A Note on Variant Spellings of 'AWAY' in the Auchinleck Manuscript and the Provenance of the Middle English Sir Orfeo

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This is an attempt to reconsider the provenance of the Middle English romance Sir Orfeo with special reference to the forms of the variant spellings of the word 'away'. ME Sir Orfeo was probably written around 1300, and belongs to the genre known as the Breton Lay. The Middle English versions of the Sir Orfeo are now preserved in three manuscripts: National Library of Scotland, Advocates' MS 19.2.1, British Library, Harley MS 3810, and Oxford, MS Ashmole 61.¹ In the present article, we deal with the first manuscript which is also known as the Auchinleck Manuscript, copied in the early fourteenth century (c1330) in London, and which is considered as one of the first manuscripts written for commercial purposes. It contains 44 works, including Sir Orfeo, in 331 folios, and was copied by six scribes.² Scribe 1 is responsible for copying most of the manuscript (31 works), and Sir Orfeo was copied by this scribe.³ This

¹ Auchinleck Orfeo is written in ff. 300r-303r, and the first 30-40 lines are now missing. The images and the whole data of the texts in the Auchinleck Manuscript are now available online: see http://auchinleck.nls.uk/
² The dialects of the six scribes are adjudged by Alison Wiggins (2004) as follows: Scribe 1 Middlesex, Scribes 2&6 Gloucestershire or border of Warwickshire, Scribe 3 London, scribe 4 ?, Scribe 5 Essex. The Unidentified language of Scribe 4 is due to the scarcity of the quantity he copied. For a detailed discussion on the works of the scribes, see A. Wiggins, 2004: 10-26.
³ According to Wiggins (2004), Scribe 6 may also have been Scribe 1.
investigation makes reference to the variant forms of the word ‘away’, i.e. 
*ow* *y* and other forms (because of the evidential weight given to this 
variation by scholarship of this manuscript). Notably in his edition of *Sir 
Orfeo*, A. J. Bliss (1966) refers to the form *ow* *y* as the south-eastern, more 
specifically Kentish dialect associated with an OE variant form *wig* for OE 
*weg*.4 even though he admits the paucity of the evidence and that another 
possible localisation of the word in the Lichfield area was proposed by E. G. 
Stanley.5 C. J. E. Ball (1960) thinks, against Bliss’ opinion, that the form 
*ow* *y* is a weak stressed form and that, most moderately, ‘this form should 
not be cited as a reason for denying that the original dialect of *Sir Orfeo 
was south-west Midland.’6 As this issue should contain not only the single 
work orientated problem, but also the matter of scribal transmission, the 
whole manuscript is dealt with in order to clarify the origin of the form of 
*ow* *y* and the provenance of *Sir Orfeo*.

I. ‘Away’ in Auchenleck Manuscript
There are five variant spellings for the word ‘away’ in MS Auchenleck: 
*away*, *awai*, *oway*, *owai*, and *owy*. Among them, *oway* is the major variant 
which appears in many of the works including *Guy of Warwick, Sir Orfeo*, 
*Lay le Freine*, etc. This is due to the fact that these works are copied by 
Scribe 1 whose ordinary spelling for the word ‘away’ must have been 
*oway*. The form *away* is found 8 times in total (the number in parenthesis 
denotes the frequency of the variant in question: *Arthur & Merlin* (3x), 
*Reinbroun* (3x), *Sir Beues* (1x), and *Sir Tristrum* (1x)). The form *awai* 

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6 See Ball, 1960: 53.
is rather more frequent than *away* with <y> spelling, which appears 29 times in four pieces (*Seven Sages of Rome* (16x), *Sir Beues* (6x), *Sir Degare* (5x), and *Flor & Blanche* (2x)). *Owai* is found 5 times in two works (*Guy of Warwick* (4x), *Seven Sages of Rome* (1x)). Finally, the variant in question *owy* is found in total six times in three works (*Sir Orfeo* (3x), *Guy of Warwick* (2x), *Lay le Freine* (1x)).

All of the occurrences of ME *owy* were written by Scribe 1, and are used in the rhyme positions. Comparing the frequency between *owy* and other variants, it is quite certain that the variant *owy* was particularly used for the purpose of the rhyme scheme. In *Sir Orfeo*, three rhymes are found as *cri : owy* (l. 95), *owy : fairy* (l. 491; l. 561). The reflex of OF *i* (of *cri*) rhymes on OE *eð* (of *owy*), attesting ME /iː/. Other examples in the same manuscript such as *owy ; cri* (l. 7539) and *Gij : owy* (8992) are found in *Guy of Warwick*, and *aspie : owy* (l. 302) in *Lay le Freyne*. The proper noun ‘Guy’ has its variant form *Gij* to make it rhyme with *owy*, and to indicate that the pronunciation is ME /iː/. The Anglo-Norman word *aspie* (< AN *espi(i)er*) rhymes with *owy*, attesting ME /iː/. There is an interesting instance that *Guy of Warwick* (couplet version), copied also by the scribe 1, has a rhyme that goes ‘Pe douke Otus is now wel *sori / For Gij is schaped so oway* (5469-70).’ Here it is noteworthy that *oway* consists the rhyme with *sori* (< OE *sārīg*), attesting ME /iː/, where, therefore, the spelling *oway* is scribal.

