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Pronoun innovation in Middle English

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Rhona Alcorn*

Pronoun innovation in Middle English

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Abstract: This paper reconsiders the history of two little-known third-person pronouns – 3pl. acc. *his* and 3sg. fem. acc. *His* – attested only during Middle English. Competing theories of their origins are evaluated and a novel account is proposed. The paper highlights an important gap in our understanding of the history of English oblique pronouns and supplies the most comprehensive description yet published of the distribution of these innovative forms.

1 Introduction

With few exceptions, the personal pronouns of Standard Modern English (ModE) can be traced all the way back to Old English (OE). The exceptions are well documented, being the 3pl. *th*-initial forms, standardly assumed to have been borrowed from Old Norse (e.g. Mustanoja 1960: 134; Werner 1991; Lass 1992: 120–121). It turns out, however, that the progenitors of ModE they, their, them were not the only third-person pronouns to appear for the first time just as OE gave way to Middle English (ME). This paper considers the use of *his* as an accusative form – a curious and rarely discussed early ME innovation that has yet to be satisfactorily explained.

The paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews existing accounts of ME sg. and pl. acc. *his* and evaluates competing theories about their origins. Finding none to be entirely convincing, in Section 3 I present a detailed study of the phenomenon using data from A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English. An entirely new hypothesis about the emergence of acc. *his* follows in Section 4. The paper concludes with a summary in Section 5.

2 Existing accounts

2.1 Descriptions

Accounts of *his* as an acc. pronoun extend as far back as Guest (1844: 283–284), where it is identified as a “peculiar” 3pl. form used by Robert of Gloucester, an
English historian who flourished in the late thirteenth century. Two decades later, Morris (1866a: 153) noticed that Gloucester also used *his* as a 3sg. fem. acc. form, and supplied other sg. examples from the *Ayenbite of Inwyt*, a text written in Canterbury in 1340 by Dan Michel of the Northgate in his “engliss of Kent” dialect. *His* is listed in a few ME handbooks and grammars as a 3pl. acc. form (e.g. Wright and Wright 1928: §376; Mossé 1952: §65; Mustanoja 1960: 135; Fisiak 1968: 88; Nielsen 1981: 227; Fulk 2012: 65), although only a subset of these sources also identify 3sg. fem. acc. *his* (viz. Wright and Wright, Mustanoja, Nielsen).

The historical dictionaries catalogue both forms: *OED* (s.v. †his, *pron.2*) and *MED* (s.v. his, *pron.3*) for the sg.; *OED* (s.v. †his, *pron.3*) and *MED* (s.v. his, *pron.4*) for the pl.¹ *OED* supplies the fullest list of variant forms, viz.: 3pl. (-)as, (-)es, hes, his(e), hys(e), (-)is, -s, ·us, ys; 3sg. fem. as, (-)es, hes, hies, his(e), hys(e), (-)is, ys.² Since *his* is just one of many variant forms, I shall henceforth refer to the pronouns as sg. and pl. acc. HIS. (Likewise, I will use 3pl. acc. HI to denote the set of variant forms of the 3pl. acc. Pronoun – primarily *hi, hie, heo* – and so on.) *MED* provides the greatest number of illustrative examples, including those at (1) for the pl. and (2) for the sg. The relevant forms are indicated in bold.

(1)  

a. De coc & te capun. ge feccheð ofte in ðe tun. & te gandre & te gos. bi ðe necke & bi ðe nos. haleð *is* to hire hole  
the cock and the capon (she) seizes often in the farmyard, and the gander and the goose, by the neck and by the beak, carries *them* to her den’  
(*Bestiary*, 304)  
b. Vndelt hes leide quor-so hes tok  
Undivided he laid *them* (= the pigeon and the dove) where he took *them* (*Genesis and Exodus*, 943)  
c. He bouthe him boþe hosen and shon, And sone dide him dones on  
‘He bought him both trousers and shoes, and immediately made him put *them* on’  
(*Havelok*, 970)

¹ Mustanoja (1960: 135) identifies a further set of examples in *MED* (s.v. alsō, adv. ld.[c]) that have been misanalysed as emphatic sentence adverbials.

