

## A NEW MNEMONIC FOR THE DATE OF EASTER\*

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For obvious reasons, the need to determine the date of Easter each year with precision has occupied British clergy from Bede and before. One result was a proliferation of short mnemonic poems rendering a rule-of-thumb *computus* for this essential calculation.<sup>1</sup> *A New Index of Middle English Verse* (NIMEV) lists twenty-three versions of these.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, examples in Latin exist also, sometimes in combination with the verses in Middle English.<sup>3</sup> MS Q.II.6, an almost unknown manuscript produced in East Anglia ca. 1320–1330, now in the Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de El Escorial in Spain, contains a Middle English Easter mnemonic thus far neither published nor cited. Only Lucy Freeman Sandler has discussed this manuscript, but as an art historian her chief concern was the many splendid images it contains.<sup>4</sup> She does not mention the presence of the little mnemonic poem:

Estryn day yf þu wylte knowe  
Whether þt yt falle hygh or lowe  
Loke wheron þe prime go that 3ere  
And þu xalt fynde þt prime here  
Among these primes blake  
That same prime I rede ye take  
And after that prime the next sonday  
With owten dowt ys Estryn day

[Easter day if you will know

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Whether that it falls high or low  
Look whereon the prime goes that year  
And you shalt find that prime here  
Among these primes black  
That same prime I advise you take  
And after that prime the next Sunday  
Without doubt is Easter day.]

The poem appears in a mid-to-late fifteenth-century hand added to a calendar entry for the month of April, on fol. 8<sup>v</sup>. Forms such as ‘Estryn’ and ‘xalt’ help identify the dialect as Norfolk, possibly localizable to Norwich.<sup>5</sup> The calendar has been modified by another hand, to reflect Premonstratensian use in the abbey of St Mary’s at West Dereham, Norfolk, where the manuscript resided from the early fifteenth century until the surrender of the abbey in 1538.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to being unknown, the mnemonic in Escorial MS Q.II.6 is unusual for apparently grounding its calculation in April. Most known examples of calculative Easter Day verses tie themselves to the vernal equinox (always 19, 20, or 21 March), e. g., Cambridge, University Library MS Ff.6. 8, f.3: ‘In Marche after þe first C’.<sup>7</sup> There are exceptions: Cambridge, Trinity College MS O.9.38 for example calculates from the feast of St Benedict.<sup>8</sup> The mnemonic verses in Escorial MS Q.II.6 are not one of these: they align with no saint especially venerated by the Norbertines (the feast day of St Norbert is 6 June, for example), nor in East Anglia generally. The key may perhaps lie in the lines ‘Whether þt yt falle hygh or lowe/Loke wheron þe prime go that 3ere.’ ‘Prime’ is the first appearance of the new moon after the vernal (or paschal) equinox, which sometimes can occur between late March and mid-April.<sup>9</sup> Hence in some years Easter falls either in March or April. If in this poem ‘hygh’ is March and ‘lowe’ April, it would suggest that the poet hoped to achieve a general *computus* that could serve to find Easter in either month.<sup>10</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For examples, see Laurel Means, “‘Ffor as moche as yche man may not haue þe astrolabe’”: Popular Middle English Variations on the Computus’, *Speculum* lxxii (1992), 595–693.

<sup>2</sup> *A New Index of Middle English Verse*, in Julia Boffey and A.

S.G. Edwards (eds) (London: 2005), no. 1502, 103 (DIMEV 2533). My count of twenty-three includes NIMEV 426 (DIMEV 703), a brief mnemonic calculating Easter from St Benet's day.

<sup>3</sup> E.g. Cambridge, Trinity College MS 0.9.38, London, British Library MS Sloane 747, Oxford, Balliol College MS 354; for discussion of Latin versions, see Linne Mooney, 'A Medieval Latin Mnemonic for Finding the Date of Easter', *Notes & Queries* xxx (October, 1983), 391–2; and further A.G. Rigg, 'The Letter "C" and the Date of Easter', *ELH* v (1967), 1–5. Rigg, .2, cites 'sixteen known manuscripts' with Latin Easter mnemonics.

<sup>4</sup> See Sandler, 'An Early Fourteenth-Century English Psalter in the Escorial', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* xxxii (1979), 65–80, and also a briefer mention in her *Gothic Manuscripts, 1285-1385* (London, 1986), 87–89.

<sup>5</sup> See Angus McIntosh, M.L. Samuels, and Michael Benskin, *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* (1986), now available online at <<http://www.lel.ed.ac.uk/ihd/elalme/elalme.html>>; compare with Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates 18.7.21 (John of Grimestone's Preaching Book [holo- graph]), *LALME* I.88 LP 4041. Norfolk; London, British Library, Harley 3954 (MS in one hand), *LALME* I. 112. LP 4103. Norfolk.

<sup>6</sup> Originally Escorial MS Q.II.6 was designed for use by Austin friars; see Sandler, 'Early Fourteenth-Century English Psalter', 66–69. She notes: 'It is apparently the earliest surviving English manuscript of the order, and the only one from the fourteenth century' (69). West Dereham is 42 miles from Norwich, whence contemporary visitation records suggest many of the canons came. One 'John of Norwich' is mentioned in MS Q.II.6., fol. 13<sup>r</sup>, e.g.

<sup>7</sup> On the dominical letter system for dates, see C.R. Cheney, *Handbook of Dates for Students of British History* (London, 1945), 6–9; in CUL MS Ff.6. 8 the noted date is March 7.

<sup>8</sup> 'Ate feste of seint benedist'; NIMEV 31, no. 426.

<sup>9</sup> So understood by Higden, trans.Trevisa: 'þe 3ere of þe mone is from prime in a monþ of þe 3ere to þe firste prime in þe same monþe [of] anoper 3ere'; see *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden Monachi Cestrensis* ed. J. R. Lumby (Rolls Series, London, 1871), 9 vols, III, 135.

<sup>10</sup> It is also possible that the poet refers to use of a volvelle, in which case 'high' and 'low' would refer to positions on the wheel; see Means, 'Ffor as moche as yche man may', 601, 607.