

SELECTED ORTHOGRAPHIC FEATURES IN ENGLISH EDITIONS OF THE *BOOK OF GOOD MANERS* (1487-1507)

0. INTRODUCTION

In this paper I am going to discuss some tentative results of my research on the orthography in several late fifteenth and early sixteenth century editions of a book printed in English. I will compare the spelling systems of three printers: William Caxton, Richard Pynson and Wynkyn de Worde as apparent in several editions of Caxton's translation of *Le livre de bonnes moeurs* (itself a translation from Latin) by Jacques Legrand published in 1487 as *The book of good maners*. The editions considered in this analysis were printed by Richard Pynson (1494 and 1500) and Wynkyn de Worde (1498 and 1507). For the purposes of the present analysis, I transcribed a sample of approximately 6,000 words from each edition (altogether approximately 30,000). This was possible owing to my temporary access to *Early English Books Online* (at <http://wwwlib.umi.com/eebo/>), a still ongoing project carried out by the Universities of Michigan and Oxford (launched in 1999), comprising, in one comprehensive database, the facsimiles of 100,000 books published in English between 1475 and 1700 – out of 125,000 listed in the catalogues of early English books, namely Pollard & Redgrave's *Short-Title Catalogue (1475-1640)* and Wing's *Short-Title Catalogue (1641-1700)*.

The findings discussed in the present paper are part of a larger project aiming to describe the orthography in early printed books in English. Obviously, only further and more exhaustive research in this line, based on a larger corpus, can lead to definitive and compelling conclusions in the area under consideration.

1. RATIONALE AND ASSUMPTIONS

English orthography in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is considered highly inconsistent (See, e.g., Scragg 1974:64, Salmon 1999: 15). In fact, it is generally assumed that it achieved the state of relative stability as late as the mid-seventeenth century. The role of printers as a factor contributing to the regularisation and rationalisation of spelling was most probably only secondary, i.e., it consisted in dissemination and reinforcement rather than establishment of spelling rules. These rules were the contribution of theoretical linguists (spelling reformers, grammarians and orthoepists) and schoolmasters (see Brengelman 1980: 333 and also Scragg 1974:64, Salmon 1999:18), like Cheke, Smith, Hart, Gil, Coote, and Mulcaster, to name but a few, who wrote their treatises (not all of them were published) in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

I decided to analyse the texts printed by Pynson and de Worde for several reasons. Firstly, they are the earliest well known printers (beside Caxton) and, despite being foreigners, they are likely to have had at least some influence on the general spelling practice – in view of their considerable outputs. Secondly, I was interested in the degree of (in)consistency of their spelling systems, and whether they made any efforts to improve them (therefore I chose to analyse several editions of the same book). It should be remembered that in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries publications on the reform of English spelling were not yet available. Also the first printer's rule-book was published as late as 1683-4 (written by Moxon), so the printers in the fifteenth and early sixteenth century were not greatly assisted in their efforts to regularise their own spelling. John Hart, the best-known sixteenth-century spelling reformer wrote in his *Orthographie* (1569, fo. 15r) that “[p]rinters altered spelling as they pleased merely to fill up the compositor's line in printing”. That opinion was worth verifying. Thirdly, according to Brengelman (1980: 333) “There is no evidence that any sort of mutual dissemination of information about spelling among printers was taking place – not even within the same printing house”. That statement seems rather counterintuitive, and constituted a stimulus for the decision to check whether printers took into consideration earlier editions of a given book, while preparing their own ones. Finally, the standardisation and

regularisation of spelling did not happen overnight. Therefore one could expect that some signs of it should be traceable in early printed books.

2. CRITERIA AND VARIABLES FOR THE ANALYSIS

Spelling reformers (and other theoretical linguists) in the sixteenth and seventeenth century developed several proposals concerning the reform of spelling (listed by Salmon 1999: 21). Since these proposals proved to be very influential in the course of time, they have been used in the present study as the criteria showing the degree of regularisation in the texts analysed. They include:

- a) the establishment of etymological spelling,
- b) orthographic distinctions between homophones,
- c) morphological spelling (a consistent orthographic representation of the same morphemes),
- d) the clear indication of vowel length (either by doubling letters representing vowels or by adding a final <e>).

It is noteworthy that in these proposals spelling reformers advocate establishing functional interrelation between orthography and other levels of language structure, namely semantics, morphology and phonology (with the exception of the first criterion which was motivated socially rather than linguistically – as it testifies to the high prestige of Latin).

3. RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

3.1. ETYMOLOGICAL SPELLING

In the Early Modern English context ‘etymological’ means ‘neo-Latinate’, and it usually consists in adding epenthetic consonants which make the relevant words look more similar to their Latin ancestors. Table 1a presents the printers’ orthographic variants of seven words: ADVISE, ASSAULT, AVENGE, DAMNED, DEFAULT, DOUBT (a verb) and DOUBT (a noun).

Table 1a: Etymological spelling: orthographic variants¹

	Caxton 1487	Pynson 1494	de Worde 1498	Pynson 1500	de Worde 1507
ADVISE (verb)	<i>(t)adyse</i> (3)	<i>adyse</i> <i>aduse</i> <i>ause</i>	<i>adyse</i> (3)	<i>(t)adyse</i> (3)	<i>(t)adyse</i> (3)
ASSAULT (noun)	<i>assault</i>	<i>assaulte</i>	<i>assaulte</i>	<i>assaute</i>	<i>assaulte</i>
AVENGE (verb)	<i>aduenge</i> (3) <i>adue~ge</i> (2) ²	<i>auenge</i> <i>a uenge</i> (3) <i>adue~ge</i>	<i>aduenge</i> (5)	<i>aduenge</i> (3) <i>auenge</i> (2)	<i>aduenge</i> (4) <i>adue~ge</i>
DAMPNED (past participle)	<i>dampned</i> (2) <i>da~pned</i>	<i>dampned</i> (3)	<i>dampned</i> (2) <i>da~pned</i>	<i>dampned</i> (3)	<i>dampned</i> (2) <i>da~pned</i>
DEFAULT (noun)	<i>defaute</i> <i>defanlte</i> ³	<i>defaute</i> <i>defaulte</i>	<i>defaute</i> (2)	<i>defaute</i> (2)	<i>defaute</i> (2)
DOUBT (verb)	<i>doubte</i> (2)	<i>doubte</i> <i>doubt</i>	<i>doubte</i> (2)	<i>doubte</i> (2)	<i>doubte</i> (2)
DOUBT (noun)	<i>doubte</i>	<i>doubte</i>	<i>doubte</i>	<i>doute</i>	<i>doubte</i>

All the lexemes in question are reflexes of Latin words, but their direct source of borrowing into Middle English was Old French. Table 1b indicates their parent forms in both Romance languages. In all cases the consonant clusters existing in Latin were simplified in Old French, and reintroduced in late Middle English and Early Modern English.

¹ If a given form occurred more than once in the text, the number of occurrences is provided within brackets.

² The tilde was frequently used by the printers to represent <n> or <m>.

³ The graphemes <u> and <n> are occasionally confused in the editions under consideration.

Table 1b: Etymological spelling: the origin of words

	Old French	Latin
ADVISE	<i>aviser</i>	<i>advisere</i>
ASSAULT	<i>asaut</i>	* <i>adsaltus</i> < <i>adsilire</i> (popular Latin)
AVENGE	<i>à avengier</i>	<i>ad vindicare</i>
DAMN	<i>dam(p)ner</i>	<i>dam(p)nare</i>
DEFAULT	<i>defaute</i>	* <i>fallitus</i> < <i>fallere</i> (popular Latin)
DOUBT	<i>doute(r)</i>	<i>dubitare</i>

On the basis of the data in Table 1a we can conclude that in the book editions under consideration etymological spelling was predominant in the words listed here already at the end of the fifteenth century. In Caxton we can see only one exception to the rule – one instance of *defaute* does not contain the etymological <l>, preserving the Old French spelling. In his edition of 1494 Pynson corrected the evident typographic mistake in Caxton (<n> used instead of <u>), but was less consistent than Caxton as regards etymological spelling. Pynson's provenance (he was a Norman by birth) could be considered a factor contributing to his preference for the variants showing the Old French orthography. In 1500 he introduced slight changes in his spelling, which show some idiosyncratic consistency. Namely, all the nouns lack the epenthetic consonants, but nearly all the verbs (with the exception of three occurrences of *aduenge*) have the neo-Latinate spelling. In contrast, de Worde uses etymological spellings consistently, DEFAULT being the only lexeme for which he uses the old variant. Possibly, he was not aware of the relation between that word and its Latin ancestor.

3.2. ORTHOGRAPHIC DISTINCTION BETWEEN HOMOPHONES

The orthographic distinction between the homophones is the second criterion taken into consideration in the present study.

