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*Present Indicative plural forms in some plays
of the Bodleian MSS Digby 133*

In Medio Inglese, la grafia e le forme grammaticali dell'inglese variavano non solo a seconda dell'autore e della provenienza geografica, ma anche nello stesso autore e nella stessa area geografica. Tuttavia, nella zona attorno a Londra, si stava gradualmente realizzando un processo di standardizzazione linguistica. Uno degli aspetti più evidenti di questa standardizzazione era rappresentato dalla perdita delle flessioni grammaticali presenti nelle sillabe finali di molti vocaboli. Tuttavia, alla fine del quindicesimo secolo si trovavano ancora delle flessioni: in particolare, nell'area delle Midlands, alcuni testi presentavano ancora la desinenza del presente indicativo plurale.

Lo scopo di questo studio è di descrivere le forme con cui viene indicato il presente indicativo plurale in quattro opere teatrali del tardo Medio Inglese appartenenti ad alcuni testi contenuti nel Bodleian Digby MSS 133, e cioè *The Conversion of St Paul*, *Mary Magdalene*, *The Killing of the Children*, e *Wisdom*, tutte scritte nel dialetto dell'East Anglia, e di stabilire i motivi che giustificano la scelta di una forma piuttosto che un'altra.

1. *Introduction*

In Middle English (henceforth ME), not only spelling, but also grammatical forms of the language written in different parts of the country and by different writers were far from being uniform even in the same area. Yet by the end of the fourteenth century and up to the middle of the fifteenth century, the type of English written and spoken in the area around London acquired great importance as far as the gradual trend towards a standard language was concerned, particularly in the East Midland area. As a consequence, some of the rougher dialectal features were eradicated. One of the most recognizable features of the development from ME to Modern English was the reduction in the use of grammatical inflections embodied in the final syllables of many words. Yet this was not an absolute criterion, as, at the end of the fifteenth century, a number of in-

flections were still present. In some Midland texts in particular, morphemes for the present indicative plural forms could still be found.

The purpose of this study is to describe the ways in which present indicative forms are rendered in some late ME plays belonging to the so-called Bodleian Digby MSS 133 and to determine whether the occurrence of one form instead of another was random or followed certain other dialectal features. In the first part of the paper, we will discuss present indicative plural forms commonly used in early and late ME. In the second part we will describe the results of an analysis carried out on four plays, i.e. *The Conversion of St Paul*, *Mary Magdalene*, *The Killing of the Children*, and *Wisdom*, all belonging to the Bodleian Digby MSS 133.

2. Middle English Present Indicative Plural Forms

In ME, verbal inflection became uniform in the present tense system, regardless of the verb type (i.e. strong vs. weak). Yet, as shown in Table 1, this inflection varied greatly in different ME dialects.¹

Person	Southern and Kentish		East Midland		West Midland		Northern	
	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1 st	-e	-eþ	-e		-e		-e	-es /-is
2 nd	-est		-est	-en /-es	-es /-est	-en /-es/	-es	
3 rd	-eþ		-eþ /-es		-eþ /-es	-un /-us	-es	

Table 1. ME Plural Paradigms of Present Indicative.

Such morphemes occurred in various spelling variants: for example, the unstressed vowel <e> could be also written as <y> or <i>; final <th> could be substituted by <þ>, or, in some cases, by <t>; <s> sometimes appeared as <z> (McIntosh 1983: 235).

¹ A complete description of the present indicative paradigm and relative tables normally describing the plural forms of all ME dialects can also be found in Sweet (1900: 378-379, 381), Wright / Wright (1928: 175-176), Rota (1951: 472), Mossé (1958: 76-77), Fisiak (1968: 96), Brunner (1970: 70-71), Samuels (1972: 85-86), Pezzini (1981: 165), Frank (1982: 170), McIntosh (1983: 235-244), McIntosh *et al.* (1986: I, 467), Francovich Onesti (1988: 163-164), Görlach (1991: 88) and Lass (1992: 134-139).

ME plural inflections of the present indicative developed from Old English *-iaþ* which turned to *-eþ* in the Southern dialects, and to *-es* in the Northern ones. Midland dialects behaved differently, as there the Northern forms in *-es* were adopted along with the new *-en* morpheme which derived from the endings of the present subjunctive and the simple past (Wright / Wright 1928: 175; Rota 1951: 472). Apparently, the introduction of the *-en* forms solved the problem arising from the decreasing distinction between Old English *he* (third person singular – masculine) and *heo* (third person singular – feminine, and third person plural), which, in ME, were both represented as *he*. Ambiguity, determined by the fact that *he* supplied the function of ‘he’, ‘she’ and ‘they’, was eventually solved not only by introducing the pronouns ‘she’ and ‘they’, but also by replacing the original *-eþ* morphemes (deriving from Old English *-iaþ*) of the plural present indicative paradigm with the present indicative plural morphemes ending in *-en* (Samuels 1972: 85), and which is still found in numerous Midland dialects (Wright / Wright 1928: 175). See Figure 1, from *Middle English Maps*, <http://icg.harvard.edu/~eng101/workbook/mid-eng/dialect-map/>:



Figure 1. Standard present indicative plural persons in Middle English dialects.

