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Leeds Studies in English

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Parallel Lines Through Time: Speech, Writing and the Confusing Case of *She*

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Abstract

The approach to Middle English dialectology that was developed in connection with the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* treats the written text, rather than its spoken correlate, as the primary object of study. Such an approach allows for the direct analysis of surviving data rather than the indirect approach demanded by the reconstruction of speech. For interpretative purposes, however, the interaction between the written and spoken modes cannot be ignored, and is of fundamental importance for the comparison of medieval and modern dialect materials.

This is illustrated by the history of certain regional variants of the pronoun 'she'. A geographical correspondence between the survival of some conservative written forms in the Middle English materials and a partially gender-free pronoun system in modern varieties is of particular interest, in that it appears to reflect a significant divergence between the medieval written and spoken systems. It is here suggested that the divergence has its basis in the different communicative strategies required by the two media, in particular the greater reliance of the written mode on such syntagmatic tracking devices as gender and case. The actual selection of written variants does not seem simply to mirror regional spoken usage, but rather to reflect social and textual factors. This example highlights the importance, in interpreting Middle English written forms, of an integrated approach that combines a corpus-based analysis with a close study of the individual texts.

1. *Setting the question: the spoken mode in the study of Middle English*

1.1. The study of past states of language differs in two important respects from the study of present-day varieties: the evidence survives in the written mode only, and is limited by chance survival. A central problem in historical linguistics has, accordingly, involved the interpretation of written data: how does one make assumptions about the spoken language in a period from which only written data survive? In the study of Middle English (henceforth ME), the centrality of this question has varied with changing approaches to the material. Traditional historical linguistics tended to treat the written form merely as (inadequate) evidence for the spoken language, the latter being the primary object of study. More recently, with the methodology developed in connection with the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (henceforth LALME) (McIntosh, Samuels and Benskin, 1986), the focus has shifted to the written language as an autonomous system, to be studied in its own right before any extrapolations to the spoken mode are made.

Following the LALME tradition, the question of the relationship between the spoken and written modes has in recent years remained relatively marginal in ME studies. The present paper relates to preliminary work for a new history of ME orthography and phonology, based on the LALME framework but necessarily facing different challenges.¹ Using as an example the late survival of traditional spellings such as *heo* for the feminine pronoun in the Southwest Midland area, it will suggest that these challenges can only be met by taking fully into account the interaction between the spoken and written systems.

1.2. As is well known, the historical circumstances during the early part of the ME period gave rise to a situation where English writing came to display linguistic variation to an extent usually only found in the spoken mode. This was a direct consequence of the temporary displacement, after the Norman Conquest, of English by Latin and French as the written language for most functions. As English gradually regained its status as a written language from the thirteenth century onwards, it lacked a centralized model, and the texts show considerable variation on all levels of language. It is not until the middle of the fifteenth century that the written dialects gradually begin to be replaced by a standard usage.

Accordingly, the surviving ME materials form a large corpus that reflects the natural variation and the changes in English during a very dynamic period. Traditionally, only a small fraction of the available material was held to be of value as

linguistic evidence: the great majority of texts, which survive as scribal copies only, tended to be dismissed as containing mixed or 'corrupt' language, while only authorial holographs or original documents could be expected to provide a 'pure' dialect. Views on the purity of dialects have since changed; it is now generally acknowledged that variation, not uniformity, is characteristic of natural language, and that this variation is of an orderly kind and can be analysed and explained.

While these insights mainly derive from studies of present-day states of language, a similar idea, applied to ME studies, was originally formulated by McIntosh (1963 [1989], 1974 [1989], 1975 [1989]): there is no reason to assume that ME scribes would typically produce a random mixture of dialectal forms. A scribe would generally translate a text written in a dialect different from his own, and would tend to replace alien forms but retain ones that belonged within his own repertoire. The inventory of forms in any ME text is thus not random but can be explained, and is often definable in regional terms. By detailed dialectal analysis, it is possible to determine whether a text contains a regionally consistent language; such texts can then be localized by fitting them in relation to each other. This insight formed the basis of the LALME methodology and made possible the construction of a framework of several hundreds of localized texts and, as a consequence, a very large amount of mapped-out data.

To achieve this, it was necessary to work with finer distinctions than those available by traditional methods. It was shown by McIntosh (1963 [1989], 1974 [1989], 1975 [1989]) that distinctions within the written mode, whether corresponding to spoken-language features or not, form patterns that are in themselves regionally significant. As the orthographic data can be studied directly, it has been possible to build up a much more sophisticated picture of regional variation in ME than would ever have been considered possible before.

The strict separation of the written and spoken modes, and the study of the former in isolation, have thus been (and continue to be) necessary methodological steps in building up a typology of ME scribal usage. However, as soon as our main interest is no longer purely typological – as soon as the data are to be interpreted or commented upon in some way – a consideration of the relationship between the spoken and written modes becomes unavoidable. As has been pointed out by Smith (1996: 6) in a similar context, history presupposes an attempt to make sense of things; if we wish to make sense of ME spelling it is impossible to ignore the spoken mode. In other words, we cannot approach ME as though 'its users were deaf and dumb' in the words of McIntosh (1956 [1989: 11]), as they were not, and the fact is in itself highly significant for the dynamics of the language.

