THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT

EPISODE 87:
THE FIRST SPELLING REFORMERS

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 87: The First Spelling Reformers. In this episode, we're going to look at the alphabet during the period of early Middle English. We're also going to continue our look at the Ormulum – a 12th century text that marked a revival of English writing. As we saw last time, the text shows some important changes in the language – as English evolved from Old English into Middle English. Those changes included lots of new words – especially Norse words. But it also included several notable changes in English spelling. Some of those changes are documented for the first time in the Ormulum. Other changes appear a short time later. So this time, we'll look at those spelling reforms – and we'll see how many of our modern spelling conventions evolved during this period.

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Now this time, we're going to explore the changing alphabet during the time of Middle English. The Anglo-Saxons had adopted the Latin alphabet and made some changes to it to make it work for Old English. But after the Norman Conquest, the French-educated scribes didn't like what they saw in English documents. They looked at those documents and saw funny-looking letters – and they saw strange spellings for certain common sounds. So those scribes tried to 'fix' English spelling – and of course, I'm putting the word 'fix' in quotes. What they were really doing was imposing traditional French spelling rules on English.

We see the first evidence of these changes in the final entries of the Peterborough Chronicle – composed in the mid-1150s. And we see lots more of these changes in the Ormulum – probably composed in the 1180s. These are two of the earliest Middle English texts, and they both show several new spellings. But the Ormulum is notable because it is the first document to clearly distinguish the pronunciation of long vowels and short vowels. Orm made this distinction by doubling the consonant after a short vowel. This was a completely new innovation – and Orm was very proud of it. He even directed any scribes who copied his text to make sure that they maintained his spellings. He wanted his text to be read out loud to English-speaking congregations. And he wanted to wanted to make sure that the words were pronounced correctly. So his text is very helpful in showing how words were actually pronounced in the late 1100s – at least in the East Midlands of England.

In addition to his spelling innovations related to vowels, Orm is also the first scribe to use some common spelling conventions for certain consonant sounds. Most of these consonant changes were traditional spellings used in Latin and French documents. So they weren't really unique to Orm. But Orm is the first known English writer to use many of these innovations.

Now I had intended to cover all of these changes in this episode. But there were so many changes that I won't have time to cover all of them here.

So this time, I'm going to focus on the new spellings related to consonant sounds. And next time, I'll try to tackle the changes associated with the vowels. After these next couple of episodes, we'll have a much better idea why English words are spelled they way they are.

Let me begin by noting that I looked at the development of the Old English alphabet back in Episodes 34 through 36. So if you're really interested in this topic, I would recommend that you go back and listen to those episodes as well. And if you want an even more comprehensive version of the story, I recommend that you check out the History of the Alphabet audiobook that I did several years ago. The audiobook traces the story all the way back to the very first version of the alphabet. But this time, I'm only going to focus on the changes to the alphabet during the period of early Middle English. And as we'll see, most of those changes are still with us today.

Now back in those earlier episodes, I traced some sound changes that took place in early Old English. And I explained how the early Anglo-Saxon scribes adapted the Latin alphabet to those sounds. That required them to use some existing letters in new ways, and it also led them adopt some new letters that weren't even part of the Latin alphabet.

So I thought a good place to start was with those new letters used by the Anglo-Saxon scribes. Those are the letters known as thorn, eth, wynn and ash. They weren't used in Latin and French, and the French-educated scribes apparently hated them because they immediately replaced them with letters from the Latin alphabet. A few of those Anglo-Saxon letters lingered on for a few more centuries, but they gradually disappeared by the end of the Middle English period.

So let's start with those old Anglo-Saxon letters called thorn and eth. These were the two letters used for the 'th' sound. And actually, I should say 'sounds' – because there are actually two different 'th' sounds. There is the voiced sound found in words like ***the*** and ***this***, and the voiceless version found in words like ***thank*** and ***thing***. And we can hear that difference if we try to switch those sounds – if we try to pronounce 'thIS' as 'THiss' or 'THank' as 'thANK.'

Anyway, it appears that Old English had BOTH of these 'th' sounds, just like we do today. But Latin didn't have either one. So Latin didn't have a specific letter for this sound. That meant that the Anglo-Saxons had to figure out a way to spell those sounds in Old English. So they came up with two solutions, and they existed sise-by-side in Old English.

One option was a runic letter called thorn (þ). This letter resembles a letter P with the loop in the middle of the stem rather than at the top. The other option was called eth (ð). It was probably derived from an Irish version of the letter D. It looks like a lower case 'd' with a curved stem – and the stem has a line through it.