² A leading hyphen indicates that the form attaches to the end of a preceding word in the source manuscript(s), as in examples (1b) and (1c).
a. The man who wants to be sure to have God’s grace, should do good himself … then will he have it indeed’ (Poema Morale, Lamb 487, 40)
b. The soul … he brought out of hell, and joined it to his body’ (Robert of Gloucester, Chronicle, Version A, 1616)
c. The earth is heavy … Who holds it up?’ (Shoreham Poems, 131/48)

According to OED, sg. and pl. acc. HIS is exclusive to ME: the earliest examples are found in early thirteenth-century manuscripts, and the latest in manuscripts dating to the fifteenth century. Guest’s claim that 3pl. acc. HIS had “not yet quite disappeared from our provincial dialects” (1844: 283) suggests that it continued in some spoken varieties well into the ModE period: if so, it escaped the attention of Wright in compiling his English Dialect Dictionary (1898–1905).3

Based on item maps in LAEME and LALME, Fulk (2012: 65) describes the regional distribution of 3pl. acc. HIS: “south of the Thames there are examples only in Kent … otherwise they are found in scattered fashion across the South Midlands, and in East Anglia extending as far north as King’s Lynn in Norfolk.” There is no such detailed description on record for the distribution of 3sg. fem. acc. HIS.

2.2 The inheritance hypothesis

The earliest theories about ME sg. and pl. acc. HIS share an assumption that they originate in the input language to the Anglo-Saxon settlement. The most recent of these theories is that of Morsbach (1897: 331), who suggests 3pl. HIS originates in a native s-initial form corresponding to Old Saxon 3pl. acc. sia, sea, sie and Old Frisian 3pl. acc. se. According to Morsbach’s very brief account, this native s-initial form became weakened to enclitic -s (in a fashion parallel to swa

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3 Wright (s.v. HIS, II.) does, however, identify HIS as a dialect form for 3sg. fem. objects, but his sole example (from W. Somerset), given at (i), more probably involves a possessive pronoun. Although it refers to a female creature, poss. ’is agrees in gender with he and with un (< OE 3sg. masc. acc. HINE).
weakening to enclitic -s in sons < some swa ‘at the very moment when [lit. soon so]’), before later expanding into non-clitic forms es, hes, his, etc. Morsbach’s claim rests crucially on his assumption “dass auch dem ae. hier die formen von den stämmen mit anlautendem s nicht fremd gewesen sind” [that forms with initial s were not foreign to OE]. There is, however, not a shred of evidence for either an s-initial third-person acc. pronoun nor an enclitic -s variant in OE, so the likelihood of ME acc. HIS descending by inheritance from a continental WGmc form is practically zero. Indeed, the complete lack of evidence of any “s”-ful third-person acc. pronoun in OE is sufficient to exclude any theory that asserts ME acc. HIS to be an inheritance from the language of England’s Germanic settlers. This includes the suggestion by Guest (1844: 283) – endorsed, surprisingly, by Morris (1866a: 154, 1866b: li–liv) – that ME 3pl. acc. HIS answers to Gothic 3pl. acc. ins ‘them’, and that ME 3sg. fem. acc. HIS is formed on a root that is cognate with that of Gothic 3sg. izos, izai (gen., dat. forms of si ‘she’).

2.3 The contact hypothesis

Continental WGmc forms are central to another idea about the origins of “s”-ful third-person acc. pronouns in ME. This suggestion, from Nielsen (1981: 227), starts from the premise that there are no s-initial 3pl. or 3sg. fem. acc. forms in OE, then continues: “[i]n the south-eastern dialect of ME such forms do occur, however, *perhaps in consequence of contacts between Kent and the Continent*, cf. OFris. se, MDu. si” [emphasis mine].

Nielsen evidently has in mind a borrowing scenario, but it is not entirely clear what forms he is attempting to explain. For example, he asserts that south-east ME has s-initial 3pl. and 3sg. fem. acc. forms – a peculiar claim for which there is no evidence whatsoever – yet he makes no mention of s-final forms like (h)is, (h)es and as, so it is unclear how he imagines them to have come about from exposure to s-initial forms like OFris se or MDu si. Even more puzzling is his suggestion that s-initial 3pl. forms are attested for the nom. as well as the acc. in south-east ME. This is almost certainly an error – and rather a serious one in a publication of its type.