2. The spoken and written systems in ME

2.1. As indicated in the previous section, speech and writing form separate systems, and variation in one does not necessarily relate to variation in the other. At the same time, both are manifestations of the same 'language' – the same lexis and grammar – and some correspondence must be assumed between them. It has frequently been pointed out that alphabetic spelling systems, when newly devised, ideally tend to reflect the phonemic distinctions of the spoken language. Because of the greater conservatism of the written medium, the correspondences between the two systems are likely to diminish with time, so that the spelling system, as in present-day English, may end up being far from an accurate reflection of the distinctions in speech. However, there are limits as to how far the written system can be distanced from the spoken one without becoming uneconomical, that is, accessible only to specialists with the time and motivation to learn it (cf Smith 1996: 15-17).

The spoken and written media, then, can be said to work autonomously in that choices within each are governed by different factors; at the same time, they interact constantly, each influencing the other. Figure 1 shows diagrammatically the relationship between speech and writing, using the basic model given by Samuels (1972: 6).² The two media are represented by parallel lines running along the time axis. The arrows between the lines show different kinds of interaction, including spelling pronunciations and adjustments in the written mode to changes in speech. Samuels (1972: 6) comments on the model as follows:

- (a) a majority of linguistic changes arise in the spoken language, and may or may not ultimately spread to the written medium; (b) certain (though fewer) changes originate in the written language, and may or may not spread to the spoken medium; and (c) the main influence of the written language is a conservative one – it acts as a brake, inhibiting the general acceptance of many changes that arise in the spoken language.

These points may be taken as axiomatic for most periods of the language. In general, we expect written language to be more conservative, and to reflect a somewhat earlier stage compared with the spoken mode. A certain level of fixity, or standardisation, may, moreover, be seen as a typical (if not universal) characteristic of written language: compared with the spoken mode, it is likely to be much more closely focused on a particular set of conventions, permitting less variation. This situation

could be depicted by drawing a section of the parallel lines, where the variable spoken mode is represented by a whirl, suggesting a centre of focus with fuzzy edges, and the fixed written mode by a dot (see Figure 2). Most changes take place within the spoken medium, and the influence of the written mode on the spoken is on the whole a restrictive one, limiting change.

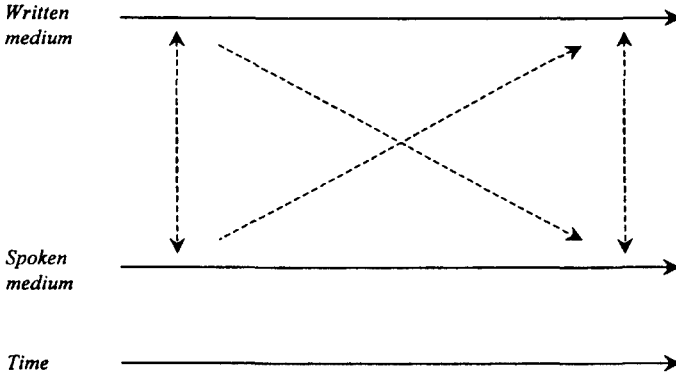


Figure 1. The interaction of the written and spoken media over time (after Samuels 1972:6)

However, such a model cannot be applied directly to the ME situation, which is characterized by a high degree of variability in the written mode. Smith has compared this variability to that of present-day spoken usage: '[m]edieval written standards seem to have worked in the same way as spoken Received Pronunciation does in Present-Day British English: they are a sort of mean towards which scribes tend' (Smith 1996: 67). In ME, then, we must assume a model where both the written and spoken modes are characterized by more or less loosely focused variation; such a situation could be depicted by drawing the sections of both lines in Figure 1 as whirls (see Figure 3). The interaction between the two modes will, then, to some extent differ from that described by Samuels. Rather than an asymmetrical relationship, where the influence of the spoken language tends to speed up change in the written mode, and the written mode acts as a brake on the spoken, we might assume two parallel variable systems in a more fluid and dynamic process of interaction.

2.2. To bring the preceding discussion into focus, the copying behaviour of the ME scribe should be considered. While it makes sense to say that, in ME, written language reflects regional (and other) variation, we can assume no *direct*

correspondence between the variants used by a scribe in writing and in speech. Firstly, much orthographic variation has no counterpart in speech (e.g. *myn* ~ *min* 'mine'). Secondly, even such variation that can be assumed to be connected with features of the spoken language, such as the occurrence in a scribe's written usage of variants such as *man* and *mon* for 'man', does not necessarily imply an equivalent variation in his speech, but simply that both forms were familiar and acceptable to him in writing. The scribe's choice in a given text of either form, or a particular mixture of both, will in the main depend on two factors: his general copying strategy and the linguistic usage of the exemplar.

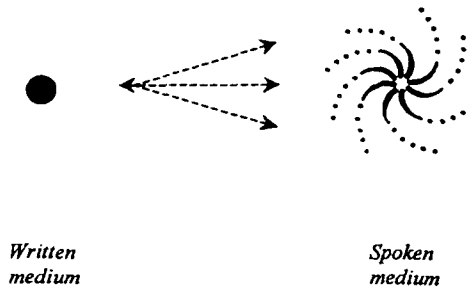


Figure 2. The written and spoken media: section of the arrows in Figure 1

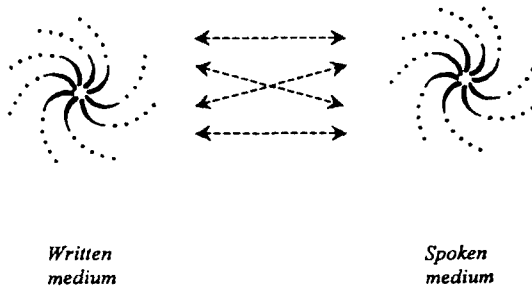


Figure 3. The written and spoken media: the ME situation

In a seminal article, Benskin and Laing (1981) outlined the copying strategies available to the ME scribe. The typology follows the original, much-quoted tripartite distinction made by McIntosh (1973 [1989: 92]), dividing the scribes into A) translators, B) *literatim* scribes and C) those who do something in between. The original premise of the LALME project was that a large number of scribes could be

treated as A types, so that their output could be used as direct evidence for a single regional usage.