So both of those letters were in common use prior to the Norman Conquest. But then the Normans arrived, and the French-educated scribes didn't like these funny-looking letters, so they decided to replace them with something more familiar. Their solution was our modern letter combination – 'TH.' And one of the first uses of this letter combination in English can be found in the Peterborough Chronicle. In fact, I mentioned this back when we went through the Chronicle. In the entry for the year 1132, the scribe wrote, "Was it noht suithe lang, " which meant "Was it not very long." The

word ***suithe*** meant 'very.' It had normally been spelled with a thorn or eth at the end, but the Peterborough scribe spelled it S-U-I-T-H-E. And the 'TH' spelling entered English.

Now I should note that the 'TH' letter combination was not a brand new innovation. It had actually been around for a long time in Latin. That was because the Romans had borrowed a lot of Greek words with that sound. And the Greeks had a specific letter for the sound called theta. But since Latin didn't have that sound – or a letter for that sound – they just used the 'TH' letter combination to represent that sound in those words borrowed from Greek. And now that spelling was applied to English as well.

With the use of the 'TH' letter combination, there was no longer a need for those old Anglo-Saxon letters – thorn and eth. So those old letters gradually disappeared. Eth actually disappeared VERY quickly. It disappeared within a century. It was gone by the late 1200s. Thorn hung around a bit longer, but it was ultimately a victim of the printing press which was invented near the end of the Middle English period. Most of those new presses were constructed on the continent and used continental letters. And they didn't have a thorn. So that forced the use of 'TH,' and thorn finally disappeared from English.

You might remember from an earlier episode, that the printers did try to come up with a way to print the thorn in English documents. Since they didn't have a specific thorn letter, they sometimes used the letter Y because the shape of their Y resembled a thorn. And that technique gave us the spelling of 'Y-E' for ***the*** – as in 'Ye Olde Tea Shoppe.' But the first word was always pronounced /the/ – not /ye/. The letter Y was just used as a substitute for the thorn. Eventually that practice stopped because of the confusion it created. And the 'TH' letter combination became the standard spelling for the 'th' sounds in English.

I noted earlier that there are actually two distinct 'th' sounds in English – a voiced version and a voiceless version. And you may be wondering why Modern English does not distinguish these two sounds the way Modern Icelandic does. Well, the answer appears to be because the Norman scribes didn't have either sound in French. So they either didn't notice the difference or didn't fell any need to distinguish the two sounds.

So that takes care of two of those Anglo-Saxon letters – thorn and eth. What about the other two – called ash and wynn? Well, the letter called 'ash' was actually a letter for a vowel sound. It represented the/æ/ sound in a word like ***hat*** or ***bat***. Since it was a vowel letter, I'll deal with it in the next episode.

So that leaves the final Anglo-Saxon letter called 'wynn.' This letter represented the 'w' sound. Now again, the Latin alphabet didn't have a specific letter for the 'w' sound when the Anglo-Saxons borrowed the alphabet. The letter W didn't exist at that time. So the Anglo-Saxons turned to the runes and borrowed the runic letter for that sound called 'wynn.' The letter actually resembles the letter P with a much bigger loop. And that largely solved the problem of how to represent the /w/ sound in Old English in a clear and consistent way.

Now again, when the Norman scribes arrived, they didn't like that funny looking Anglo-Saxon letter. So they got rid of it and imposed a new spelling which was an early version of our modern letter W. But in order to understand what happened here, we have to consider what the French scribes had to work with because the 'w' sound was complicated in Latin and French.

Earlier, I said that the Latin alphabet didn't have a specific letter for the 'w' sound, but that sound did exist in early Latin. So how did they spell it? Well, they used the letter U. The U represented both the vowel sound /oo/ – and this 'w' sound. And in fact, those two sounds are so closely related that linguists actually classify the 'w' sound as a semi-vowel. When the vowel sound /oo/ appears before another vowel, it tends to shift to the 'w' sound. A good example of this is the name ***Louis*** (/loo-ee/) in French. The spelling L-O-U-I-S is its original spelling, and it reflects the original pronunciation. But notice that we tend to pronounce it as /loo-wis/ – or /loo-wee/ in French. That 'w' sound is a natural development. And in fact, the spelling of the name was later Anglicized to L-E-W-I-S.

The important point here is that the Romans and the French tended to use the letter U for the /w/ sound because the /w/ sound was seen as a variation of the U sound. And there really wasn't much confusion, because context made it clear. When the letter U appeared before a consonant, it was usually pronounced as a vowel - /oo/. But when the letter U appeared before another vowel – like in ***Louis*** (/loo-wee/) – it was usually pronounced with that 'w' sound.

So the French-trained scribes tended to use the letter U for this /w/ sound. But they also had another technique that was really a variation of the U. As I noted, when a U appeared before another vowel, it typically had the 'w' sound. I have given the example of ***Louis*** (/loo-wee/), but another good example is the Latin word ***equus***, which is a term for a class of animals including horses and zebras. It is spelled E-Q-U-U-S, but the first U is often pronounced as a /w/ – or a 'w' sound – so it is /ek-woos/.