By the end of the fourteenth century, the plural paradigm of present indicative verbs of all dialects tended either to be reduced to final *-e* or to disappear (0-forms).² There was, however, the occurrence of *-eþ* forms in various late ME texts whose scribes belonged to the *-en* area. In the Midland dialects, for example, traces of the morphemes *-eth* / *-ith* were still present, as in the *Paston Letters*: "...and all oder thynggys that behouyth on-to here profythe harddely to myn powere" (Paston 1458: 8, 10). According to McIntosh (1983: 235-244), these forms did not derive from the traditional OE *-iaþ* paradigm, but were rather innovations modelled on the inflection that occurred north of the Chester-Wash line. In Old English, the Northumbrian paradigm of present indicative verbs was *-e* for the 1st person singular; *-es* / *-est* for the 2nd person singular; *-es* / *-eþ* for the 3rd person singular and *-aþ* for all plural forms. In early ME, final *-t* and *-þ* of the 2nd and 3rd person singular disappeared while final *-s* was extended to the 1st person singular so that eventually the whole of the singular and plural persons ended with *-es* (Wright / Wright 1928: 175-176; Lass 1992: 136). The ME trend to reduce all flectional endings to *-e* or to 0 was hindered in the area north of the Chester-Wash line, where the operating rule required the present indicative plural form *-es*³ unless the subject of the verb was a personal pronoun immediately preceding or following it (McIntosh 1983: 237; Rota 1951: 472). If so, the ending was reduced either to *-e* or to 0. The dialect of the Northern Midlands was so strongly influenced by this paradigm that its own present indicative plural forms were modelled on it: the present indicative plural forms ending either with final *-en* or with final *-es* were replaced by *-eth*, unless the subject of the verb was a personal pronoun immediately preceding or following the verb itself. If so, the ending was *-en*, or reduced to *-e* / 0 (see Table 2).

² Brunner (1970: 71) states levelling to 0 was adopted throughout England when the subject was a pronoun positioned after the verb.

³ According to Wright / Wright (1928: 176), in modern Northern Scottish and most of the North Midland dialects all the singular and plural persons take final *-s* / *-z* when not immediately preceded by pronouns (i.e., when the subject is a noun, a relative or interrogative pronoun, or when the verb and the subject are separated by a clause).

Dialectal Paradigm	Non-personal pronoun subject (not) adjacent to verb	Personal Pronoun subject adjacent to verb
Northern	-es	-e/0
Midlands	-eth	-en (-e/0)

Table 2. Northern and Midlands present indicative paradigms.

If there was a construction in which two verbs linked by a conjunction shared the same personal pronoun subject immediately preceding the first verb (as in ‘they sit and eat’), then the morphological pattern would be: pronoun + verb ending in *-e* + conjunction + verb ending in *-eþ*.

Constructions of the pattern ‘they that sit’ could have either forms of the verb, but such constructions as ‘them that sit’ seemed to allow the *-eþ* form only (McIntosh 1983: 242).

On the whole, the Chester-Wash line was not so sharply defined: south of it, there was a border zone of varying width where both *-eth* and *-es* existed. However, most scribes attesting the innovatory *-eth* plural ending came from the area south of the Chester-Wash line: roughly speaking, the area comprising North-East Leicestershire, Rutland, North Hampshire, North Huntingdonshire, North Ely and North-West Norfolk (McIntosh 1983: 236).

3. *The Bodleian Digby MSS 133*

The Digby mystery plays seem to belong to the East Anglian dialect, and more precisely to the Norfolk area (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: xi-ii). In this section we will try to describe the forms of the present indicative plural persons occurring in some of the plays of the Bodleian Digby MSS 133:⁴ *The Conversion of St Paul*, *Mary Magdalene*, *The Killing of the Children*, and *Wisdom*. These plays show a sort of continuing hand in the manuscript, indicated by the fact that:

⁴ The so-called Bodleian Digby MSS 133 contains some unrelated texts brought together accidentally: Galileo Galilei’s *Discorso del Flusso e Reflusso del Mare*, dated 1616, Roger Bacon’s *Radix Mundi*, dated 1550, *The Conversion of St Paul*, tracts of *De Theoria Trium Superiorum (Planctarum)*, *De Epicyclo Lunæ*, and *De Capite et Cauda Draconis*, the incomplete *Trattato dell’Arte Geomantica*, all of them written in a seventeenth-century hand, *Mary Magdalene*, *Candelmas Day and the Kylling of the Children of Israelle*, and the incomplete fragment of *Wisdom*.

- (a) the initials of Myles Blomefylde are on *The Conversion of St Paul, Mary Magdalene* and *Wisdom* (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: x);
- (b) probably the main scribe of *The Killing of the Children* was also the scribe of *Wisdom* (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: liv, lxviii);
- (c) ll.217-224 of *Mary Magdalene* seem to have been borrowed from ll.97-104 of *The Killing of the Children* (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: x).

This kind of correlation between the plays may seem very fragile. However, if we take into consideration the fact that the texts are not the original ones but copies of earlier manuscripts, we should not judge them to be ‘corrupted copies’ or deem that the scribes were not competent in their work. The fact that ME scribes did not feel any obligation either to preserve the original spelling or to “observe complete consistency in adapting the spelling of his original to make it conform to his own practice” (Brook 1963: 56) does not point to the ‘lower’ quality of the represented language.