In reality, however, it appears that most, perhaps all, ME texts reflect to a greater or lesser extent the scribal behaviour known as constrained selection, described by Benskin and Laing (1981: 72-75) as a variant of group C, but shading into both A and B. Constrained selection works within passive repertoires. A scribe translating a text written in a dialect different from his own will replace alien forms with familiar ones; however, when he encounters forms familiar and acceptable to him, whether part of his own active repertoire or not, he copies them as they stand. The extent of scribal passive repertoires, or constraints, must be assumed to vary immensely, from very wide to very narrow. At one extreme, a scribe with wide constraints, copying from a text in a familiar dialect would be likely to produce, in essentials, a literatim (or B type) copy, while a scribe with narrow constraints, copying from a very different dialect, would produce something very close to a thoroughgoing translation.

Scribal constraints cannot be assumed to reflect regional patterns only, even though these must have been of primary importance. The familiarity of a scribe with a given form may reflect geographical vicinity, but it may also reflect his previous copying experience. For example, a Midland scribe used to copying large quantities of northern texts will almost certainly have a raised tolerance of northern forms compared with scribes of the same area who lack such experience. Towards the end of the ME period, the increased mobility and circulation of texts may be assumed to have raised considerably the familiarity and tolerance of scribes towards 'alien' forms, especially in large urban centres, resulting in a process whereby originally strictly regional forms become generalised. Such forms were compared by Samuels (1981[1988: 91]) to 'the coins when two currencies are combined', that 'pass from writer to writer . . . and their regional significance is lost'; at least some of the many northern forms that came to form part of Standard English must have begun their spread as such loose change.

2.3. Even in Middle English, we cannot, then, assume a one-to-one relationship between written and spoken forms: to make inferences about the spoken mode, a more sophisticated approach is needed. Firstly, in order to observe and validate correspondences between patterns in the written material and postulated features of the spoken language, a reasonably large amount of data and contextual information is required. Secondly, the correspondences should, as far as possible, be related to data that allow direct inferences about spoken usage. Traditional sources for such information include the following:

- ❑ Rhyming and alliterative usage
- ❑ Scribal patterns (back spellings, confusion of graphs, etc.)
- ❑ Contemporary comments on pronunciation / usage
- ❑ Imitation of features of other dialects
- ❑ Texts written using the orthographic conventions of another language
- ❑ Comparison with modern spoken dialects

All these sources are potentially useful as bases for deductions about the spoken system, even if they each have their limitations. Apart from the obvious restriction of applying only to verse, the use of rhymes and alliteration as evidence for spoken usage involves two major problems. Firstly, it presupposes that medieval writers were consistent in their usage, and aimed at producing perfect rhymes or alliterative patterns. Secondly, the rhyming or alliterative usage of a text generally reflects the usage of its original author, and may be very different from the usage of the scribal text in which it appears (see Benskin and Laing 1981: 69-71).

Certain recurring patterns within a single scribal usage may be used to make inferences about the relationship between the written and spoken systems. Most notably, confusion between two forms (e.g. the occasional use of <a> for expected <e> and vice versa within a single text) generally suggests hyperadaptation of some kind, reflecting a merger in the scribe's dialect, or at least a considerable conflict between two systems. On the other hand, the use of exceptional or isolated spellings confined to a single lexeme or word class may simply illustrate that *chaque mot a son histoire*, but might also signal other factors and should not be accepted uncritically as evidence for a distinct pronunciation.

Contemporary comments on pronunciation are central to the study of Early Modern English, during which period they are plentiful; however, such comments are exceedingly rare in Middle English. More useful evidence is provided by various occasional biproducts of language contact: imitations of dialectal speech occur in several Middle English texts and can provide valuable data (see e.g. Smith 1995 for Chaucer's use of Northern dialect in the *Reeve's Tale*). Furthermore, there are some rare but important examples of Middle English spelt according to the conventions of other languages, notably Welsh (see Black 1998a). Texts such as these are of particular interest for the light they can throw upon such problematic phenomena as changes in vowel quality during the ME period.

Finally, comparison with modern regional speech is a potentially fruitful method of making deductions about past speech-patterns, including their relationship to the

written mode. Some of the possibilities involved in comparing the collected ME data with those derived from modern dialect surveys – notably the Survey of English Dialects (SED) – were discussed in the Introduction to LALME (I: 27); so far, however, relatively little work has been done along these lines. In the following, an attempt will be made to relate some of the SED data to the LALME material for the Southwest Midland area. Apart from the data in LALME itself, the discussion is based on a close study of 24 texts, dated to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and localized in the Herefordshire area.³

3. Diachronic comparison: the case of she

3.1. Because of its historical orientation, SED is particularly useful for diachronic comparison. There are, naturally, limitations as to the comparability of the data collected for the SED with that in LALME: the overall set of dialectally significant features has undergone great changes over time, and the two surveys aimed at collecting different types of material.⁴ The most fundamental difference, however, involves the medium: the SED records variation in the spoken mode, LALME in the written. Accordingly, even where data for the 'same' item have been collected for both surveys, they are not directly comparable: the comparison can only be indirect, dependent on our interpretation of the medieval written forms and, ultimately, on our theory of the relationship between the two media.