Table 2a shows that Caxton and de Worde (the latter only in his first edition) consistently distinguish between the lexemes THAN and THEN. On the contrary, the number of orthographic variants in Pynson's edition of 1494 testifies to the total confusion on his part as far as the differentiation between both lexemes is concerned. However, in the version of 1500, although he still clearly did not differentiate between THAN and THEN, Pynson became more consistent, using <a> in all the instances. Interestingly, in his remaining editions, de Worde also uses the spelling with <a> to represent THEN in one instance. That apparent typographic mistake makes it likely that de Worde consulted Pynson's edition of the book while preparing his own. Examples 1-4 below show the changes applied in the successive versions of the sentence containing the forms of THEN. In 1507 de Worde could have copied the sentence without reflecting on the meaning of the word.

Table 2a: THAN and THEN

	Caxton 1487	Pynson 1494	de Worde 1498	Pynson 1500	de Worde 1507
THAN (conjunction, preposition)	<i>than</i> (9) <i>tha~</i> (2)	<i>than</i> (10) <i>tha~</i>	<i>than</i> (11)	<i>than</i> (11)	<i>than</i> (11)
THEN (adverb)	<i>thenne</i> (7) <i>the~ne</i> (10)	<i>than</i> (11) <i>tha~</i> (2) <i>thanne</i> <i>thenne</i> <i>then</i> <i>the~ne</i>	<i>thenne</i> (17)	<i>than</i> (9) <i>thanne</i> (7) ⁴	<i>thenne</i> (10) <i>then</i> (6) <i>than</i>

- 1) "Thenne Constanci⁹ began to gyue laud vnto god" (Caxton 1487)
- 2) "Thenne constancius began to yeue laude vnto god" (Pynson 1494)

⁴ The differences in the total number of occurrences in Tables 2a, 3a, 3b, 4c and 5 results from the fact that short fragments of the text are missing from Pynson's edition of 1500.

⁵ The <9> symbol represents a flourish sometimes used instead of the word-final <-us>.

- 3) “Thenne Constancius began to gyue laude vnto god” (de Worde 1498)
- 4) “Than Constancius began to gyue laude vnto god” (Pynson 1500, de Worde 1507)

In Table 2b the gemination of the letter representing the consonant is a contrastive feature in Caxton and de Worde, but not in Pynson. It helps avoid homographs. In contrast, in Table 2c Caxton and de Worde consistently allow for homography – the gemination of the letter representing the vowel is not a distinctive feature here. Pynson shows some hesitation in 1494, but in 1500 the geminated form prevails.

Table 2b: SON and SUN

	Caxton_1487	Pynson_1494	de Worde_1498	Pynson_1500	de Worde_1507
SON (noun)	<i>sone</i>	<i>sonne</i>	<i>sone</i>	<i>sonne</i>	<i>sone</i>
SUN (noun)	<i>sonne</i> (2)	<i>sonne</i> <i>so~ne</i>	<i>sonne</i> (2)	<i>sonne</i> (2)	<i>sonne</i> (2)

Table 2c: SEA and SEE

	Caxton_1487	Pynson_1494	de Worde_1498	Pynson_1500	de Worde_1507
SEA (noun)	<i>see</i> (3)	<i>see</i> (2) <i>se</i>	<i>see</i> (3)	<i>see</i> (3)	<i>see</i> (3)
SEE (verb)	<i>see</i> (5)	<i>see</i> <i>se</i> (4)	<i>see</i> (5)	<i>see</i> (3) <i>se</i> (2)	<i>see</i> (5)

In Table 2d the distinction between SINS and SIGNES is preserved in Caxton and in Pynson’s first edition, but in de Worde (both editions) and in Pynson 1500 the geminated form appears instead of the one containing the cluster <gn> (as a spelling variant of SIGNES). It could have been due to a typographical error. However, other interpretations are also possible. On the

one hand, in view of the etymology of SIGN – from Latin *signum*, via Old French *sine*, *signe*, it is possible that de Worde simply used a different orthographic variant of SIGN (without <gn>) which was copied in later editions. On the other hand, he could have misunderstood the meaning of the word in question and interpreted it as ‘sins’.