Normally, ME scribes, while copying their texts, used to translate their exemplar into their own dialect (Beadle 1991: 93). This was a necessity, since not only texts but also scribes were not physically linked to the area to which they belonged, as they could move about: texts passed from one region to another (and dialectal translation was necessary to make the text understood by the local readership) and scribes coming from other regions (and therefore speaking different dialects) had to understand the text in order to copy it. For instance, one scribe from Norfolk could operate in Kent, and while copying his Kentish exemplars he could use a Norfolk spelling system and a Kentish translation of it; the same scribe, when working in Norfolk, could come across a Northumbrian text and, while copying it, he had to ‘translate’ the Northumbrian dialect and its spelling system into the Norfolk ones in order to make the text accessible to other Norfolk people (Beadle 1991: 90). It should also be borne in mind that ME scribes were inventing a new spelling system. Indeed, the Norman Conquest influenced the use of written English in England. Before the Conquest, English was the language of both government and literature, and was especially used in recording legal and administrative documents (unlike in the rest of Europe). After the Conquest English was substituted with French and

Latin: Latin replaced English as the written language of government and French replaced English as the written language of law and literature. Yet the drawing up of documents in English did not completely cease: to copy such records was important in order to preserve original registers (which were not replaced by the copy but maintained as proof in case of litigation). When in early ME the recording of documents in English flourished once more, scribes may have found the original Old English spelling incomprehensible and felt forced to invent their own (Laing 1991: 33-39).

While copying, scribes had to decode the original texts or manuscripts and to re-encode them in such a way that they could offer different encoding solutions or even that some spelling systems could include variant solutions within the usage of a single scribe (Laing 1999: 251). Scribes could then behave in three different ways (as discussed by Laing 1991: 251-270):

- 1) the scribe was the inventor of a spelling system and used it to compose rather than copy (as Orm did);
- 2) the scribe was the inventor of a spelling system and used it to copy someone else's work (he had to decode the language of the author and then re-encode it in his own language);
- 3) the scribe was the inventor of a spelling system and used it to copy someone else's work which he also had to translate (he had to decode the language of the author, re-encode it in his own language and to a greater or lesser extent 'translate' the original text or manuscript into his own dialect).

There may have been cases in which scribes either knew the different dialect and had no difficulty in copying the text, or did not care to understand the words and tried (a) to copy the text in exactly the same way as it was written (so that, even in late ME, they reproduced exactly the Old English spelling features because they did not see the sense of a word and were worried about losing the meaning of the text if they did not reproduce it word by word), or (b) to copy the text less carefully and even invented nonce spellings because they did not understand the language in those strange and archaic forms (Laing 1991: 39).

We now know that the manuscript of *The Conversion of St Paul* was copied by two scribes, the main one using an Anglicana hand with few

Secretary features,⁵ while the second used both Anglicana and Secretary styles, which would suggest a date of twenty to thirty years later than the rest of the manuscript. The first scribe wrote the whole play except for folios 45-47 (i.e. ll. 412-515) which were written by the second scribe. A third hand appeared three times to write the instruction 'Daunce' in the right margin of f. 37r and the left margin of ff. 34v and 43v (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: xvi-xvii).

The manuscript of *Mary Magdalene* was copied by one scribe who, however, used such an inconsistent style (probably his exemplar was also inconsistent), that we can merely suppose the text is an extremely hurried copy of the original manuscript (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: xxxi- xxxii).

The Killing of the Children was written in two hands; the main scribe was probably the author of the play itself, so that the text may be deemed to be an authoritative / authorial copy of the play, if not the original text; both the main scribe and the second one used the Anglicana spelling system throughout the play, though the second hand had a somewhat different style (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: liii-lv).

Whoever copied the manuscript of *Wisdom* was the main scribe of *The Killing of the Children* and was apparently a very careful workman who made relatively few errors. The manuscript of *Wisdom* gives the impression of being somewhat older than that of *The Killing of the Children* and this impression is based on the style of writing and the watermark of the paper, both suggesting a date of 1490-1500 for *Wisdom*. The manuscript, however, is not the original but a valid copy of the text (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: lxiv-lxv).

If we exclude *The Killing of the Children*, which seems to be an authorial copy of the original manuscript, and where presumably the scribe/author was simply using his own dialect, we are unable to say whether the other three scribes of the plays may be regarded as simply the 'inventors' of a spelling system employed to copy someone else's

⁵ Anglicana was the handwriting style that became distinctively recognizable from the mid-fourteenth century and developed from the Textura one (regular square-off hand) because Textura was slow to produce and was the first move toward the so-called 'cursive hand'. Secretary was a new type of handwriting that began to dominate from the third quarter of the fourteenth century and apparently originated in Italy (cf. *Introduction to Paleography*, <http://www.dac.neu.edu/english/kakelly/med/amet.html>).

work, or also as ‘translators’ of their exemplars. Probably the scribes of *The Conversion of St Paul*, of *Mary Magdalene*, and of *Wisdom* were both, which makes things harder for us to describe, as, for example, the scribe of *Wisdom* was consistent in the use of his spelling system whereas that of *Mary Magdalene* was not (cf. also Maci 1999).