In some cases, correlations can be fairly straightforward. Figure 4 shows a well-known correspondence between ME spellings and twentieth-century pronunciations of the word 'man', as recorded by LALME and the SED respectively. The two patterns are, of course, not directly equivalent. While the SED pattern reflects an actual pronunciation of 'man' as something like [mɒn], the LALME pattern does not show how speakers in a particular area pronounced the word, but rather the area where scribes were in the habit of spelling 'man' with <o>. The two are clearly different matters; still, it would seem unreasonable to doubt that the distributions show a significant correspondence of some kind (see Wakelin 1982).

At first sight, a set of similar correspondences seems to emerge in the maps showing the medieval and modern distributions of forms of the feminine personal pronoun 'she' (Figure 5). However, on closer consideration these patterns turn out to be rather less straightforward to interpret than is the case with the *man/mon* example.

The distributions of the northwestern *ho/oo* type and the dominant *she* type may fairly safely be assumed to reflect some kind of continuity, even if the derivation of

these forms may be controversial. The southwestern patterns, on the other hand, present a problem. The distributions of ME *heo* and ModE *her* (or, more precisely, *er*) are remarkably similar, and a direct derivation of the latter from the former has been tentatively suggested (see Duncan 1972: 190 and references there cited). Less controversially, *her* is usually derived from the object form, making the correspondence on the map more or less coincidental. It will here be suggested that *heo* and (*h*)*er* are indeed connected, but that the connection is of a more complex kind than direct derivation, and one which demonstrates well the interaction between writing and speech.

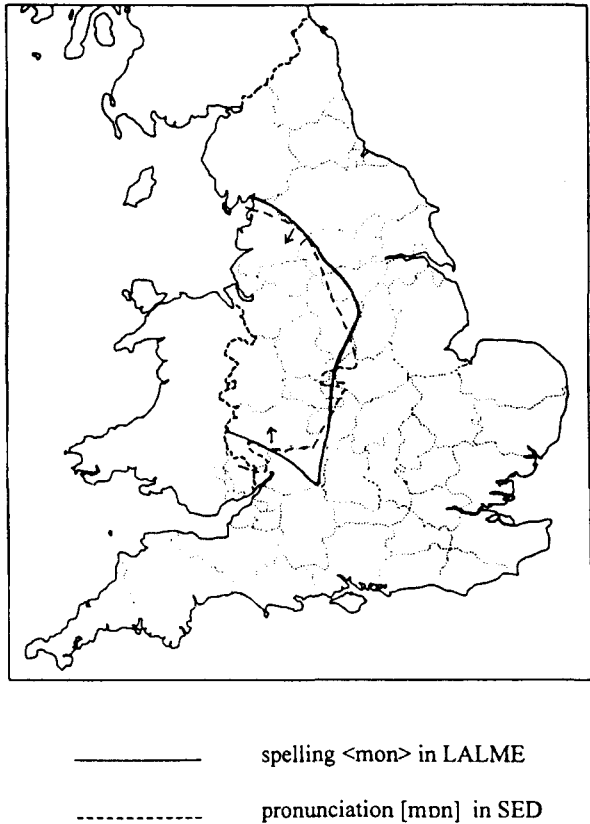
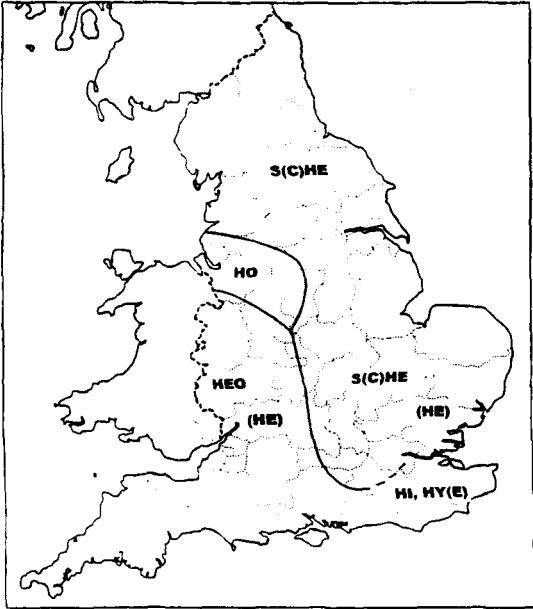


Figure 4. The distribution of MON type forms for 'man' in LALME and SED



LALME

SED (from Upton and Widdowson.1996)