Well this idea of putting two U's together in this manner became popular in Late Latin and early French. If you really wanted to make it clear that the sound you were writing was a /w/ sound and not an /oo/ sound, then you could just write two U's back-to-back. So French-trained scribes used both techniques – a single U before another vowel or the back-to-back U's if they really wanted to make it clear.

And after the Normans conquered England, these two techniques replaced the Old English letter for the 'w' sound called 'wynn.' In fact, this happened very quickly. In an earlier episode, we saw that the Peterborough scribe was already using back-to-back U's in place of the wynn in the mid-1100s. These back-to-back U's became so popular that they were soon compressed into a single letter – known as the double U. This was already starting to happen in the 1100s and 1200s. And once those two U's were physically attached to each other, that actually created a brand new letter for the /w/ sound. And this process also gave us the name of the letter – the 'double U.'

So the Old English letters thorn and eth were replaced with a new 'TH' letter combination. And the Old English letter wynn was replaced with a U or UU letter combination, which soon evolved into our modern letter W.

Now I mentioned that the letters U and W are closely related. The sounds they represent are closely related, and in fact the letter W evolved out of the letter U as I just described. But there is another letter that is closely-related to U and W, and you can probably guess which one it is. It is the one that comes in between those two letters in the modern alphabet. Of course, it's the letter V. And the letter V is also important to this part of the story.

Both Old English and Old French had the 'v' sound – /v/. But each language had a different letter for that sound. And neither of them used the letter V because the V didn't exist yet as a distinct letter.

So let's explore this development. The 'v' sound didn't exist in Classical Latin, and that's why there was no specific letter for that sound in the Latin alphabet. But that sound started to appear in the language during the Late Latin period as the original language fractured into the Romance languages – including French. The sound appeared when the Latin 'w' sound shifted to a 'v' sound in many words. So that had two important consequences for early French. It meant that Old French had a relatively new 'v' sound, but it didn't have a specific letter for that sound. Since it was considered a variation of the 'w' sound – which itself was a variation of the U sound – the scribes just used a letter U for all of those sounds because that's really all they had to work with.

Now over time, they invented ways to vary the letter U to distinguish those three sounds. As I noted earlier, they used back-to-back U's for the 'w' sound, and that eventually evolved into our modern letter W. And to distinguish the 'v' sound from the 'u' sound, they just used two different versions of the letter U.

The letter was sometimes written with one long curvy line – and it was sometimes written with two separate straight lines. And over the next few centuries, the curvy version was allocated to the vowel sound of U, and the 'v-shaped' version was allocated to the /v/ sound. And once this distinction became widely accepted and was consistently used, that meant that the 'v-shaped' version became its own distinct letter with its own sound. This process was completed until the end of the Middle English period around the 1500s. And the two shapes really became distinct in the hands of the printers and their brand new printing presses. But up until then, throughout the Middle English period, the U and V were considered the same letter. It could be written two different ways, and it could represent two different sounds, but it was the same letter. In fact, it could really represent three different sounds, because the letter was still sometimes used the 'w' sound. So this 'U/V' letter was doing a LOT of work in Middle English. And this confusion didn't get completely sorted out until the V and W were finally accepted as distinct letters a few centuries later.

So all of that meant that Old French had a 'v' sound represented by letter U – which was sometimes written in a way that resembled modern letter V. So it was early verison of the modern letter V. And just to keep this discussion as simple as possible, I'll refer to this letter as 'V' going forward, but keep in mind that it wasn't considered to be a separate letter yet.

So after the Norman Conquest, the French-trained scribes encountered the English languages which also had a 'v' sound, but that sound was far less prominent in English. In English, the sound was

represented with the letter F because it was considered to be a variation of the 'f' sound. Now this may seem odd at first glance, but we've actually come across this issue in earlier episodes.

We've seen how the 'f' sound switched to a 'v' sound in certain words in Old English, and we still do that today. So we have one ***leaf***, but two ***leaves***. One ***thief***, but two ***thieves***. We explored this sound change before, so I won't go back through it here. But you may remember that the 'f' sound and the 'v' sound are closely-related sounds. The only difference is that the 'f' sound is voiceless and the 'v' sound is voiced. And that sound became voiced in certain situations – like plural words. So in those cases, it switched from an 'f' sound to a 'v' sound. And that's why the Anglo-Saxons just thought of the 'v' sound as a variation of the 'f' sound, and they spelled it with the letter F.

Well, the French scribes didn't like that spelling. It looked weird and foreign. So they got rid of the F in situations where it represented the 'v' sound, and they replaced it with their own letter – their early version of the letter V. So when we spell words today with a V, that is ultimately an innovation brought by the French scribes. Had the Conquest never happened, we would probably still be spelling those words with an F just like the Anglo-Saxons did.