II. *(A)way* in Old English Period

In Old English period no forms equivalent to ME *owy* as compound *on-weg, a-weg* are known to us, but only the forms such as *way* and *wig*. The

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main reason why the form *owy* so far has been considered to be a Kentish dialectal form, depends on the fact that it often appears as the form *wig* for a translation of the Latin word *via* (or derivative forms such as *wiferend*, *wilung*) in the *Kentish Glosses*. This form can be phonologically explicable for the dialect. One question, however, that arises is whether this form is peculiar only to Kentish dialect? The form *wig(e)* is found in at least three Old English manuscripts: the aforesaid *Kentish Glosses*, the *Vespasian Psalter*, and the *Bede Glosses*. The *Vespasian Psalter* is assignable to Mercian dialect, in which the word in question appears as *wig* for the translation of Latin *viam* (sg. acc.). Ball refers to the spelling *<i>* in *wig*, which was affected by the original spelling of the Latin word *viam*, and, as the form *weg* is more frequent in the manuscript, therefore that the form *wig* was an error by the scribe. Nevertheless, there still remains the problem between the scribe and the exemplar, though Ball excluded the possibility of Mercian dialect. As for the form *wigas* which appears in the *Bede Glosses* (Northumbrian dialect), Ball ousted the possibility of Northumbrian dialect without any good reason. What Ball tried to suggest is that it is the Kentish dialect that remains after the elimination of both Mercian and Northumbrian dialects of the variant form.

III. ‘(A)way’ in Early Middle English Period

It is true that, as Ball reports, there is no instance of *owy* in Kentish dialect in early Middle English period. In other words, it means that the descendant of OE *wig* had already been lost in Kentish dialect in ME period, which is also confirmed by investigation based on the data from *An Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English*. The variants for ‘away’ in Kentish dialect appear in the three localised texts. In the text of the *Ayenbite of Dan Michel* (British Library, MS Arundel 57) we have three
forms which are *a-way, away*, and *awaye*. The *Poema Morale* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Digby 4) shows *wei* and *weges*. Lastly, the *Kentish Sermon* which is preserved in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud. Misc. 471, gives a single instance of *weye*. It is obvious that, after all, none of these Kentish texts had ME *owy*.

Three early Middle English texts that have ME *owy* are extant. Two of them have already been mentioned by Ball, which are respectively Oxford, Jesus College MS 29 and London British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A ix. In the former manuscript, ‘away’ is found in the form of *awy*, rhyming with *by*. The latter text is the *Brut* by Laȝamon where the variant form is *awi*. The third material is from Oxford Bodleian Library, MS Digby 86 which contains the same poem that appears in the Jesus College manuscript. It is noteworthy that *awy* again rhymes with *by* as in the Jesus manuscript. Among the three instances, two of them are used for the sake of rhyme, which attests ME /iː/. The fact that form *awi* in the *Brut* is kept unchanged by the correctors leads us to think that the spelling itself is reliable, but, considering the normal form for ‘away’ in Laȝamon’s *Brut* are either *awai* or *aweai*, it may have been a mere scribal error.⁸

IV. Conclusion

The following observations are deduced from the integrated evidence found in the extant materials in the Auchinleck manuscript, and from those of Old and Middle English periods. The form *wig* in Old Kentish dialect does not exist in early Middle English Kentish dialect, where only

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⁸ Laȝmon’s *Brut* (Cotton Caligula MS) has the rhyme *mewie : awaie*, which attests the pronunciation ME /ei/.
forms such as *away, awey*, etc. can be found. The fact should be noted that the dialect of manuscripts in which remnants of OE *wig*, i.e. *awi* and *away* appear in early Middle English period, is confined to the south-west Midland area.\(^9\) The form in question is used exclusively in the rhyme positions where, though the form may have derived from the weak form, normally strong forms are expected. As a rhyme in the *Guy of Warwick* (*sori : way*) attests ME /i:/, it is suggested that the spelling in the manuscript was originally intended as *owy*/away. Therefore, the form we have dealt with cannot be considered as the relic of the Old Kentish dialect nor London dialect, but, in fact, it is accordingly the genuine form of the south-west Midland dialects (partly deduced from the internal evidence in the Auchinleck Manuscript) which strongly supports the provenance of ME *Sir Orfeo* to be the south-west Midland dialect area.

Bibliography

Primary Sources


\(^9\) Laing, *Catalogue of Sources for a Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English* (Suffolk, 1993) and *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (hereafter *LALME*, 1986) identified the dialect of the three manuscripts. Oxford, Jesus College MS 29 is assigned to South-East Herefordshire in *LALME* as LP 7440. It may fit in North West Gloucestershire. The language of London, British Library, MS Cotton Caligula A ix (*Laȝamon*) is north Worcestershire. Admitting that there are some mixture of dialects, the language of Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Digby 86 can be assigned to somewhere in Worcestershire or Gloucestershire.
University Press.


Secondary Works


Dictionaries


Atlases and Other Sources