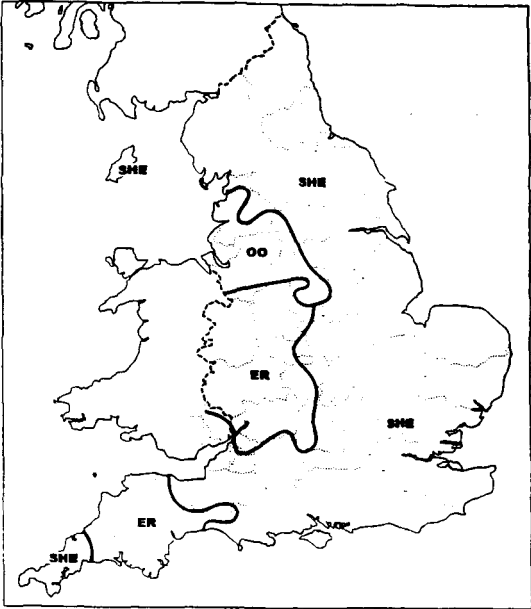


Figure 5. The distribution of forms for 'she' in LALME and SED respectively

3.2. The Old English third-person pronoun system distinguished between masculine *he* and feminine *heo*, the contrasting vowels of which may fairly safely be assumed to have been a long front mid vowel and some kind of mid-height diphthong (see Table 1). In the late OE period, *eo* appears to have been monophthongized to a rounded front mid vowel, usually symbolized /ø:/; as a result, the distinction between 'he' and 'she' was maintained by a contrast between an unrounded front mid vowel and a rounded one. In ME spelling, the rounded vowel is usually represented by <eo>, sometimes <oe>, <ue> or <u>. Subsequently, /ø:/ became unrounded and fell together with /e:/. The latter, systemic change seems to have begun in the eastern and northern dialects, and took place at markedly different rates in different areas.⁵ The regular result in the third-person pronoun system would have entailed the loss of formal gender distinction; in those (non-southern) dialects where OE *heo* was also the form for 'they', formal distinction of number would likewise be lost. The resulting system would have been markedly less functionally efficient; however, as is well known, the situation was remedied in most dialects by the adoption of new forms of the present-day 'she' and 'they' types, which gradually spread out from the northeastern Scandinavian-influenced areas.⁶

Period / material	Masculine	Feminine	Plural
Old English (OE)	he	heo	hie / heo
ME reflexes of OE forms	he	he	hi / he
ME – Present-day English (adjusted system)	he	she	they
LALME Herefordshire texts (14th and 15th centuries; main types only)	he	heo (11 texts) she (10 texts) he (2 texts)	hi, they

Table 1. Simplified summary of the development of the English third-person pronoun system

Parallel Lines Through Time: Speech, Writing and the Confusing Case of She

Text (LALME code, repository and manuscript, contents)	Attested forms of 'she'
7260 London, BL Royal 17 B xliii (<i>Mandeville's Travels</i>)	sche (schee)
7280 London, BL Harley 2281 (<i>Prick of Conscience</i>)	heo
7301 Cambridge, CCC 293, hand A (<i>Piers Plowman C-text</i>)	sche (hue) ((he she))
7302 Cambridge, CCC 293, hand B (<i>Piers Plowman C-text</i>)	hue 6 sche 4 he 3
7310 Oxford, Bodleian Laud Misc 553, hand A (<i>Agnus Castus</i>)	he (((hee)))
7320 London, BL Harley 2376 (<i>Piers Plowman C-text</i>)	he (((sche)))
7330 Oxford, Bodleian Digby 171 (<i>Piers Plowman C-text</i>)	scheo ((sche 3heo s3heo)) > heo ((he))
7340 Cambridge, CUL Dd.vi.29, fols 110-124v (medica)	sche 2
7350 Oxford, Bodleian Douce 78 (<i>Titus and Vespasian</i>)	sche ((schee))
7361 London, BL Sloane 5, hand A (medica)	she
7370 Oxford, Bodleian Rawlinson B 171 (<i>Prose Brut</i>)	she
7380 Princeton, Garrett 138 (<i>Prick of Conscience</i>)	scheo 2 heo 1 hue 1
7391 Oxford, Bodleian Tanner 201, hand A (<i>Mem. Credencium</i>)	hue 3 > heo 10+
7392 Oxford, Bodleian Tanner 201, hand B (<i>Mem. Credencium</i>)	heo 5
7410 London, BL Add. 46919 (William Herebert, poems)	hoe 3 a 1
7420 Cambridge, CUL Kk.1.12 (<i>Prose Brut</i>)	sche (((he schee she)))
7430 London, BL Cotton Cleopatra D ix, hand B (<i>Southern English Legendary: Gregorius</i>)	heo (((hij)))
7450 Cambridge, St John's College B.12 (<i>Confessio Amantis</i>)	heo (((sche he)))
7460 Cambridge, Selwyn College 108 L.1 (New Testament)	heo ((he))
7481 Oxford, Bodleian Rawlinson B 173, hand A (<i>Prose Brut</i>)	sche ((scho))
7500 London, BL Harley 201, hand A (<i>Robert of Gloucester</i>)	heo ((he)) (((ho)))
7510 Oxford, St John's College 6 (Lydgate, <i>Troy Book</i>)	sche ((scho)) (((heo)))
7520 Longleat, Marquess of Bath's MS 5, fols 1-35.	scheo (sche) ((heo))
9260 London, BL Harley 2253 (miscellany)	heo hue (he) (((ho hy)))

Table 2. The attested forms of 'she' in the LALME texts localized in Herefordshire

For the pronoun 'she', the Herefordshire material from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries shows a large number of individual forms (see Table 2), which may be grouped to form three main types: *heo*, *he* and *she*.⁷ The *heo* type (including the variant spellings *hoe*, *hue*) is most common, appearing as the dominant form in eleven of the 24 texts, with *she* (including *sche(e)*) a close second, being dominant in ten texts. *He* (including *hee*) is least common, occurring as a dominant form only in two texts; however, it is present as a minor variant in most of the texts.