Now I should note that Orm still used the traditional Anglo-Saxon 'F' in the Ormulum. He hadn't yet adopted the letter V. And we see that in his spelling of the word ***verse***. ***Verse*** is a Latin word, and it was used in the Church, so it had actually been used during the Old English period. Orm used it in the Ormulum, but he spelled it F-E-R-R-S. So the French V hadn't arrived yet.

I should also mention one other thing about the 'v' sound in Old English. As I noted, it wasn't very common in Old English. It only occurred in words where it was surrounded by voiced sounds. So for example, it tended to pop up when words ending in F were made plural – so again, ***leaf*** and ***leaves***, and ***thief*** and ***thieves***. For this reason, it almost never appeared at the front of native Old English words. It only appeared at the front of words borrowed from other languages – usually French or Latin. So I just gave the example of ***verse*** which Orm used in the Ormulum. And after the Conquest, a LOT of French words with that initial sound started to come in – words like ***very***, ***village***, ***visit***, ***vote***, ***vest***, ***vigil***, and on and on. They're all borrowed words. And they're all spelled with that letter V.

So that means that virtually all of the words we have in Modern English that begin with a 'v' sound are loanwords from other languages. There are a few exceptions to this rule, but I'll probably cover those exceptions in future episodes.

So we've seen how the unique Anglo-Saxon letters were discarded, and the use of the letter F for the V sound was also discarded in most cases. It still lives on in a few words – like the word ***of*** (O-F). But for the most past, the new scribes just used their early version of the letter V.

So that's a lot of change. But those scribes weren't done yet. They also made some more changes. For example, they introduced the letter Z (or zed) to English.

In English, the history of the 'z' sound is very similar to the history of the 'v' sound. They're both the voiced version of another sound. So as we saw, the 'v' sound is the voiced version of the 'f'

sound. And the Anglo-Saxons just used the letter F for both of those sounds. And the 'z' sound is the voiced version of the 's' sound. So again, the Anglo-Saxons just used the letter S for both sounds.

Once again, we see this change at the end of plural words. So just as ***leaf*** becomes ***leaves*** with a 'v' sound, ***house*** becomes ***houses*** (/how-zez/) with a 'z' sound. Again the sound changed to a voiced sound when it was surrounded by other voiced sounds, which often happened with words were made plural.

So letter S represented the 'z' sound in Old English, but that /z/ sound was limited in Old English, and never really appeared at the front of words.

Then along came the Normans, and once again, they didn't like the fact that the Anglo-Saxons spelled the 'z' sound with the letter S. So they introduced their own letter Z. But as I noted, that 'z' sound was limited in Old English, and never really occurred at the beginning of words. So almost every word we have in Modern English that begins with an initial 'z' sound came from somewhere else. They are almost all loanwords – like ***zeal***, ***zero***, ***zebra***, ***zoo***, ***zone***, ***zombie***. They all came in from other languages, and they're all spelled with that letter Z rather than the Old English S.

So letters V and Z were introduced from French during the Middle English period. But the Middle English scribes were far less consistent – and far less diligent – in their use of the letter Z. In Modern English, the letter V almost always represents the 'v' sound with a few exceptions like the word ***of*** that I noted earlier. But when it comes to letter Z, its use is much more hit and miss. The 'Z' was never consistently applied to English words. So that's part of the reason why we still use the letter S for the 'z' sound in many words today. We see that S at the end of words like ***tease***, ***bruise***, ***surprise***, ***advertise***, and many, many more. So we still let the S do all of the work in many words. So we have ***close*** with a 'S' sound, but we might ***close*** the door with a 'z' sound. Both words are spelled the same way. And we might live in a ***house*** with an 'S' sound, but a school might ***house*** its students in a dorm. Again, both words are spelled with an S. It may seem confusing and inconsistent, but when we use the S for the 'z' sound in that way, we're using it the same way the Anglo-Saxons did. So the French scribes introduced the letter Z, but they were never able to make its use consistent.

I should also make quick note about the name of that letter. I've mentioned this before, but as many of you know, the letter is pronounced /zee/ in the United States and /zed/ in much of the rest of the English speaking-world. The letter actually originated in the Greek alphabet as the letter called ***zeta***. During the Middle English period, it was called ***zede*** (/zeh-deh/) based on that original Greek name. But it was also sometimes shortened to just ***ze*** (/zay/). So both pronunciations were common in Middle English. And ***zede*** (/zeh-deh/) and ***ze*** (/zay/) ultimately gave us our modern /zed/ and /zee/. During the early Modern English period, Britain and most of its colonies settled on the first pronunciation – /zed/. In colonial America, both pronunciations were common. But after the American revolution, Noah Webster said that the proper pronunciation should be /zee/. And that really settled the debate in the United States. And it's been /zee/ ever since.

So we've looked at the introduction of letters W, V and Z to Middle English. In those cases, the French-educated scribes had a specific letter for a sound they found in English, and they elected to use their own letter rather than letter used by the Anglo-Saxons. But there were several situations where the French scribes didn't have a specific letter to use. They had to come up with another way to represent that sound. And that usually meant that they had to combine two or more letters.