Table 2d: *SIN, SINS and SIGNS*

	Caxton 1487	Pynson 1494	de Worde 1498	Pynson 1500	de Worde 1507
SIN (noun, sg)	<i>synne</i> (7)	<i>synne</i> (7)	<i>synne</i> (6) <i>syune</i>	<i>synne</i> (7)	<i>synne</i> (7)
SINS (noun, pl)	<i>synnes</i> (2)	<i>synnes</i> (2)	<i>synnes</i> (2)	<i>synnes</i> (2)	<i>synnes</i> (2)
SIGNES (noun, pl)	<i>signes</i> (3)	<i>signes</i> (3)	<i>sygnes</i> (2) <i>synnes</i>	<i>sygnes</i> (2) <i>synnes</i>	<i>sygnes</i> (2) <i>synnes</i>

- 1) “More I ansuere to the and saye that many other *signes* ben accomplysshed” (Caxton 1487)
- 2) “Moreouer I ansuere to y^e & say y^t many other *signes* be accomplisshed” (Pynson 1494)
- 3) “More I ansuere to the & saye that many other *synnes* ben accomplysshed” (de Worde 1498)
- 4) “More I anshere to the & say that many other *synnes* be accomplysshed” (Pynson 1500)
- 5) “More I ansuere to the and saye that many other *synnes* ben accomplysshed” (de Worde 1507)

Moreover, Table 2d provides some more evidence for the claim that the printers must have consulted each other’s editions during the preparation of their own ones.

3.3. MORPHOLOGICAL SPELLING

The third criterion in the present analysis is morphological spelling. This section deals with selected inflectional and derivational suffixes.

3.3.1. INFLECTION

Tables 3a and 3b show the orthographic variants of the third person singular ending {-th} in the verbs APPEAR and SAY, the occurrences of which constitute more than 50 per cent of all verb forms used in the text.

Table 3a: The suffix {-th} in the verb APPEAR⁶

	Caxton 1487	Pynson 1494	de Worde 1498	Pynson 1500	de Worde 1507
<-eth>	17	17	-	18	31
<-ethe>	-	4	-	7	-
<-yth>	8	1	36	-	5
<-ith>	11	14	-	-	-
<-ithe>	-	-	-	1	-

Table 3b: The suffix {-th} in the verb SAY

	Caxton 1487	Pynson 1494	de Worde 1498	Pynson 1500	de Worde 1507
<sayth>	19	3	35	11	34
<saythe>	-	2	-	4	-
<saith>	15	15	-	17	-
<saithe>	-	1	-	2	-
<seith>	-	11	-	-	-
<seithe>	-	3	-	-	-
<sath>	1	-	-	-	-
<sayeth>	-	-	-	-	1

In the above tables one can see that Caxton is not consistent in his use of the third person variants. In his edition of 1494 Pynson seems to have been

⁶ The orthographic variants found in the editions include: *apappereth(e)*, *apperyth*, *ap(p)erith(e)*, *appieryth* (only Caxton), *appryth* (only de Worde).

completely negligent about his choice of orthographic forms. However, de Worde showed impressive consistency in his first edition. In 1500 Pynson's consistency increased, i.e., the number of types of orthographic forms used by him was smaller. Surprisingly, in his second edition de Worde changed his usage considerably as regards the variants of the verb APPEAR. Moreover, that change in his usage, involving a decrease in consistency, seems to have been due to the influence exerted by Pynson's edition of 1500.

3.3.2. DERIVATION

Tables 4a-c list the orthographic forms recorded for three derivational suffixes, i.e., {-ness}, a native suffix, as well as {-al} and {-ity}, borrowed from French and Latin.

Table 4a: The suffix {-ness}

	Caxton 1487	Pynson 1494	De Worde 1498	Pynson 1500	de Worde 1507
<-nesse>	<i>fraylnesse</i>	<i>frailnesse</i> <i>mekenesse</i> (3)	<i>fraylnesse</i> <i>mekenesse</i> (2)	<i>fraylnesse</i> <i>mekenesse</i> (3)	<i>fraylnesse</i> <i>mekenesse</i> (2)
<-nes>	<i>mekenes</i> (3) <i>clerenes</i>	<i>clernes</i>	<i>mekenes</i> <i>clerenes</i>	<i>clerenes</i>	<i>mekenes</i> <i>clerenes</i>

Table 4 lists the occurrences of the two recorded orthographic variants of the suffix {-ness}, namely <-nesse> and <-nes>. Pynson and de Worde clearly favoured the longer variant, the one with the geminated <s> and the final <-e>, and did not change their usage over time. It is noteworthy that, in that case, Pynson was slightly more consistent than de Worde, i.e., the only exception to his rule was the single occurrence of *clernes* in his both editions.