It might be assumed that this pattern reflects, in a direct way, an ongoing change within the spoken mode, in accordance with the general historical development outlined above: the *heo* type gradually disappears, leaving a dysfunctional *he*, which is immediately replaced by the new *she* type. On closer inspection, however, this assumption involves several problems.

Firstly, although the *heo* forms are numerous, their orthographic form is exceptional in the Herefordshire material: *heo* is, in fact, the only lexical item where the spelling <eo> (or <oe>, <ue>) is regularly retained in texts dated after the mid-fourteenth century. On the basis of the evidence both of rhymes and back spellings, it seems fairly certain that the distinction between /ø:/ and /e:/ must in general have disappeared from all or most spoken systems at least by the second half of the fourteenth century.⁸ However, in the single form *heo*, <eo> spellings appear even as late as the mid-fifteenth century.

Because of the isolation of these forms, it should be asked whether it is plausible to assume a correspondence between them and any distinctive spoken-language feature. On the one hand, each word having its own history, *heo* might simply have retained a rounded vowel longer than other words. A connection between a heavy functional load and the late retention of rounding has been made by Sundby (1963: 141 ff.) and Kristensson (1977), with reference to the entire class of /ø:/ (i.e. the long variety of the rounded front mid vowel, as opposed to the short one). A comparatively late retention of the rounded vowel in *heo* would certainly make sense from a functional point of view. On the other hand, the period of time involved would seem exceedingly long for a phoneme to survive marginally, in a single word. Moreover, the late survival of /ø:/ in *heo* also seems unlikely in light of the numerous back spellings of <eo> for historical /e/ in many of the texts in which *heo* is dominant.

The similarly frequent *she* type also involves a problem with regard to correspondences with spoken features. Comparison with the traditional dialects of the present century gives little positive evidence for *she* ever having formed part of the spoken system. The dialects of the Southwest Midland area are, in fact, unique among traditional varieties of English in that they, at least in certain contexts, lack formal

gender distinction in the personal pronoun system; according to a local saying, 'everything in Herefordshire is he, except the tomcat who is she' (Leeds 1985: 22). The normal spoken-language form both for 'he' and 'she' is *er*, although the object form '*im* may be used for the masculine when required for clarity, as in '*im went out but er didn't*' (cf. Leeds 1985: 23).

The form *er* 'she' is usually derived from the object form *her*, and assumed to represent the general tendency for pronoun exchange found in the Southwest. The masculine pronoun has been explained differently: Ihalainen (1994: 216) derived it from a low-stress form that came to be identical to the feminine form from pronoun exchange: 'Hyper-rhoticity probably accounts for the merger . . . The feminine pronoun derives from *her* whereas the masculine pronoun comes from the weak form *a* [ə], which introduces an *r* in final position.' Ihalainen's derivation is supported by 'the fact that in some varieties of south-western English, most notably in Devon, the masculine enclitic is *a*, whereas the feminine pronoun is *er*.'

It is, however, doubtful whether pronoun exchange alone can account for the form of the feminine pronoun in the Southwest Midland area. It has been pointed out (Duncan 1972: 190) that the area of *er* 'she' is clearly different from the southwestern area of general pronoun exchange, and that (*h*)*er*, unlike all other pronoun-exchange forms – including (*h*)*im* – is used consistently as a subject, both in stressed and unstressed position. Moreover, it might be argued that the coincidental loss of a major formal grammatical distinction as the result of two pronouns undergoing entirely different developments is not an intrinsically attractive explanation.

A more plausible explanation might be to derive both *er* 'he' and *er* 'she' from ME *he*, used without gender distinction. The phonological development causes no problems: in modern dialects, 'aitch-dropping' is a general feature in the Southwest Midlands, as in most parts of England, and the speech especially of the Hereford and Worcester area is marked by extensive hyper-rhoticity, that is, the addition of (usually retroflex) *r* after final schwa. Apart from well-known examples such as *yeller*, *feller*, there are recorded present-day forms *mer* 'me' and *ther* 'thee', which form an exact parallel to *er* 'he' (Leeds 1985: 15).

3.3. The main problem with the suggested derivation of *er* 'he/she' from ME *he* 'he/she' is that the latter type of system occurs relatively infrequently in the ME written materials. If a direct correspondence is assumed between the written and the spoken forms, as in the case of *mon*, there are no very strong grounds for postulating a widespread system without formal gender distinction, from which the modern one could be derived. Even though the *heo* and *she* forms are in themselves problematic,

the fact remains that they are dominant in the surviving texts.

This dominance is, however, based on the assumption that all informants are of equal evidential value. Bearing in mind the linguistic character of ME scribal texts – the likelihood that they reflect constrained selection rather than active inventories – it would seem inevitable that some texts provide better evidence about a particular dialect than others. Accordingly, it may not be enough to consider the overall figures relating to the Herefordshire texts: in order to make sense of the distribution of forms, we should look more closely at the individual texts, taking into account their textual background and relative status as dialectal evidence.

A clear difference emerges, first of all, between texts with a northern or eastern dialectal background, and those with a more local textual history. Virtually all the texts showing dominant *she* can be shown to represent scribal translation from a northern or eastern dialect. These include: BL MS Royal 17 B xliii of *Mandeville's Travels*; three manuscripts of the *Prose Brut* (Bodleian Rawlinson B 171 and B 173; Cambridge University Library Kk.I.12); two medical manuscripts (Cambridge University Library Dd.VI.29 and BL Sloane 5); Oxford, St John's College MS 6 of Lydgate's *Troy Book*, and Longleat, Marquess of Bath's MS 5 of a Wycliffite sermon handbook. One very late manuscript, Bodleian Douce 78 (*Titus and Vespasian*) already shows the influence of standardisation.