We've already seen that with the TH letter combination. The French scribes didn't like the Old English letters thorn and eth, so they just replaced those letters with a combination of T and H. Well, they did that in several other situations as well. And that produced some other letter combinations that we still use today like CH and SH and GH. So let's look at those developments.

I've explored the origin of the CH before – way back in Episode 5 about the history of the letter C. But let me do a quick recap. As you probably know by now, the letter C was used for the 'k' sound in Latin. And that's how Old English used it as well. But during the early Middle Ages, that 'k' sound shifted forward to new sounds before the front vowels – E and I. And it many cases, it also shifted at the end of a word. And that happened in both Old English and early French. But the new sound was different in each language.

In Old English, the 'k' sound shifted forward to become a 'CH' sound – /ch/. So the word ***kirk*** started to be pronounced as /chirch/. And that gave us the modern word ***church***.

But in French, the 'k' sound shifted forward and became an 's' sound. So the Latin word ***circus*** (/keer-koos/) meant a ring. And in early French, that initial 'C' before the 'I' shifted forward to an 'S' sound. And (/keer-koos/) became ***circus*** – as in a 'three-ring circus.' And the related word ***circulus*** (/keer-koo-loos/), became ***circle***. So yes, ***circus*** and ***circle*** are cognate, and they both reflect this basic sound change within French.

Now even though the sound of letter C changed in both Old English and early French, neither set of scribes felt the need to change the spelling of words to reflect those sound changes. And that's because context made the pronunciation clear. When a C appeared before a back vowel – A, O U – then it had its traditional pronunciation as the 'k' sound in both languages. So ***cat***, ***cot***, ***cut***. But when it appeared before a front vowel – E or I – it had the new sound. In Old English, it was/ch/, and in French it was /s/. And as long as English and French were separate and distinct languages, there was no problem. The pronunciation was clear in each language. But after the Norman Conquest, French words started to pour into English. So the scribes couldn't rely on context anymore. Before the front vowels, the sound could now be either /ch/ or /s/. It all depended on whether the word came from Old English or French. So the French scribes had to pick one pronunciation as the new standard. Naturally, being French-trained – and many of them being French-speaking – they decided that the French rule was correct. So a C was retained for the S sound before an E or I. That was the French rule, and that's still the general rule in English today. So ***circus***, ***circle***, ***cellar***, ***cemetery***, and so on. And that means that we let context tell us the proper pronunciation just like the French did.

But that means that the scribes had to figure out a way to represent that Anglo-Saxon /ch/ sound in the same situation. And of course, there was no specific letter for that /ch/ sound. So they decided

to represent it with the 'CH' letter combination. And the spelling of the word ***church*** went from C-I-R-C-E to C-H-U-R-C-H.

The new CH is actually on display in the Ormulum. In Old English, the word ***child*** was spelled C-I-L-D. But Orm spelled it C-H-I-L-D just like we do today. And the word ***bench*** had traditionally been spelled B-E-N-C. But Orm spells it B-E-N-N-C-H-E. So those examples confirm that the new C-H spelling was underway in the late 1100s.

Now, as I've noted before, some Old English words retained the 'k' sound before and E and I. That included words like ***king*** and ***kindred***. There were other sound changes at work here that were causing that 'k' sound to be retained. But that created a problem for the Norman scribes who needed to distinguish that lingering /k/ sound before E and I. As it turned out, the Latin alphabet had a letter K that wasn't really being used very much. So the letter K was introduced to represent that lingering /k/ sound before the E and I. So words like ***king*** and ***kindred*** got their modern letter K during this period.

And again, Orm gives us some of these brand new spellings in the Ormulum. He spells the word ***kinde*** as K-I-N-D-E, instead of the older spelling C-Y-N-D. And in earlier episodes, we saw that the final Peterborough scribes spelled the word ***king*** as K-I-N-G, rather than the older C-Y-N-G.

So all of that meant that English acquired the CH letter combination and an expanded use of the letter K.

We've looked at the origin of TH and CH, but those French-trained scribes also gave us our modern SH. This was another sound that didn't have a specific letter in Latin or French. So the French scribes represented that sound with either SH or SCH. There were also cases where they used a double S for that sound.

Anyway, when those scribes looked at English, they saw that Old English didn't use those spellings. The Anglo-Saxon scribes spelled the /sh/ sound with the letter combination SC. And that may seem odd, but we have to remember where the /sh/ sound same from in English. It was the produced of another sound change in early Old English. The 'sk' sound (/sk/) had shifted to this 'sh' sound (/sh/). And since this change was pretty universal in Old English, the Anglo-Saxons just kept the old spelling – SC.