What is certain is that the plays do have strong Norfolk features (Beadle 1991: 90), even though each play may have been copied by various scribes with different dialects, and the plays themselves may have come from different regions. The manuscripts of these plays were very probably copied by Norfolk scribes in Norfolk or in the border areas of one of the adjacent counties, “in the incipient standard form of English which became increasingly recognizable during the latter half of the fifteenth century” (Beadle 1991: 91). In our study, therefore, we are analyzing four plays which may be regarded as examples of the Norfolk dialect.

3.1. *The Conversion of St Paul*

The play, probably written in 1490 in the East Anglian dialect (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: ix), comprises 662 lines. The plural forms of the present indicative found here are just 29. Only 3 of them seem to belong to the innovative present indicative plural paradigm in *-eth*; these belong to verbs immediately preceded or followed by a non-personal pronoun subject:

- (1) *All myscreautys and wretchys Pat doth aryse* (l. 391);
- (2) Behold how *the people hath* no pleasaunce (l. 444);
- (3) *Twenti doyth* gladly folow oure layes (l. 488).

It is worth noting that two of these plural forms with the innovative Northern *-th*-ending occur when there is a pleonastic use of *to do*, which is probably required in order to accomplish the metre pattern of the play, as *do* provides an additional unstressed syllable.⁶

The writer of the play might well have written *do* with 0-ending in-

⁶ The play has the usual four-stress verses found in most East Anglian drama of the period, though occasionally contracted to three-stress or expanded to five or six according to the rhetorical demand (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: xviii).

stead of final *-th*; yet he did not, and his preference for the use of the innovative plural form of the present indicative vs. the standard one seems to confirm the influence of Northern dialectal features, at the time when the play was either written or copied.⁷ Moreover, there are two present perfect forms in which the morpheme of the auxiliary ends with *-eþ*:

- (4) *My men hath* forsake me (l. 201);
- (5) *my busshopys hathe* chosyne won most rygorus (l. 424).

Another use of the innovative paradigm influenced by the Northern dialects can be found in the following lines, where the present indicative plural form ends in *-th*, and refers to a non-personal pronoun to which it is not adjacent:

- (6) Emperowr he ys, [...] whoys *goodnes and grace althyng doth excel* (l. 599);
- (7) *Pryde and voluptuosyte* Þer hartys *doth* so fyre (l. 446);

One plural certainly derives from the Southern dialects, as shown by the presence of the personal pronoun *we* adjacent to the verb:

- (8) *we comyt* yow all to Þe Trynyte (l. 353).

Three sentences have non-personal pronoun subjects adjacent to a present indicative verb with 0-desinence:

- (9) Here *the knyghtys lede* forth Sale into a place (stage direction to l. 211);
- (10) And *Ananie men call* me wheras I dwell (l. 274);
- (11) *The gatys kep* by commandment of Caypha and Anna (l. 650).

Two relative clauses with a non-personal pronoun subject have present indicative plural forms with 0-ending:

- (12) And by *thes letturs þat be* most reuerrent (l. 50);
- (13) *Knytys and seruuantys þat be* so plesaunt (l. 82).

⁷ McIntosh (1963: 8) states that any alteration that would destroy certain features of metre such as rhyme or alliteration were very often carefully avoided by scribes.

All the other 18 sentences have plural forms of the present indicative with 0-ending; their subject is a personal pronoun (see Table 3).

<i>Type of ending</i>	<i>Dialect</i>	<i>Occurrences</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
-es	Standard Midlands	0	0
-en	Standard Midlands	0	0
0-ending (adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	5	17.3
0-ending (adjacent to pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	18	62
-th (adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Innovation	3	10.3
-th (not adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Innovation	2	6.9
-th (adjacent to pers.pron.subj.)	Southern	1	3.5

Table 3. Verb endings in *The Conversion of St Paul* (quantitative findings).

The low percentage of *th*-endings forming the innovative plural paradigm of present indicative verbs (17.3%) denotes either the dismissal of the innovative rule or an occasional personal use (maybe of the scribe). If we then compare this percentage with the much higher one of the Midland standard tradition which presents the 0-ending (79.3%), it is clear that, from a morphological point of view, the tendency to level all forms towards 0 had already reached its peak by the time *The Conversion of St Paul* was written or copied.

3.2. *Mary Magdalene*

The play, probably written at the end of fifteenth century, clearly presents East Anglian features, though it has a mixture of Southern and Northern forms (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: xxxvi). It consists of 2144 lines, but there are only 68 occurrences of the plural forms of the present indicative. Generally, the plural form of the present indicative has no inflection at all. Only 7 cases present the innovative Northern ending:

- (14) Here *answeryt all þe people* at onys ‘3a, my lord, 3a!’ (stage direction to l. 45);
- (15) Swych *desepeyouns potyt peynys* to exsport (l. 458);
- (16) Here *aperytt to dyvllys* before þe mastyr (stage direction to l. 726);

- (17) Here *goth Mary and Martha*, and mett wyth Jhesus (stage direction to l. 794);
- (18) Here *goth Mary and Martha* homvard (stage direction to l. 819);
- (19) *Yower dilectabyll dedys devydytt* me from dyversyte (l. 955);
- (20) Here *devoyd all Þe thre Maryys* (stage direction to l. 1133).

