

## The Orrmulum

The *Orrmulum*, written in the last quarter of the twelfth century by an Augustinian canon called Orrm (a Scandinavian name that means 'serpent'), survives only in the autograph manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 1. It is likely that Orrm lived in, or was closely associated with, the Arroaisian Abbey at Bourne, a twelfth-century foundation in Lincolnshire.<sup>1</sup> The *Orrmulum* was composed with pastoral care in mind, recognizing a need for teaching in the vernacular a generation before the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which stipulated that basic doctrine and catechesis were to be performed in the native language.

The work as a whole in its surviving form is some 20,000 lines long, and consists of a chronological sequence of homilies based on the gospel readings of the mass, and relating to the life of Christ and the acts of the Apostles. Orrm's exegesis is based on the *Glossa Ordinaria*, a twelfth-century Latin work that provided a commentary on the scriptures.<sup>2</sup> Orrm relates that he undertook the work as a result of the request of his brother Walter in order to benefit the English congregation, and there is little doubt that the clarity of his exposition would have aided the understanding of the laity. The modern-day critical response to the content of the *Orrmulum* is less than enthusiastic. It has been labelled 'soporific' and 'tedious',<sup>3</sup> for example, though it is unlikely that this would have been a contemporary response for those who only had to listen to a portion of it being read aloud on the appropriate occasion. The fact that it survives in only one, quite remarkable manuscript, despite the fact that Orrm gave instructions to subsequent copyists, may

suggest that its popularity was limited. Nevertheless, the Dedication and Preface, edited below, is an interesting illustration of the author's claim to humility, his aims and intentions, as well as his methodology in writing his text. Orrm is repeatedly at pains to inform us that he wrote his work to bring English people to salvation; and he urges them constantly to perform God's teaching in thought, word and deed. Adopting a cataloguing method, Orrm takes us through the seven benefits that Christ performed on earth: from his arrival in a human form, to his Passion, Harrowing of Hell, Resurrection, Ascension, and ultimately his return on doomsday. Thus Orrm, through lists and wholesale repetition, encapsulates essential Christian teaching in his text. This extract finishes with a typical motif, asking the audience of the text to pray for him in his endeavours.

Whether or not the *Orrmulum* is satisfying aesthetically, the work itself is of significant value to linguists and dialectologists working in the early Middle English field. Orrm attempts to represent the way the words were meant to be pronounced through his system of orthography. The doubling of consonants is part of this phonetic system: they indicate that the vowel preceding them is a short vowel sound. There are numerous Scandinavian words in the text (such as *þez3*, 'they', *skill*, and *till*, 'until, towards') that probably reflect his own dialect usage. As well as the appropriateness of his language for his chosen didactic intent, his versification has fifteen syllables to every pair of lines (as edited here), a rhythm that would allow for a rapid, and almost incantatory, delivery to the audience.

### Notes

#### THE ORRMULUM

<sup>1</sup> For this information, and for an excellent analysis of the script and date of the *Orrmulum* manuscript, see M. B. Parkes, 'On the Presumed Date and Possible Origin of the Manuscript of the *Orrmulum*: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 1', in M. B. Parkes, *Scribes, Scripts and Readers: Studies*

in the Communication, Presentation and Dissemination of Medieval Texts (London, 1991), pp. 187–200.

<sup>2</sup> See J. A. W. Bennett, *Middle English Literature*, ed. and comp. D. Gray (Oxford, 1986; repr. 1990), pp. 30–1.

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, *Middle English Literature*, pp. 31, 32, 33.

### Dedication and Preface

	Nu broþerr Wallterr, broþerr min affterr þe flæsshess kinde, annd broþerr min i Crisstenndom þurh fulluhht, annd þurh trowwþe, annd broþerr min i Godess hus zet o þe bridde wise, þurh þatt witt hafenn takenn ba. an rezhellboc to follzhenn – unnderr kanunnkess had annd lif, swa summ Sannt Awwstin sette – Icc hafe don swasumm þu badd, annd forþedd te þin wille. Icc hafe wennn inntill Enngliſsh goddspellless hallzhe lare, affterr þatt little witt þatt me min Drihhtin hafeþþ lenedd. Þu þohhtest tatt itt mihhte wel till mikell frame turrnenn, ziff Enngliſsh folk, forr lufe off Crist, itt wolde zerne lernenn; annd folzhenn itt, annd fillenn itt wiþþ þohht, wiþþ word, wiþþ dede, annd forrþi zerrndest tu þatt Icc þiss werre þe sholde wirrkenn. Annd Icc itt hafe forþedd te, acc all þurh Cristess hellpe; annd unnc birrþ baþe þannkenn Crist þatt itt iss brohht till ende. Icc hafe sammnedd o þiss boc þa Goddspellless neh alle, þatt sinn denn o þe messe boc inn all þe zer att messe; annd a33 affterr þe Goddspell stannt þatt tatt te Goddspell meneþþ, þatt mann birrþ spellenn to þe folc off þez3re sawle nede; annd zet tær tekenn mare inoh þu shallt tæronne findenn, off þatt tatt Cristess hallzhe þed birrþ trowwenn wel annd follzhenn. Icc hafe sett her o þiss boc amang Goddspellless wordess, all þurh me sellfenn, maniz word þe rime swa to fillenn;	in the natural sense baptism; belief third; manner both rule-book canons' order just as Saint Augustine established asked furthered translated into the gospels' holy teaching intelligence; that Lord; granted thought to great benefit eagerly follow therefore desired compose it obliges both of us gathered almost are in the mass-book year always; occurs means preach their more; enough therein people believe self; many fill out
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### Notes

<sup>4</sup> Orrm here uses a very common modesty topos employed by many authors in the Middle Ages.