But then the Vikings arrived, and they reintroduced that original /sk/ sound. And you might remember that that gave us the modern distinction between ***shirt*** and ***skirt***. The word ***shirt*** is the Old English version with the /sh/ sound, and ***skirt*** is the Norse version with the older /sk/ sound. So by the time the French arrived, that SC letter combination was being used for both sets of words. So a document might spell ***shirt*** and ***skirt*** the same way. So the French scribes tried to fix this problem. And of course, they fixed it by introducing the SH letter combination for the /sh/ sound.

The SC combination was retained for the /sk/ sound, and we still use that spelling for words like ***score***, and ***scare***, and ***scope***, and ***scab***. And with the increased use of the letter K, there was also a tendency to use SK in addition to SC. As a very general rule, Norse words that had the /sk/ sound

tended to be spelled with an SK, and French words with that /sk/ sound tended to be spelled with an SC. But there were lots of exceptions to that rule.

So again, just to summarize, the SC letter combination was used in Old English, but the SH spelling was introduced in early Middle English. In fact, the SH spelling was being adopted around the time that Orm wrote the Ormulum because that text is the first known document to spell English words with an SH.

Take the word ***shall***. In Old English, it was spelled S-C-E-A-L. But Orm uses the modern spelling S-H-A-L-L. And Orm is the first known English writer to spell the Old English word ***shame*** with an S-H. And the best example of this is probably the word ***English*** itself. It was typically spelled E-N-G-L-I-S-C. But Orm replaced the S-C at the end with an S-H. (He actually spelled it 'Ennglissh.')

Now, just to be clear, Orm didn't invent this spelling. It already existed in French. But the Ormulum is the oldest English document to use it.

So far, we've seen that the French scribes introduced several new letter combinations to represent sounds which didn't have a specific letter in French. So we got TH for the /th/ and /th/ sounds. And we got CH for the /ch/ sound. And we got SH for the /sh/ sound. So you've probably noticed a trend there. The French-educated scribes tended to add the letter H to an existing letter to create these new spellings.

This was an old practice going back to the Romans. Ultimately, the 'h' sound is just a breathy sound that exists before or after another sound. And the Romans inherited a lot of words from Greek that had a very aspirated or breathy consonant sound. And to represent those sounds, they just put an H after the consonant. So Greek had a very aspirated P sound that sometimes sounded like combination between a P and an F. And the Romans represented that sound by adding an H after the letter P – giving us our modern PH spelling for the 'f' sound. That spelling was used for Greek words with that sound. And after the Norman Conquest some of those Greek words passed into English. So the PH spelling also passed into English during the Middle English period.

Similarly, the Greeks had an aspirated 'K' sound – sort of like /x/. So the Romans represented that sound by adding an H after the letter C. And that produced the original version of the CH spelling. But in Latin, those words were usually just pronounced with a normal 'k' sound. And those words also passed into English. That's why we have a lot of words that begin with a CH spelling but are pronounced with a 'k' sound like ***choir***, and ***chorus***, and ***chemistry***, and ***chaos***. Again, those are all Greek words with a CH spelling to represent what was once a breathy 'k' sound at the front.

The point is that the Latin scribes adopted this extra H as a standard way to spell a new sound that didn't exist in the traditional Latin alphabet. So that's why we have PH, and TH, and CH, and SH.

This became such a common practice, that it was probably the cause of another spelling change in early Middle English. And that change produced our modern W-H spelling at the beginning of words like ***white*** and ***what*** and ***when*** and ***why***. In Old English, all of those words were pronounced

with a slight breathy 'h' sound before the W. And so those words were spelled with an initial H-W. So ***white*** was H-W-I-T – pronounced more like /hweet/. And ***what*** was H-W-A-T – usually spelled with that letter æ in the middle, so it was H-W-Æ-T – pronounced /hwæt/. So there was a little aspiration at the front. And by the way, some Modern English dialects still retain that initial aspiration in those words.

But apparently, that pronunciation seemed odd to the new French-speaking scribes. Or perhaps they barely even noticed that initial H sound. Or maybe that just didn't like that spelling. It isn't entirely clear what the exact motivation was, but around this time, those scribes started to switch those first two letters at the front of those words – from H-W to W-H. Again, some scholars think that the scribes were so accustomed to putting the H after the other consonant to represent a unique sound – like PH and TH and CH and SH – that they decided to do the same thing here. And our modern WH was born.

And it was apparently born around the current point in our story, because Orm is the first known English writer to use that spelling. The word ***whose*** was ***hwæs*** in Old English – spelled H-W-Æ-S. But Orm spelled it W-H-A-S. So ***whose*** got its WH for the first time.

And the word ***who*** was ***hwa*** in Old English – spelled H-W-A. But Orm spelled it W-H-A. And this is the first known instance of the word ***who*** being spelled with its modern W-H at the beginning.

