’). (*Cura Pastoralis*, Sweet 1871: 75)
- But this that we just told in few words we will tell later in somewhat greater detail.
- (11) Þa us sedon ma þyllycra weorda þonne we **ariman** (‘tell’; ‘repeat’) magen, and myd manegum bysnum and tacnum hyt us sæðdon. (*St. Augustine, Soliloquies, Book 2*, Carnicelli 1969: 89)
- They said to us more such words than we can tell and told us them with many parables and miracles.

We may compare this with OE *tellan*, which has a similar range of senses: ‘count’, ‘account’, ‘relate’, and with OE *talu* ‘calculation’, ‘statement’, ‘story’. This material permits us to postulate two related senses for the word *ríme* as used in the *Ormulum*: one sense, ‘narration’, ‘story’, for the context shown in quotation 1, and another, ‘text’, for the context shown in quotation 2.⁷

A comparison between the forms in the *Ormulum* and attested OE forms of these nouns and verbs shows that not all senses attested in OE are found in the *Ormulum* and, conversely, that one sense found in the *Ormulum* is not attested in OE.

Table 2

Forms and senses of the stems TELL- and RIM- in OE and in the Ormulum

Form and sense	OE	Orm	As used in the <i>Ormulum</i>
tellan/tellenn			
‘count’	+	+	Forr all þatt folc ... iss ... sett. / O boc. 7 tald. 7 rimedd. (17683–86)
‘account’	+	+	Whatt gate arrt tu forr maʒʒstre tald. ... ? (16680)
‘relate’, ‘tell’	+	+	He talde þeʒʒm hu mann maʒʒ godd. Cnawenn 7 sen onn erþe. (19409–10)
getæl/täle			
‘number’	+	+	7 tacneþþ tāle off tene (4313)
talu/*tale			
‘calculation’	+	–	
‘story’	+	–	
-rīman/rimenn			
‘count’	+	+	To reccnenn. 7 to rimenn (11217)
‘enumerate’	+	–	
‘mention’	+	–	
(ge)rīm/ríme			
‘number’	+	+	Þurrh tale 7 rime off fowwerttīʒ. (11248)
‘story’, ‘text’	–	+	Þe ríme swa to fillenn. (<i>Dedication</i> 44)

To conclude, Orm's *ríme* must be formally derived from OE *(ge)rīm* 'number'.⁸ The sense of *ríme* was 'narration', 'story' (as used in quotation 1), or 'text' (quotation 2); the difference in sense between OE *(ge)rīm* and *ríme* can be accounted for by the range of senses of the related OE *arīman* 'to reckon', 'to enumerate', and 'to narrate'. Whether the 'narration', 'story' sense existed in Old English and is simply unattested, or whether it is a twelfth century innovation, cannot be determined on the basis of the available evidence.

Notes

1. Orm names himself and his book in the Dedication to his brother Walter, who is said to have commissioned the work. Both brothers are described as Augustinian canons. Orm does not state, however, when and where he wrote his text. All modern discussions of the date of the *Ormulum* must take as their point of departure the conclusions drawn in Malcolm Parkes' influential 1983 article. Parkes concluded on palaeographical grounds that the Latin cues added by 'hand C' (a collaborator of Orm's) at the beginning of each Gospel text in the manuscript (such must have been the intention; in actual practice, scribe C overlooked a few places) cannot have been written later than c. 1180. But those cues were added after Orm had composed, drafted, and copied out the text in five volumes (MS Junius 1 is a surviving fragment of the first volume), and furthermore gone through the text many times making numerous changes and corrections. All this process may well have gone on for 20, possibly even 25 years, which means that Orm may well have started working on his homilies some time around 1155–1160. For the localisation of the text to southern Lincolnshire the reader is referred to the discussion in Parkes 1983.

2. The word under discussion is written with an acute accent, *ríme*, to distinguish it from Orm's *rime* 'number'. Orm's own use of acute accents was never sufficiently consistent to justify any assumption that he himself tried to mark such a distinction in his spelling.

3. The textual passages from the *Ormulum* quoted in this article have been newly edited by the author from MS Junius 1. In this context I would like to thank Dr Bruce Barker-Benfield, Senior Assistant Librarian, Bodleian Library, for generously granting me access to MS Junius 1 in 1997 and 2002. The text quoted is

Orm's original text (before his later corrections). Contractions in the manuscript have been expanded and italicised. Erased characters in the text are shown in single angle brackets (e.g. <o>). Verse numbers, however, refer to the numbering in Holt 1878, since this is still the most recent complete edition that is generally available.

4. The *Oxford English Dictionary* similarly gives 'metre' as the sense of *rime* in the *Ormulum* (s.v. **rime**).

5. A homily in the *Ormulum* is typically based on the Gospel text for a particular mass (as specified in the Missal); in some cases, however, Orm uses two Gospel texts for one homily. It is the Gospel texts, as listed in his table of contents, that are numbered in the manuscript, not his homilies. This numbering will be retained in the present article.

6. A paragraph in the *Ormulum* is a text section whose beginning is marked in the manuscript by a *paragraphus* (in its basic form ¶, with variants incorporating more diagonal lines). Holt's 1878 edition does not print the *paragraphus* signs. It also ignores the division of the text into paragraphs. In Table 1, the paragraphs are numbered consecutively within Orm's Gospel text vii.

7. I know only one example of the use of the word *rime* in its 'story' sense outside the *Ormulum*. It occurs in *Cursor Mundi* (Morris 1876, ll. 14922f.) at the point where the narrative reaches the Passion of Christ, and the poet declares that the story (*vr rime*) must now be told more broadly (*rume*), and to that intent he will use a longer line (*langer bastune*):

Es resun þat wee vr rime rume,

And set fra nu langer bastune.

MS Cotton Vesp. A iii

And resun es we vr rime rume,

And set fra nu langer bastune.

MS Göttingen Theol. 107

for-þi in rime wille we roun

7 sette fra nu langer bastoun.

Fairfax MS 14, Bodl. Lib.

The scribe of Fairfax 14 apparently misunderstood the word and interpreted it as 'rhyme' (presumably) or (possibly) 'metre'. While he improved the rhyme, the passage as a whole became pointless, since the whole poem is written in rhyming couplets. There is no change in that respect at this point in the poem.

8. In view of Orm's Danelaw dialect, an Old Norse (Old Danish) etymology would, in principle, be possible for the word, but it is not plausible. The words *rim* 'rhyme', 'rhymed song' and *rima* 'rhyme', 'lay', and 'ballad' are attested in Icelandic only from the fourteenth century, and are best regarded as borrowings from French (Cleasby and Vigfusson 1957: 500). For a discussion of the French or Germanic origin of *rim* in the Scandinavian languages, see Hellquist (1948: 836).

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