It is interesting to note that most plural forms with the innovative Northern morpheme occur in stage directions where the language can be used much more freely than in the play itself, because it does not have to follow rhyme- or metre-controlled patterns. On the other hand, lines 458 and 955 apparently show the use of final *-th* (or its spelling variant with *-yt*) required by the metre structure of the stanzas where they occur, as final <-yt> provides an additional unstressed syllable. There is one Southern form ending with *-th* immediately preceded by a personal pronoun subject:

- (21) Onto my goddys aperteynyng *they beth* (l. 1527).

Here, however, *beth* is the *b*-line of the quatrain which follows the rhythmical pattern *abab* and final *-th* seems to have been kept so as to rhyme with *hed* (l. 1530).⁸ In the play there are also 13 occurrences of a more standard Midland paradigm in which the plural person of the present indicative features morphemes ending with *-en*; three of them have a personal pronoun subject, all the others have a non-personal pronoun subject:

- (22) *Erllys and borons and knylys Þat byn bold* (l.49);
- (23) *All thes byn ondyr my governouns* (l. 160);
- (24) A, how *my peynys don* me repelle (l. 283);
- (25) *ʒe be gronddar of gladnesse lto Þem Þat dwellyn ondyr yower domynacyon* (ll. 326/7);
- (26) *women Þat arn* in my presens here (l. 811);
- (27) *Mary and Martha and Lazare gon* home to Þe castell (stage direction to l. 925);
- (28) Now *all creaturs vpon mold / Þat byn* of Crysts creacyon (ll. 1811/2);
- (29) In good soth *we byn* atenddawntt! (l. 1871);
- (30) We angellys all *obeyyn* dewowtly (l. 2017).

⁸ It must be noted that in ME final -P (-th) became voiced [d] after vowels in unstressed syllables, although -P (-th) was retained in writing (Wright / Wright 1928: 108).

Other examples of such present indicative plural forms can be found in l. 1931, l. 1934, l. 1935 (all of them relative clauses), l. 2017 (in which there is no contiguity with the non-personal pronoun subject). All the other 48 plural forms of the present indicative have 0-ending: 3 of them are ruled by a non-personal pronoun subject not adjacent to the verb (quotations 31 to 33), while five have non-personal pronoun subjects adjacent to the verb (quotations 34 to 38). The remaining 39 sentences have 0-ending and personal pronoun subjects (see Table 4).

- (31) Thow þes sottys aʒens me *make* replycacyon (l. 203);
 (32) My dobelet and my hossys eyur together *abyde* (l. 502);
 (33) Here *ar* jentyll women dysyore your presens to se (l. 513).

- (34) How *sey þe phylyssoverys* be my ryche reyne? (l. 164);
 (35) *Thes grawous peynys* make me ner mad (l. 293);
 (36) *Your sofreyne colourrys* set wyth synseryte (l. 517);
 (37) And *my offycys* be redy wyth þer ordynowns (l. 579);
 (38) Wanne baner gyn to blasse and *bemmys* gyn to blow (l. 934).

Type of ending	Dialect	Occurrences	Percentage
-es	Standard Midlands	0	0
-en	Standard Midlands	13	19.1
0-ending (adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	5	7.4
0-ending (adjacent to pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	39	57.4
-th (adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Innovation	7	10.3
-th (not adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Innovation	3	4.4
-th (adjacent to pers.pron.subj.)	Southern	1	1.4

Table 4. Verb endings in *Mary Magdalene* (quantitative findings).

As we said before, in *Mary Magdalene* the innovative paradigm mainly occurs in stage directions where the language can be represented more freely, as it does not follow the metre pattern of the play. The low percentage of its occurrence may point to the fact that levelling of all endings towards the 0-form was the standard procedure by the time *Mary Magdalene* was written. The addition of final *-th* to the present indicative verb when a non-personal pronoun subject occurs may thus

have merely been a scribal practice. As for final *-en*, its addition was possibly dictated by the need for extra unstressed syllables when the metre structure of the play required them.

3.3. *Candlemes Day and the Kylling of Þe Children of Israelle*

At the end of the manuscript of *The Killing of the Children* there is a signature (Jhon Parfre) and the date 1512, which is the year when the play was either written or, more probably, copied. It is a play of 565 lines written in the Midland dialect with East Anglian features (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: lvi). All the plural forms of the present indicative (64 occurrences) have 0-ending, except for two (quotations 39 and 40), which present the more standard Midland forms with final *-en*. To these we have to add two present perfect forms with the auxiliary *han* (quotations 41 and 42):

(39) And sle *alle tho children*, without excepcion / Of to yeeres of age
þat within Israelle *bene* (ll. 87-88)⁹

(40) My spretes joyen (l. 501), þou art so amyable.

(41) As ye *han* seyde, I concert therto (l. 474);

(42) The lawes, Mary, ful welle ye *han* obeyed (l. 519).