Table 4b comprises the words containing the suffix {-al} (originally from Latin {-alis}) in one of four forms recorded, <-al>, <-all>, <-el>, <-ell>. The differences among the printers are considerable. Caxton used all the four endings, with some preference for single <l>. In 1494 Pynson showed a marked preference for <-all>, with only two occurrences of <-al>. In

contrast, de Worde used the variants <al>, <all> and <ell> (disregarding <el>) but attached them to different words than Caxton. In 1500 Pynson changed his consistent approach, applying all the four forms. His use of TEMPORAL and the introduction of <-ell> points to the likely influence from de Worde 1498. In 1507 de Worde chose an alternative type of consistency, i.e., he retained the geminated forms, both <-all> and <-ell>. ⁷ Apparently, he considered the endings containing <a> and <e>, respectively, to be distinctive (not interchangeable), if not morphologically, at least lexically; he avoided attaching different suffixal variants to the same root.

Table 4b: The suffix {-al}

	Caxton 1487	Pynson 1494	de Worde 1498	Pynson 1500	de Worde 1507
<-al>	<i>pryncypal</i> <i>pryncypal</i> <i>mortal</i>	<i>fynal</i> <i>temporal</i>	<i>pryncypal</i>	<i>fynal</i> <i>natural</i>	-
<-all>	<i>fynall</i>	<i>principall</i> (2) <i>te~porall</i> <i>naturall</i> <i>mortal</i> ⁸	<i>pryncypall</i> <i>fynall</i>	<i>principall</i> (2)	<i>pryncypall</i> (2) <i>fynall</i>
<-el>	<i>naturel</i>	-	-	<i>temporel</i>	-
<-ell>	<i>temporell</i> (2)	-	<i>temporell</i> (2) <i>naturell</i>	<i>temporell</i>	<i>temporell</i> (2) <i>naturell</i>

Table 4c shows the forms of the suffix {-ity} (originally from Latin {-itatem}), including <-ite> and <-yte>. Caxton did not show much preference for any of the two forms, whereas Pynson preferred <-ite>. Pynson's choice matches his general predilection for <i>, to the detriment of <y> in his editions. In contrast, de Worde favoured <-yte>, and <y> in his editions. ⁹

⁷ This conclusion about de Worde's preference for geminates confirms the findings of Blake (1965: 69) who analysed a different document printed by de Worde.

⁸ The sentence containing the adjective MORTAL is omitted three editions: de Worde 1498 and 1507, Pynson 1500.

⁹ For example, Pynson's *diligent*, *principally*, and *glorifie*, compared to de Worde's *dilygent*, *pryncypally*, and *gloryfye*, respectively.

However, one instance of *humilite* may be the result of influence from Pynson's previous edition.

Table 4c: The suffix {-ity}

	Caxton 1487	Pynson 1494	de Worde 1498	Pynson 1500	de Worde 1507
<-ite>	<i>humylite</i> (9) <i>humilite</i>	<i>humylite</i> (3) <i>humilite</i> (11)	-	<i>humilite</i> (1) <i>humylite</i> (8)	<i>humilite</i>
<-yte>	<i>humylyte</i> (5) <i>chastyte</i> <i>humanyte</i>	<i>humylyte</i> <i>chastyte</i> <i>humanyte</i>	<i>humylyte</i> (15) <i>chastyte</i> <i>humanyte</i>	<i>Humylyte</i> (2) <i>hu-mylyte</i> <i>chastyte</i> <i>humanyte</i>	<i>humylyte</i> (14) <i>chastyte</i> <i>humanyte</i>

Both in Pynson's and de Worde's use of the orthographic variants of suffixes, especially of {-al} in Table 4b, one can see a tendency towards increased consistency, interrupted by occasional influences from previous editions.

3.4. VOWEL LENGTH INDICATION

The criterion to be discussed in this section concerns the indication of vowel length. There are two basic ways of showing vowel length recorded in the editions:

- a) doubling the letter representing the vowel and
- b) adding the final <-e> in the syllable following the one containing the long vowel.

The variants of DO and SO in Table 5 show that the doubling of the letter corresponding to the long vowel did not prevail in those words. The only word, where it was consistently applied is FLEE (with merely one exception in Caxton). In Pynson the final single vowel is particularly frequent.¹⁰ In his paper, Blake (1965: 67) wrote about Pynson's "very strong tendency to

¹⁰ See also Table 2c.

double all final single vowels” in *Reynard the Fox*. Apparently, no such tendency can be traced in *The book of good maners*.