Now I should note that the 'h' sound didn't just appear before the 'w' sound in Old English. The Anglo-Saxons actually had a tendency to pronounced words with a slight aspiration before a consonant. So words like ***loud*** and ***lord*** and ***lady*** were also once pronounced with a slight breath before the L. ***Loud*** was ***hlud*** – H-L-U-D. And ***lord*** was ***hlaford*** – spelled H-L-A-F-O-R-D. And ***lady*** was ***hlæfdige*** – again spelled with an initial H-L. But the French-trained scribes apparently thought it was strange to pronounce words with that initial breathy sound, or perhaps again they barely even noticed it. Because they dropped that initial H in those words. And Orm is actually the first known English scribe to drop that H in the word ***lady***. He just spelled it with an L at the front ('laffdiʒ').

The same thing happened with certain words that began with an 'R' sound. They were often pronounced with a slight breathy sound before the initial R. So a word like ***ring*** was ***hring*** in Old English – spelled H-R-I-N-G. And ***roof*** was ***hruf*** – spelled H-R-U-F. Again, the French scribes dropped the initial H from those words as well.

So we've covered most of the major spelling changes related to consonants during this period. But there is one more letter than I need to address. And that's the letter G.

Back when we looked at the original Old English alphabet, we saw that the Anglo-Saxons used the letter G, but it represented several different sounds at the time. It could be used for the hard G sound – /g/. And in other situations that used it for the /x/ sound.

Now when the Anglo-Saxons borrowed that letter G from the Latin alphabet, they actually used a different form of the letter preferred by Irish scribes. It was much more elaborate than the traditional Roman version of the letter. It resembled a lowercase G, but the loop wasn't closed at the top.

Well, when the Norman scribes arrived in England, they didn't like that shape of the letter G, so they introduced the more traditional G shape that we use today. But they didn't completely get rid of that old G. The kept it around to represent that /x/ sound. That was one of the ways the letter was used in Old English, so they just preserved that use. But some scribes apparently didn't like that spelling – maybe because the funny shape of the letter made it look like a foreign letter. So those scribes elected to use the letter combination GH for the /x/ sound. Again, this was yet another letter combination using that letter H.

The Normans thought of the /x/ sound as a breathy G sound, so it made sense to spell it with a GH. And as we saw in an earlier episode, a word like ***knight*** was pronounced /kni(x)t/, and it was spelled with a GH to represent that /x/ sound. And when that sound eventually disappeared near the end of the Middle English period, the GH in most of those words became silent.

But again, throughout the Middle English period, the GH spelling competed with the old fancy-shaped G. Most scribes preferred one or the other. That fancy-shaped G started to become simplified a bit. It started to resemble the number 3 in its shape. And it soon acquired its own name called 'yogh.' So at some point, this fancy-shaped G evolved into an altogether new letter distinct from the original letter G. And as I noted, it was used for the /x/ sound. But it was also used in another situation – for the Y sound. And this requires a little bit of an explanation.

Remember that this yogh letter was originally letter G in Old English. And as we've seen before, the G sound shifted to a Y sound in many words in Old English. This gave us the difference between ***gold*** and ***yolk***. And ***garden*** and ***yard***. But even though the sound changed, the spelling stayed the same – with the letter G. So letter G came to represent this new Y sound in English.

Then the Normans arrived. And they discovered that the letter G was being used for the Y sound in those words. They may not have liked it, but they didn't really have a better option because the modern letter Y wasn't in place yet. So initially, they just decided to kept that fancy-shaped G called yogh for the Y sound.

In order to better understand that decision, we need to consider what was happening in French at the time. And this is where things start to get a bit complicated. The old Latin 'I' sound had undergone a lot of changes, and it actually produced two new consonant sounds. One of those sounds was the 'y' sound and the other was the 'j' sound. Now this seems complicated, but we've seen these changes before.

Do you remember the evolution of words like ***Julius*** and ***Jupiter***? In Latin, they were spelled with an I at the beginning, and they were initially pronounced /ee-oo-lee-oos/ and /ee–oo–piter/. But then that initial sound became a Y sound, and they were pronounced as /yoo-lee-oos/ and /yoo-piter/. And then in Late Latin and early French, the sound shifted again to a J sound, and the pronunciation became /julius/ and /jupiter/. So from /ee-oo/ to /yoo/ to /joo/. And if you can follow that change,

you can start to understand how the modern letters I, Y and J are connected. They all came out of the original letter I.

Now I don't have time to outline the complete history here, but the Y emerged first. It was originally the Greek version of I, and it came to be used for the /y/ sound. And the letter J emerged later, as a fancy version of the letter I with curvy tail on the bottom. And it came to be used for the /j/sound. But those developments take place later in our story. So in early Modern English, the letter I was still doing most of the work for all of those sounds, and it was confusing.