In the play 8 plural forms of present indicative verbs occur in relative clauses (cf. quotations 43 and 44). Other examples can be found with a non-personal pronoun subject in ll. 69, 74, 80/22,¹⁰ 239 and 316.

(43) And to venquysshe *my enemyes* þat ageynst me *do* (l. 63);

(44) To sle and mordere *yong children* þat in þer cradelle *slumber* (l. 303);

There are 8 present indicative plural forms with 0-ending with a non-

⁹ Apparently, *ben* (l. 88) was probably required for rhyming reasons, since the verb – the final word of the c-line of a stanza that has an *ababbcb* rhyme-pattern – rhymes with *seen* in *Withoute ony tarieng, my wille may be seen* (l. 86).

¹⁰ In the play, twenty-five lines are cancelled after l. 80. Here they are indicated by l. 80 followed by a slash and the number of the erased line, as shown above in “l. 80/22”.

personal pronoun subject adjacent to the verb; other examples are l. 423 and stage directions to l. 430 and to l. 485:

- (45) To aspye if *ony rebelles do* ageynst oure lay (l. 80/4);
- (46) And if *ony suche come* in thy way (l. 80/5);
- (47) Here *the knyghtess and Watkyn walke* about the place (stage direction to l. 234);
- (48) [...] as *prophetes do* specifie (l. 245);
- (49) *Women be* ferse when thei list to assaile (l. 311);

All the other 45 occurrences have present indicative plural forms with 0-ending and personal pronoun subjects, as the following quotations:

- (50) In whos worshippe this fest *we honor* (l. 10);
- (51) And though *thei sharpe and crye*, I care not a might (l. 142);
- (52) Say, I warne them in ony wyse þer blood þat *thei spille* (l. 175);
- (53) Women be ferse when *thei list* to assaile (l. 311);
- (54) *Worshippe* we Jhesu, þat shalbe oure sauoyre – (l. 547).

The Killing of the Children seems to be the most recent play, if compared with the others contained in the Bodleian Digby MSS 133. The fact that all plural forms in the present indicative have a 0-ending may meaningfully represent a more stable linguistic condition, as regards the language or the dialect spoken in that period, which makes the language of the play seem much more similar to Present-Day English, as far as the paradigm used for the plural present indicative is concerned (see Table 5), even though the play seems to have been written at the beginning of the sixteenth century (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: lviii).

Type of ending	Dialect	Occurrences	Percentage
-es	Standard Midlands	0	0
-en	Standard Midlands	2	3
0-ending (adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	17	27
0-ending (adjacent to pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	45	70
-th (adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Innovation	0	0
-th (not adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Innovation	0	0
-th (adjacent to pers.pron.subj.)	Southern	0	0

Table 5. Verb endings in *The Killing of the Children* (quantitative findings).

The impression of a much more modern play is probably due to the fact that the manuscript of *The Killing of the Children* seems an authoritative if not an authorial copy: apparently the main scribe was adapting a longer play to more modest requirements; indeed, the author himself may have been making another copy and revising it with the help of an assistant (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: liv-lv); his own spelling uniformity gives the idea of a less ‘corrupted’ version of the play.

3.4. *Wisdom*

The play is incomplete and was allegedly written between 1490 and 1500. Its dialect seems to be the East Anglian one (Baker / Murphy / Hall 1982: lxviii). This fragment, consisting of 751 lines, has 67 occurrences of present indicative plural forms. Of these, 53 have a 0-paradigm; 3 sentences with non-personal pronoun subjects immediately preceding or following the verb have the innovative present indicative plural forms ending in *-th*:

- (55) here *entreth fyve virgynes* [...] and syng (stage direction to l. 165);
- (56) *Alle thinge hath dew tymes* (l. 401);
- (57) *Riches makyth a man equalle* (l. 587).

There is one relative clause which shows the innovative morphemes and naturally the verb is not adjacent to the non-personal pronoun subject:

- (58) *thei that of the hevye burthen of synne hath cure* (l. 159).

Compare the pattern of the sentence above with the following:

- (59) *thei that despeyere mercy haue grett concu[n]ccion* (l. 467).

There is also an interesting plural form of a present perfect verb with its auxiliary ending in *-th*:

- (60) Now *Mayntenaunce and Periury/ Hath shewed* the trace of her company (ll.745-6).

No forms seem to have final *-th* deriving from Old English *-iaþ*. However, cf. (61), in which the passive form has the auxiliary with final *-th*, probably a Midland form (Brunner 1970: 84):

- (61) *Thre myghtes euer Cristen soule hase /whiche beth applieth to the Trinete* (l. 177/ 178).

There is one non-personal pronoun adjacent to its verb which has the present indicative plural form ending in *-en*, typical of the Midland ME dialects:

- (62) In creatures *his werkes ben* most wonderfully (l. 257).

There is also one non-personal pronoun adjacent to a present indicative verb which has a plural paradigm with final *-es*, the characteristic morpheme of the North:

- (63) For God is charite, as *actours telles* (l. 270).

Here, however, the Northern morpheme seems to be maintained so as to accomplish the rhyme of the stanza in which the line occurs: the stanza follows an *abab bcbc* rhyme scheme and *telles* is the final word of one of the *b*-lines.

