



Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Review of Johannesson, N.; Cooper, A. (2023) The Ormulum
Baalen, A.M.W. van

Citation

Baalen, A. M. W. van. (2024). Review of Johannesson, N.; Cooper, A. (2023) The Ormulum. *Journal Of The Spanish Society For Medieval Language And Literature (Selim)*, 29(1), 195-197. doi:10.17811/selim.29.2024.195-97


Version: Publisher's Version

License: [Creative Commons CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4038329>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Johannesson, Nils-Lennart, and Andrew Cooper, eds. 2023. *The Ormulum*. 2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. xxviii + 655. ISBN 9780192890436.

Reviewed by Amos van Baalen 
Leiden University

The *Ormulum* has long been an essential text in studies of the history of English as one of the few prominent new compositions in English in the twelfth century. With its idiosyncratic spelling system that reveals much about the pronunciation of Orm's Early Middle English dialect, the *Ormulum* provides unique insights into the transitional period between Old English and Middle English, and the state of the English language a century after the Norman Conquest. This new edition, the first to appear in almost 150 years, is as faithful as possible to Orm's original, which makes it an essential resource for any future studies of this fascinating text.

Nils-Lennart Johannesson, the founder and director of Stockholm University's *Ormulum Project* from 1993 until his passing in 2019, and Andrew Cooper, director of the project from 2020 onwards, have produced an edition which improves upon its 1878 predecessor by Holt and White (Holt 1878) in a number of ways. First of all, unlike Holt and White's edition, this latest edition includes parts of the *Ormulum* that are no longer found in the author's famous holograph, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 1. By incorporating an earlier incomplete transcription of the text by Dutch philologist Jan van Vliet (1622–66), now in London, Lambeth Palace Library, MS 783, Johannesson and Cooper's edition offers readers the most complete version of the *Ormulum* to date. This latest edition is also closer to Orm's text: while Holt and White's edition did not reproduce Orm's "distinctions between different kinds of caroline *g*, and between the two uses of insular *g* (3)" nor his punctuation (x, fn. 15), these elements are present in Johannesson and Cooper's edition. Although Johannesson and Cooper—unlike Holt and White—do not provide any notes or commentary on the text itself, there appear to be plans for the publication of a third volume with commentary drawing on Johannesson's notes (xvii); it is sincerely hoped that these plans will come to fruition.

The edition consists of a brief introduction (of only a little over five pages) outlining the editorial decisions made, the edition itself, an appendix of three pages featuring deleted text from fol. 48r of Junius 1, and a glossary. Johannesson and Cooper divide Orm's text into three discrete sections of which the first two are the shortest: the Prolegomenon and the Latin texts, the latter essentially a table of contents. The third part consists of Orm's thirty-two verse homilies. The Middle English text is arranged in verse, which foregrounds Orm's regular metre. Aside from line numbers, the edition also features some other useful information such as the relevant folio and column numbers in Junius 1, and references to the first lines on the relevant pages in Holt and White's edition, for easy comparison between the two editions. The passages taken from Van Vliet's transcription are clearly demarcated as such by a capital V before the line numbers (xxiii–xxv).

The “Glossary and Index of Proper Names” (593–655) is a useful addition to these volumes. Proper names are listed between common nouns in the glossary since they are not distinguished by capitalisation from common nouns by Orm (593). The glossary includes any forms written by Hands A, B, and P (which are Orm’s), and Hand C (which belongs to Orm’s “assistant”; xxiii) but not any later hands (593). Although the glossary also includes forms from Van Vliet’s transcript, these are once again signposted by a capital V preceding their relevant line numbers (593). The Latin table of contents is not glossed (593), but the glossary does contain Latin words that occur in the Prolegomenon and Homilies (see, e.g., the entry for *currus*); these are interspersed among the English material in the glossary. The glossary appears complete, with “[i]nflexed forms or variant spellings” also receiving their own entry in the glossary if they are separated alphabetically from the main lemma to which they refer (594). For instance, past tense forms of the strong verb *spekenn* “to speak” are also listed under their own entries: *spacc* and *spæke*, *spækenn*; these refer to the main entry for the verb, and are distinguished from it in that they are in roman type, while the main entry is in bold. The decision to include these inflected forms in the glossary allows readers to find the relevant headwords more quickly, since they do not need to reconstruct the base form first. Another useful aspect of the glossary is the inclusion of etymological information in each entry, which is helpful for establishing the origin of Orm’s vocabulary.