So all of this helps to explain why the French scribes didn't try to change the spelling of the 'y' sound in English. Since the letter Y wasn't really established yet, they just kept the fancy G of Old English. And in early Middle English, that letter – called yogh – was used for the 'y' sound. So for the most part, the French scribes used that letter the same way the Anglo-Saxons did. It could represent either the /x/ sound or the 'y' sound.

I should note that the letter Y was finally adopted as a distinct letter a couple of centuries later in the 1300s, and at that point, the Y started to take over. As the letter Y became more popular, the fancy-G – or yogh – died out. The final nail in yogh's coffin came with the advent of the printing press. Most European printers didn't have a yogh in their printing kit. So the letter Y became the standard way to spell that sound.

So we've covered the 'y' sound, but what about the 'j' sound? Well, the French scribes also had to deal with this sound in English. But before I go through these developments, let me make an important note. The 'j' sound was very rare in English, and it was non-existent in Latin. And that's interesting, because today both languages have lots of word with that sound. And I should note that the Modern French 'j' sound (/ž/) – as in a name like ***Jacques*** – is a later development, but it evolved out of that initial 'j' sound that we still have in English. Anyway, that 'j' sound is all over the place in both Modern French and Modern English. And the reason for the growth and expansion of that sound is two-fold.

First, Late Latin acquired this modern 'j' sound thanks to two completely unrelated sound changes involving two completely different letters. I've already mentioned the first one. From /ee-oo–lee-oos/ – to /yoo-lius/ – to /julius/. That 'j' sound evolved out of the letter I. And that produced words like ***Julius*** and ***Jupiter*** and ***judge*** and ***jury***.

Meanwhile, the letter G also experienced the same sound change, and in the case of the letter G, it changed before the front vowels – E and I. In those situations, hard G sound (/g/) slid forward in mouth and became a soft G – or 'j' sound. And that produced words like ***general***, and ***gender*** and ***gentle*** and ***germ***. And of course, that's the same sound that we just saw in words like ***Julius*** and ***judge*** and ***jury***. So French got this 'j' sound from two completely different sound changes. And that meant that French scribes had two different ways to represent that sound. They could either use the letter I or the letter G (the so-called soft G).

Eventually, that letter I acquired a little curvy tail in the hands of some scribes. And in later centuries, scribes started to use that fancy I with the tail to distinguish that 'j' sound in ***Julius*** from

the typical vowel sound of I. And that fancy I with the curvy tail became our modern letter J. But at the current point in our story, that hadn't happened yet. So the French scribes were still using letter I in some words and letter G in other words.

And after the Norman Conquest, they encountered a handful of English words with that same 'j' sound. But as I noted earlier, that sound was rare in English. It was found at the end of a few words like ***hedge***, ***ledge***, ***bridge*** and ***ridge***. That 'j' sound was spelled with a CG in Old English. And the French scribes apparently decided that that sound needed to retain a unique spelling. So they replaced the old C-G with a brand new D-G-E. And that gave us the modern spelling of those words I just mentioned – ***hedge***, ***ledge***, ***bridge*** and ***ridge***. They all end in D-G-E today.

So as a result of all of that, English acquired three different ways to represent the 'j' sound. First, there was letter I (soon to become letter J). Secondly, there was letter G (also known as soft G). And third, there was the letter combination D-G-E at the end of a word or syllable. A word like ***judge*** actually combines two of those spellings – J at the front and D-G-E at the end.

One other quick note about Old English words with the 'j' sound. As I noted, Old English didn't really use that sound at the beginning of words. So when we find a Modern English word that begins with a 'j' sound, we're usually looking at a word borrowed from another language. So this is the same thing that we saw earlier with words in English that begin with a 'v' sound or begin with a 'z' sound. They're all usually loanwords borrowed from other languages.

So by now, you can probably start to see why Modern English spelling is so complicated. But despite the inconsistencies, there are some basic underlying rules. And in fact, if the French scribes had applied their new letters in a consistent manner, and if later loanwords had been altered to fit these rules as they came in, then English spelling would make a lot more sense today. But alas, that didn't happen. Exceptions were made. New words came in with their own unique spellings. Sounds continued to change. And later scribes and printers made up new rules and decided on altogether new spellings.

So English spelling was never really settled during this period. And it didn't start to become settled until dictionaries started to be produced in the 1700s and 1800s. For now, scribes relied upon some of the general rules I outlined in this episode. And they tended to spell words phonetically – as they sounded. Most dialects used the same basic consonants, so the pronunciation and spelling of the consonants was a bit more stable. But the vowels were a completely different story. Vowel sounds were undergoing a lot of changes, and that produced a variety of regional accents. This was apparently such a problem during the late 1100s that our friendly scribe Orm invented his own system to represent the vowel sounds in his words. And that system is extremely important to linguists because it shows exactly how the vowels were changing – at least in the East Midlands.

So next time, we'll turn our attention to those vowels, and we'll look at Orm's reforms. Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.