There are four sentences with non-personal pronoun subjects not immediately adjacent to the verb: in these cases, the present indicative plural forms have 0-ending:

- (64) *Wiche sacramentes alle synne wasshe away* (l. 125);
(65) Thus *alle the soules*, that in this lyve be / *Stondyng in grace, be lyke to this* (l. 172);
(66) Lo, *these thre myghtes* in on soule *be* (l. 277);
(67) Courtly persones *men hem proclame* (l. 599).

Six sentences have non-personal pronoun subjects adjacent to present indicative verbs which form the plural person with 0-ending:

- (68) Here in *þe goyng out, þe fyue wyttes syng*: [...] (stage direction to l. 325);
(69) *Your resons be grete* (l. 450);

- (70) *These thynges be now so conuersaunt* (l. 607);
 (71) *Men sewe to my frendshippe* (l. 636);
 (72) *Fewe places now there be* (l. 649);
 (73) *These meny thre synnys comprehende* (l. 715).

Note that three out of six 0-forms of the present indicative plural paradigm refer to the verb ‘to be’ in the typical variant of the Midland dialect deriving from ME *ben* (Brunner 1970:84). Table 6 gives a quantitative summary of the present indicative plural forms occurring in this play.

Type of ending	Dialect	Occurrences	Percentage
-es	Standard Midlands	1	1.5
-en	Standard Midlands	1	1.5
0-ending (adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	6	9
0-ending (not adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	4	6
0-ending (adjacent to pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	51	76
-th (adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Innovation	3	4.5
-th (not adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Innovation	1	1.5
-th (adjacent to pers.pron.subj.)	Southern	0	0

Table 6. Verb endings in *Wisdom* (quantitative findings).

In *Wisdom* the innovative paradigm of the present indicative plural forms occurs even less frequently than in *The Conversion of St Paul and Mary Magdalene*: only 6% of forms use the *th*-ending vs. 91% using the more standard ending levelled to 0. The use of the innovative paradigm is not justified by rhyming reasons (all endings with *-th* occur in mid-line position), nor does it seem to be required by metre patterns; therefore, the use of final *-th* instead of 0 seems a personal use of the scribe who probably (and unconsciously) preferred his own dialectal variant to the standard ones. However, at least in one line, the use of final *-th* may seem justified: l. 159 has *hath* in:

- (74) *thei that of the hevy burthen of synne hath cure.*

which may be necessary to create alliteration with *th-* of *thei*, *that*, and *burthen* (this was pronounced with the voiced dental fricative up to the second half of the seventeenth century. Dobson 1981: 955).

4. Conclusion

As we have shown, only three Bodleian Digby plays reveal the presence of the innovative plural paradigm of the present indicative: *The Conversion of St Paul*, *Mary Magdalene*, and *Wisdom*, whereas *The Killing of the Children* shows a strong tendency towards the use of 0-ending in the present indicative plural paradigm. In all the plays we can see a very high percentage of standard Midland forms, while the innovative Northern paradigm, contrary to what we might expect, is in fact quite infrequent (see Table 7).

Paradigm	Text			
	<i>Wisdom</i>	<i>Killing of the Children</i>	<i>Mary Magdalene</i>	<i>Conversion of St Paul</i>
Southern	0	0	1.4	6.8
Standard	94	100	83.9	76.1
Innovation	6	0	14.7	17.1

Table 7. Innovative vs. standard paradigms: percentages of occurrence in individual texts.¹¹

In general, the very high percentage of 0-forms both with non-personal pronoun and with personal pronoun subjects (82.9%) vs. the relatively low percentage of innovative forms modelled on the pattern dominating north of the Chester-Wash line (8.3%) may reflect the established linguistic trend towards the disappearance of all inflectional endings by the time the Bodleian plays were written (see Table 8).

Paradigm	Occurrences	Percentage
Southern	3	1.3
Standard Midlands (ME)	17	7.5
Innovation	19	8.3
Standard Midlands (early Modern English)	189	82.9

Table 8. Overall pattern distribution in the Digby Plays¹²

¹¹ By 'Southern' we mean the present indicative plural *-th*-ending (deriving from Old English *-iaþ*); by 'Standard' we mean the *-en* and *-es* morphemes and the 0-form; by 'Innovation' we mean the present indicative plural *-th* modelled after the Northern paradigm. In the table we have not taken into consideration whether the (personal pronoun) subject is adjacent to the verb.

¹² Cf. n. 11. Here we distinguish between 'standard Midlands (ME)', meaning the plural pre-

It is interesting to note that the percentage of the innovative paradigm is slightly higher than the more traditional Midland one, i.e. paradigms with final *-es* or final *-en* (altogether representing 7.5%), considering also that the latter only occurs when required by the metre or rhyme schemes of the play (see paragraphs 3.2, 3.3 and 3.4 above). It is perhaps possible that a different type of justification is to be offered for this rather restricted use of Northern endings (cf. Table 9).