45	acc þu shaltt findenn þatt min word, e33whær þær itt iss ekedd, maz3 hellpenn þa þatt redenn itt to sen annd t' unnderrstandenn	everywhere; added
50	all þess te bettere hu þe33m birrþ þe Goddspell unnderrstandenn; annd forrþi trowwe Icc þat te birrþ wel þolenn mine wordess, e33whær þær þu shaltt findenn hemm amang Goddspelless wordess.	it obliges them  endure
55	Forr whase mot to læwedd folc larspell off Goddspell tellenn, he mot wel ekenn maniz word amang Goddspelless wordess. Annd Icc ne mihhte nohht min ferrs	For who must to unlearned people doctrine add verse
60	a33 wiþþ Goddspelless wordess wel fillenn all, annd all forrþi sholde Icc well offte nede amang Goddspelless wordess don min word, min ferrs to fillenn.	
65	Annd te bitæche Icc off þiss boc, heh wikenn alls itt semeþþ, all to þurhsekenn ilc an ferrs, annd to þurhlokenn offte, þatt upponn all þiss boc ne be nan word 3æn Cristess lare, nan word tatt swiþe wel ne be to trowwenn annd to follghenn. Witt shulenn tredenn unnderr fot annd all þwerrett forrwerppenn:	I entrust to you important duties search look through  against  believe and to follow
70	þe dom off all þatt læþe flocc þatt iss þurh niþ forrblendedd, þatt tæleþþ þatt to lofenn iss þurh niþfull modiznesse. þe33 shulenn lætenn hæþeliz off unnkerr swinn, lef broþerr. Annd all þe33 shulenn takenn itt onn unnitt annd onn idell; acc nohht þurch skill, acc all þurh niþ, annd all þurh þe33re sinne.	completely rejected judgement; hateful crowd malice; blinded blame; which should be praised pride prevent; contemptuously work; dear
75	Annd unnc birrþ, biddenn Godd tatt he forr3ife hemm here sinne; annd unnc birrþ baþe lofenn Godd off þatt itt wass bigunnenn. Annd þannkenn Godd tatt itt iss brohht till ende þurh hiss hellpe: forr itt maz3 hellpenn alle þa þatt bliþelike itt herenn, annd lufenn itt, annd foll3henn itt wiþþ þohht, wiþþ word, wiþþ dede.	unprofitable things  their we are obliged to pray
80	Annd þannkenn Godd tatt itt iss brohht till ende þurh hiss hellpe: forr itt maz3 hellpenn alle þa þatt bliþelike itt herenn, annd lufenn itt, annd foll3henn itt wiþþ þohht, wiþþ word, wiþþ dede.	
85	Annd whase wilenn shall þiss boc	happily

	efft oþerr siþe writenn, himm bidde Icc þatt he't write rihht, swasumm þiss boc himm tæcheþþ: all þwerrett affterr þatt itt iss uppo þiss firrste bisne, wiþþ all swillc rime alls her iss sett, wiþþ all se fele wordess; annd tatt he loke wel þatt he an bocstaff write twi3zess, e33whær þær itt uppo þiss boc iss writenn o þatt wise. Loke he wel þatt het write swa, forr he ne maz3 nohht elless onn Enngli3sh writenn rihht te word, þatt wite he wel to soþe. Annd 3iff mann wile witeinn whi Icc hafe don þiss dede, whi Icc till Enngli3sh hafe wennd Goddspelless hall3he lare: Icc hafe itt don forrþiþatt all Crisstene folckess berrhless iss lang uppo þatt an, þatt te33 Goddspelless hall3he lare wiþþ fulle mahhte fol3he rihht þurh þohht, þurh word, þurh dede. Forr all þatt æfre onn erþe iss ned Crisstene folc to foll3henn i trowwþe, i dede, all tæcheþþ hemm Goddspelless hall3he lore.	again; afterwards he just as; instructs  example such many  letters; twice everywhere manner so  knows; in truth inquire  translated  because salvation dependent; one thing; they  strength  in
100	Annd forrþi whase lerneþþ itt annd foll3heþþ itt wiþþ dede, he shall onn ende wurrþi ben þurh Godd to wurrþenn bor3henn. Annd tærfore hafe Icc turnnedd itt inntill Enngli3she spæche, forrþatt I wollde bliþeliz þatt all Enngli3she lede wiþþ ære sholde lisstenn itt, wiþþ herrte sholde itt trowwenn, wiþþ tunge sholde spellenn itt, wiþþ dede sholde itt foll3henn, <sup>3</sup> to winnenn unnderr Crisstenndom att Godd soþ sawle berrhless. Annd 3iff þe33 wilenn herenn itt, annd foll3henn itt wiþþ dede, Icc hafe hemm hollpenn unnderr Crist	worthy glory; saved  people ears  true; salvation
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## Notes

<sup>3</sup> These three lines sum up the need to follow God's will in thought, word and deed.