As regards the words ending in a consonant, there was no unanimity among the printers either. In the case of BOOK, Caxton hesitated between doubling the final letter and adding the final <-e>, without showing a marked preference for any of those measures, whereas in LIFE he did not indicate the length of the vowel at all. In contrast, in his first edition Pynson was surprisingly consistent with regard to BOOK, i.e., he indicated the length of the vowel solely by adding the final <-e>. However, in the variants of LIFE, no such consistency is evident. Interestingly, in 1500 he introduced double marking of the vowel length in BOOK (in the five instances of *booke*). Also in this case mutual influences can be seen between Pynson and de Worde. The latter, in his edition of 1498, seems to have been as consistent as Pynson in 1494, adding a final <-e> in all the instances of the word BOOK. In turn, in his edition of 1507, he must have been influenced by Pynson’s second edition, since he also introduced double marking in several instances. As regards LIFE, Pynson consistently added the final <-e> in it in 1500, and so did de Worde in 1507. On the other hand, in 1500 Pynson replaced <i> with <y> in two instances of the word LIFE, which testifies to his being influenced by de Worde’s edition of 1498.

Table 5: Vowel length indication

	Caxton 1487	Pynson 1494	de Worde 1498	Pynson 1500	de Worde 1507
BOOK	<i>book</i> (20) <i>boke</i> (24)	<i>boke</i> (44)	<i>boke</i> (44)	<i>boke</i> (36) <i>booke</i> (5)	<i>boke</i> (40) <i>booke</i> (4)
DO	<i>doo</i> (9) <i>do</i> (2)	<i>doo</i> <i>do</i> (10)	<i>doo</i> (3) <i>do</i> (8)	<i>doo</i> <i>do</i> (10)	<i>doo</i> (3) <i>do</i> (8)
SO	<i>soo</i> (2) <i>so</i> (19)	<i>soo</i> (2) <i>so</i> (19)	<i>soo</i> (7) <i>so</i> (14)	<i>soo</i> (4) <i>so</i> (17)	<i>soo</i> (9) <i>so</i> (12)
FLEE	<i>flee</i> (5) <i>fle</i> (1)	<i>flee</i> (6)	<i>flee</i> (6)	<i>flee</i> (2)	<i>flee</i> (6)
LIFE	<i>lyf</i> (4)	<i>lif</i> (3) <i>life</i>	<i>lyfe</i> (4)	<i>lyfe</i> (2) <i>life</i> (2)	<i>lyfe</i> (4)

Nevertheless, the use of final <-e> cannot always be explained as a measure indicating the vowel length. On the contrary, it is very frequently added for no apparent reason, for example in *kynge*, *kinge*, *sonne* ‘sun’, *whiche*, *whyche*, and *suche*.

4. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, it must be admitted that the texts under consideration show a large degree of variation. It was certainly at least partly due to the fact that there was still no significant pressure from spelling reformers to regularise and rationalise the spelling. Moreover, important differences can be seen in the printers’ consistency. Namely, de Worde seems to have been more consistent in his editions than Pynson. However, also Pynson made some improvements in that regard. On the whole, later editions are more convergent than the earlier ones, i.e., the differences in the distribution of variants are not so conspicuous.

It seems that Hart’s claim that printers altered spelling “as they pleased to fill up the compositor’s line in printing” (1569, fo. 15r) was too strong, though it might have been true of the use of tildes and contractions. At least in some cases, for example in the distribution of verb forms in the third person singular and of the variants of the {-al} suffix, the modifications introduced in the editions represent the printers’ conscious efforts aiming to reduce the degree of variation and make their spelling more consistent. Thus, they did not always copy the text thoughtlessly.

In view of the above findings, neither is it possible to agree with Brengelman who wrote that there is no evidence “that any sort of mutual dissemination of information about spelling among printers was taking place” (1980: 333). In fact, the analysis of the similarities and differences among the editions of *The book of good manners* leads to the opposite conclusion, i.e., that the printers consulted one another’s works and that mutual influences between them were frequent.

Undoubtedly, the analysis presented above does not show an exhaustive picture of the early printers’ orthographic systems, and more research needs to be done regarding the distribution of particular graphemes, punctuation and capitalisation in the documents published by a larger number of printers.

As indicated in the introduction, the present study is part of a large project in progress.

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