The aspect that most clearly characterises this new edition is the sheer commitment to reproducing as accurately as possible Orm’s text as it appears in Junius 1. For instance, the edition not only transcribes accents on vowels and reproduces the five-way distinction that Orm makes with respect to the letter <g>, but it also painstakingly distinguishes between four different versions of capital letters and various forms of the *paragraphus* (xxiv–xxvi). Generally, Orm’s own corrections are not explicitly indicated, which is a sensible decision, avoiding as it does unwanted distraction for the reader. One type of correction that is included is the deletion of <o> in the digraph <eo>; this is indicated by an *e* with two dots underneath it in the edition. This type of correction was arguably included because it is “[t]he most salient change in orthography during the production of the manuscript” (xxv–xxvi). Although it does feel somewhat arbitrary to include this emendation but not other types, it is a useful addition for those studying the historical phonology (and orthography) of English, while not causing too much additional clutter in the main text.

Their dedication to accuracy notwithstanding, the editors occasionally deviate from Orm’s spelling in the manuscript, in order to create a text that is more congruent with Orm’s vision of a work written in a consistent orthography. For instance, the edition emends any “[v]ariant spellings” to an orthography that is closer to Orm’s usual spelling. Nevertheless, all of these corrections have relevant footnotes which feature the manuscript reading (xxvii). For instance, in lines 343 and 368 of the Prolegomenon, the manuscript spellings *frofren* and *opnenn* are, respectively, corrected by the editors to *frofrenn* with <nn> and *oppnenn* with <pp>, since Orm doubles consonants orthographically following a “short vowel in a closed syllable” (xxv). Overall, any corrections of errors, however minor they are, are explicitly signposted. This signposting also applies to any other deviations from the manuscript in the edition. For instance, texts labelled, e.g., “Homily I/II,” show that Orm did not write the rubric and pericope for Homily II, and that it was added editorially to the edition based on the Latin table of contents (44, fn. 1). In addition, different *signes de renvoi* (symbols used to point the reader to text written elsewhere in the manuscript) are distinguished and reproduced in

footnotes whenever they are relevant. Any text that is supplied editorially, e.g., when “it is straightforward to complete damaged lines from context,” is enclosed in angled brackets and accompanied by a footnote (xxvii). Text edited from Van Vliet’s transcript is treated differently, since it is normalised to Orrm’s orthography without explicit signposting, although there is no addition of punctuation (xxvii).

With their meticulous and consistent manner of editing the text, Johannesson and Cooper have made an edition of the *Ormulum* that will be an essential addition to the library of anyone studying the transitional period from Old to Middle English, and the state of the English language in the twelfth century. Their absolute commitment to providing the most accurate text possible, distinguishing—like Orrm—between different types of <g>, reproducing accents, capitals, punctuation, etc., and clearly indicating whenever there are editorial deviations from the manuscript, ensures that scholars can safely rely on this new edition for the study of the *Ormulum*. These aspects, coupled with other useful additions such as the special marking of words originally spelled with <eo> that were later corrected to <e>, and the provision of etymological information in the glossary, result in an edition which allows for the thorough linguistic analysis of one of the most important texts from this crucial period in the history of the English language.

References

Holt, Robert, ed. 1878. *The Ormulum with the Notes and Glossaries of Dr. R. M. White*. 2 vols. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

(Received 08/12/2023)