Type of ending	Dialect	Occurrences	Percentage
-es	Standard Midlands	1	0.5
-en	Standard Midlands	16	7
0-ending (adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	33	14.5
0-ending (not adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	4	1.8
0-ending (adjacent to pers.pron.subj.)	Standard Midlands	152	66.7
-th (adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Innovation	9	3.9
-th (not adjacent to non-pers.pron.subj.)	Innovation	10	4.3
-th (adjacent to pers.pron.subj.)	Southern	3	1.3

Table 9. Verb endings in the Digby plays (overall quantitative findings).

One explanation for this phenomenon may be found by analyzing when final *-th* was used. In *The Conversion of St Paul* the innovative paradigm occurs only five times and precisely in ll. 391, 444, 446, 488 and 599 (see paragraph 3.1). Four of these five occurrences (ll. 391, 446, 488 and 599) present a pleonastic use of ‘to do’, whereas l. 444 has ‘to have’. In all these instances final *-th* does not occur for reasons of rhyme or metre. Further, ll. 444, 446 and 488 occur in those folios written by the second scribe and which, according to Baker / Murphy / Hall (1982: xvi-xvii), may date back to some twenty to thirty years later than the copy written by the first scribe. It seems very likely that the second scribe did not replace a more conservative paradigm with the innovative one, but simply copied the innovative paradigm as he found it in the original manuscript because it was perfectly clear to him. The *-th*-paradigms normally occur in mid-line position; all the other 17 plural in-

sent indicative endings in *-es* and in *-en*, and ‘standard Midlands (early Modern English)’, by which we mean the plural present indicative formed with 0-ending.

dicative verbs with 0-inflection occur in any position in the line (i.e. mainly in the middle, though occurrences of 0-forms are possible at the beginning, or in rhyming position, either before or after the subject). Since *-th* mostly occurs with pleonastic verbs, it could be regarded as a feature employed for additional emphasis. It should be noted that the verbs with final *-th* are uttered by characters who should not be taken as models by the religious and Christian audience: l. 391 occurs in lines attributed to Anna, a pagan priestess, and ll. 444, 446, 488 are spoken by the Devil himself. The *-th* plural paradigms of the present indicative may thus have been considered as features of non-refined language.

In *Mary Magdalene* the present indicative plural paradigm normally shows forms levelled to 0 (see paragraph 3.2 above). Most *-th* morphemes occur in stage directions, but two of them occur in ll. 458 and 955, where not only are they required to accomplish the metre scheme of the lines, as final <-yt> for *-th* provides an additional unstressed syllable, but they are also uttered by a character named Luxuria and the pagan Queen of Marseilles, respectively. If the copy were indeed a hurried one, the scribe would not have dropped all *-th*-endings except for those two required for reasons of metre. Furthermore, the presence of final *-th* in the stage directions seems to justify the assumption that the scribe did copy his exemplar in exactly the way it was written, no matter how careless or under stress he may have been. The scribe understood the presence of the *-th* morphemes used to form the plural paradigm of present indicative verbs and left them both in the stage directions and in ll. 458 and 955. Once again, we may suppose that *-th* had to be regarded as a feature of emphasis.

The Killing of the Children seems to be an authorial copy of the original manuscript (see paragraph 3.3 above), i.e. the scribe revising the copy was also the author of the original play. All plural forms have 0-ending, which contributes not only to the uniformity to the play, as far as the spelling system is concerned, but also to an overall impression of greater modernity of the text itself. There is only one *-en* plural paradigm of the present indicative used to accomplish the rhyme scheme (see paragraph 3.3. above). Apparently, in this play there was no need to stress the negativity of the pagan world by using the final *-th* in the present indicative plural paradigm: the dramatization of the killing of all Israeli children, as narrated in the Bible, was probably thought to be cruel enough in itself.

As to *Wisdom*, we know that the scribe was the same person who wrote *The Killing of the Children*. Yet here the scribe was probably the copier, as some spelling ‘inconsistencies’ are found together with various plural indicative forms in *-th* which do not seem to be justified either by reasons of rhyme or metre (the instance in l. 53 seems to be required by alliteration). Apart from the stage direction (after l. 164), also in this case the other two present indicative plural morphemes in *-th* occur when Man is being tempted by the Devil: the first occurrence is uttered by Lucifer himself (l. 401); the second one by Understanding, one of Man’s five senses and which have already abandoned God’s teachings to follow the Devil’s (l. 587). By employing *-th*-forms the author probably represents lower-class language, unfit for a religious and honest person.

It is, however, difficult to offer a satisfactory conclusion as far as the plural forms of the present indicative are concerned, partly because we have compared only four texts from the Midlands area, and partly because evidence is often ambiguous. The written form of a word is not a visual representation of fifteenth-century standard English, when few spelling rules, and no English dictionaries existed, and when the primary artistic consideration was speed in copying.

Yet if it is true that the manuscripts of *The Conversion of St Paul*, *Mary Magdalene*, *The Killing of the Children*, and *Wisdom* were copied by Norfolk scribes in Norfolk and in the standard form of English that made it impossible to distinguish one scribe’s text from another’s (Beadle 1991: 91), what results from our analysis seems to point to the fact that the innovative Northern paradigm was often employed to stress a character’s negative message by means of ‘irregular’ morphology.

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