In contrast, virtually all texts with a local, or at any rate southern/western, background show *heo* as the dominant form. These include: BL MS Harley 2281 of the 'southern version' of the *Prick of Conscience*, a text with a geographically restricted spread centred on the Southwest Midland area; Bodleian MS Tanner 201 of the *Memoriale Credentium*, a text surviving in dialectally closely related copies and probably originating in Gloucestershire; the poems of William Herebert (BL MS Add. 46919), an authorial holograph by a writer of Herefordshire origin, and BL MS Harley 201 of Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicle*. *Heo* is also the dominant form in Cambridge, St John's College MS B.12 (34) of Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, in which it has been shown to represent a fairly thorough scribal translation into Herefordshire usage.⁹ Finally, two of the three manuscripts of the C-text of *Piers Plowman* in the Herefordshire material (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 293 and Bodleian Digby 171) show a mixture of *she* and *heo* type forms; as has been shown by Samuels (1985 [1988]: 80), such mixtures go back to Langland's own usage.¹⁰

Only two texts in the material show *he* as the dominant form for 'she', even though *he* appears as a minority form in most of the texts. However, these two texts were on close analysis judged to provide exceptionally good evidence for the Herefordshire dialect. The text of the herbal *Agnus Castus* in Bodleian MS Laud Misc

553 shows a regular and strongly regional usage; as it probably reflects a date fairly early in the fourteenth century, its use of *he* rather than *heo* is all the more significant (see Black 1996: 94, 239). The other text, BL MS Harley 2376, is a version of the C-text of *Piers Plowman*, which shows an unusually thorough translation, involving all levels of language, into the scribe's own usage. In comparison with other manuscripts of *Piers Plowman*, this usage would, moreover, appear to correspond relatively closely to a spoken system (see Black 1998b and forthcoming).

It would, then, appear that the *she* type is mainly restricted to scribal translations of northern and eastern texts, and may simply have belonged to the passive repertoires of Herefordshire scribes, without forming part of spoken usage. The question remains, however, how the dominance of the *heo* type forms should be interpreted. It was already noted in the previous section that the possibility that the *heo* forms reflect an actual survival of /ø:/ seems very unlikely: why, then, should <eo> be retained in *heo* long after its use had been discontinued elsewhere?

The most reasonable explanation, it would seem, has to do with the different pragmatic requirements of the written and spoken media. Compared to speech, writing requires a much higher degree of explicitness, due to the lack of immediate speaker interaction: accordingly, certain syntagmatic tracking devices, such as the distinction of gender and number, are inherently of greater functional importance in the written mode than in the spoken. The situation in modern Finnish might be used as an example. The Finnish system of personal pronouns does not distinguish gender: *hän* corresponds to both 'he' and 'she'. This causes few communicative problems in the spoken mode, as the immediate context makes it clear (if necessary) whether 'he' or 'she' is meant, and any misunderstandings can be corrected without delay.¹¹ Problems do, however, arise in the written mode. This is especially true of the translation of texts from other languages into Finnish, where various, sometimes cumbersome, ways of circumlocution are required; as a reaction to this, there have been occasional half-serious calls for the introduction of gender-specific orthographic forms.

While such linguistic engineering is unlikely to take place, the point serves to illustrate the difference between the situation in Finnish, on the one hand, and the situation facing a Southwest Midland scribe in the late ME period, on the other. For the latter, unlike for present-day writers of Finnish, gender-specific written forms were readily available for selection. By the fourteenth century, the written form *she* would have been familiar to any scribe or reader of northern or eastern texts, and would naturally come to be copied by scribes translating out of these dialects, as part of their passive repertoire. During the late ME period, with a steady increase in the production and circulation of texts, the use of *she* in writing could hardly have failed to spread.

Even in areas where a *she* type pronoun did not belong to the spoken system, its use in writing would have had two important communicative advantages: *she* was already widely used and understood, as well as being gender-specific. Accordingly, it may be assumed that written forms of the *she* type eventually came to spread in active use as well as in passive repertoires, becoming part of the 'loose change' effect that preceded standardisation (cf. 2.2 above).

Before this took place, however, the most obvious solution was simply to retain the traditional spelling *heo*. Throughout the ME period, the Southwest Midland area seems to show a comparatively large-scale production of texts and, as a result, a continuous and somewhat conservative spelling tradition. The loss of distinction between /e:/ and /ø:/ during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had, first of all, led to the confusion of the graphs <e> and <eo> and, eventually, to the latter being discarded in most contexts. However, as the distinction between *he* and *heo* served a very useful function, retaining the traditional spelling for the feminine pronoun made very good sense. As <e> and <eo> had simply become variant spellings for a single sound, *heo* (quite apart from being the traditional form) would have had the advantage over *she* in its closer correspondence to the spoken form. Eventually, however, the wide geographical currency of *she* had to weigh in the favour of the latter.

Accordingly, in the fifteenth century, the spelling <heo> appears to have been purely a feature of the written language, and there is thus no need to postulate a prolonged survival of the phoneme /ø:/ in a single word. This explanation also makes sense of the correspondence between the medieval and modern patterns in Figure 5. The modern form *er* is not directly derived from late ME *heo*; instead, the latter is simply an orthographic form used in areas where the spoken system was already characterized by the lack of formal gender distinction still typical of the traditional Herefordshire dialect.

4. Conclusions

The example of the forms of 'she' in the late ME materials illustrates at least three important points about the relationship between the written and spoken media in ME. The first concerns the degree of correspondence between the two systems. As shown above, the medieval Herefordshire material contains three main types of forms for 'she', as well as various minor forms. It appears that only one type may have been current in the spoken mode, and that this one corresponds to the least common of the written types. Accordingly, in this particular case the written and spoken media

function as fairly independent systems.

Secondly, the number of distinct types appears to be higher in writing than in speech. This relates to the model shown in Figure 3: both the written and spoken modes are variable, and the influence of the former on the latter is not necessarily always conservative. A ME scribe would simply have one repertoire of spoken variants and another of written ones; while the two are connected, the actual choices will reflect different factors, such as different communicative needs.

The third point has been made numerous times before, but may still be worth stating. Even if we had, in the study of ME, the luxury of unlimited materials, the complexity of the material means that the specific character of each individual text cannot be ignored. Unlike modern dialectologists, we cannot choose our informants, nor can we go back to ask them additional questions when the surviving data is insufficient. Every text has, therefore, to be analysed carefully before its status as evidence can be evaluated: simply looking at overall figures means that we are likely to miss the significant patterns. Accordingly, the methods of, for example, corpus linguistics cannot be directly transferred onto the ME material with the expectation that the results will make immediate sense. What we can do, instead, is to take the informants on their own terms, and with some patience and collaboration we might be able to make the dead speak.

NOTES

¹ This work is planned to form the first stage of the recently launched Middle English Grammar Project, the eventual aim of which is to produce comprehensive accounts of Middle English on all levels of language. A survey of ME orthography is now under way, the principal co-workers being Drs Jeremy Smith and Simon Horobin (University of Glasgow) and the present writer (Stavanger College).

² Cf also Smith (1996: 17).

³ These texts formed the basic material in Black (1996), and include all scribal texts localized in Herefordshire in LALME, with the exception of four texts (LALME Linguistic Profiles 7290, 7363, parts of 7400 and 7480), which were deemed unsuitable as evidence for Herefordshire usage.

⁴ See LALME, I: 27. For example, dialect vocabulary formed a major part of the collected SED data, while lexical data are a very minor element in LALME.

⁵ According to Jordan (1968: 63, 65, 99), the unrounding began in the north and east

already in the OE period, while the rounded vowel remained in the Southwest Midland area until the fourteenth, or even fifteenth century; such a late dating does not, however, agree with the findings of more recent studies (Sundby 1963; Kristensson 1987). Jordan's dating seems to be based on the assumption that *eo* spellings always imply a rounded vowel, and his fifteenth-century dating may in part simply reflect the frequent occurrence of the written form *heo* 'she'.

⁶ The original development of the *she* type falls outside the present argument; for a useful discussion of the traditional theories, see Duncan (1972).

⁷ A fourth type, *s(c)heo*, is relatively minor in the material, and probably represents simply a 'derived variant' or orthographic permutation of the *she* type, the graphs <e> and <eo> having become functionally equivalent, at least in most contexts (for the concept of derived variants, see Benskin and Laing 1981: 77). It is significant that the two texts in which it occurs frequently (LPs 7330 and 7520) are ones that show widespread, presumably hyperadaptive, use of <eo> for expected *e*; for example, the regular form of the definite article in LP 7520 is *þeo*. The forms *a*, *ho*, *hy*, *hi(j)* occur as very minor variants only, and are also not included in the discussion; of these, the *ho* and *hy/hi(j)* types are relict forms that reflect a (north)western and southeastern textual background respectively.

⁸ The only texts in the Herefordshire material in which <eo> appears more than sporadically in words other than *heo* are BL MSS Add. 46919 and Harley 2253, both from the first half of the fourteenth century, and (with less frequent <eo>) Bodleian MS Digby 171 and Longleat, Marquess of Bath's MS 5, both from the late fourteenth century. Moreover, with the exception of Harley 2253, all these texts contain numerous examples of confusion between <eo> (or the equivalent digraph) and <e>, suggesting that the distinction was no longer a living feature in the dialect of the scribe. Harley 2253 seems to have no back spellings of <eo> (or equivalent) for <e>, but contains a large proportion of <e> for historical *eo*, including the frequent occurrence of *he* 'she'.

⁹ See Smith (1985: 91 ff.) and Okumura (1991, *passim*). The text seems to be a composite one, of which the first part is copied from a Southwest Midland exemplar; apart from occasional Gowerian relicts, this part of the text shows a strongly coloured northeastern Herefordshire usage. Gower himself seems to have used the *she* type, with a possible variant <scheo> (Smith 1985: 83, note 21).

¹⁰ Samuels (1985 [1988]: 80) holds that 'Langland was simply availing himself of two of the variants that existed in his own dialect, and not, as Chambers thought, combining his own provincial *heo* with a *she*-form that he learned in London'. There is, however, no particular need to assume that the *she* type formed part of Langland's spoken usage: it is demanded by the alliteration less frequently than *heo* (or *he*), and his command of a wide range of dialectal forms, used for the purposes of alliteration, is well known (see

Kane 1981; cf also Black 1998b and forthcoming).

¹¹ It may be noted that casual spoken styles take the syncretism still further, with the single form *se* – used for animates and inanimates alike – covering the full range (apart from impersonal use) of the English pronouns *he*, *she* and *it*.

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