Aside from the problematic linguistics of Nielsen’s suggestion, it suffers also from a lack of supporting historical evidence. Studies of language contact have shown that pronouns are borrowed very rarely and their borrowing is usually dependent on intense contact (e.g. Thomason and Kaufman 1988: 74–78; Law 2009; Trudgill 2010: 23–25). If ME 3sg. fem. and 3pl. acc. HIS were indeed attributable to contact between Kent and the Continent, we would expect at least
some degree of sociocultural (if not also some further linguistic) evidence – as with the borrowing of þ-initial 3pl. pronouns from Old Norse. But in the absence of any independent evidence of intense contact with continental WGmc peoples in the late OE to early ME period, Nielsen’s suggestion is easily set aside.

2.4 The pluralized HIS hypothesis

The most recent account of acc. HIS is that of Fulk (2012: 65), who suggests 3pl. forms represent 3pl. acc. HIS with “addition of the commonest plural marker in nouns.” Unlike previous accounts, this proposal implies a motivation for the pronoun’s appearance: by identifying the “s” as a common plural marker, Fulk implies that its function was to identify the pronoun as plural – much in the same way as the “s” of non-standard ModE 2pl. yous(e) (see further Hickey 2004: 199–203; Beal 2010: 39–42).

Fulk’s suggestion does, however, leave four crucial questions unanswered. 1. Why was the “s” added to the 3pl. acc. but not to the formally identical 3pl. nom.? 2. Why was it added in early ME in particular? 3. What is the source of the “s” in 3sg. fem. acc. HIS? 4. If “s” was added to acc. pl. HIS to mark it as plural, why do some texts exhibit 3sg. HIS as well as 3pl. HIS? This latter point is illustrated by the following pairs of examples from MED (s.v. his, pron.3 and pron.4).

(3) a. On of þe holie writes þe ben red her inne to dai bringen. us blisfulle tidinges of an edie meiden þe was iferen bispused þe heuenliche kinge. & seið he hes fette hom

‘One of the holy writs which are read herein today bring us blissful tidings of a blessed maiden who was bespoused to the heavenly king as his wife, and says that he fetched her home’
(Homilies in Cambridge, Trinity College B.14.52, 159)

b. Hie his fet lauede mid hire hote teres and wipede his þer after mid hire faire here

‘She washed his feet with her hot tears, and wiped them thereafter with her fair hair’
(Homilies in Cambridge, Trinity College B.14.52, 145)

(4) a. Huo þet ziþþ ane wyfman and wylneþ his ine herte

‘Who that sees a woman and desires her in (his) heart’
(Ayenbite of Inwyte, 11/2)
b. De ilke kueade best hedde miȝte ... to viȝte wyþ þe halȝen an his to overcome
   ‘The same wicked beast had (the) power ... to fight against the holy ones and to overcome them’
   (Ayenbite of Inwyte, 15/3)

One possible answer to questions 3 and 4 is that the 3sg. examples are not in fact acc. forms but are instead a continuation of OE 3sg. masc./neut. gen. his. (See Table 1 for the major forms of OE third-person pronouns.) Many verbs normally or often took a genitive object in OE (Visser 1966: §§370–391; Mitchell 1985: §§1091–1092; Ogura 2010), and some persisted into early ME when they became increasingly rare (Mustanoja 1960: 87; Visser 1966: §373; Allen 2009). Such an analysis might explain the use of his in (4a): the governing verb (a reflex of OE wilnian) is independently attested with gen. objects in early ME (Mustanoja 1960: 88), and although the pronoun’s antecedent has a female referent, historically it is a grammatically masc. noun. In the following section, however, I argue against a genitive analysis of the ME 3sg. his examples, meaning we are still without a satisfactory account of sg. as well as pl. acc. his.

Table 1: Old English third-person pronouns (Campbell 1959: 289).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nom.</td>
<td>he</td>
<td>hit</td>
<td>heo</td>
<td>hie, hi, heo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acc.</td>
<td>hine</td>
<td>hit</td>
<td>hie, hi</td>
<td>hie, hi, heo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen.</td>
<td>his</td>
<td>his</td>
<td>hire</td>
<td>hira, heora</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dat.</td>
<td>him</td>
<td>him</td>
<td>hire</td>
<td>him</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3 An extended description

3.1 Overview

In pursuit of a tenable account of the origins of ME 3sg. fem. and 3pl. acc. his, I undertook a detailed study of all examples occurring in the corpus of texts underpinning A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English 1150–1325 (LAEME).4 Grammatical gender was still operational in early ME although natural gender was becoming increasingly more common (e.g. Jones 1988; Lass 1992: 106; Curzan 2003).

5 LAEME belongs to a suite of linguistic atlases compiled at the University of Edinburgh’s Institute for Historical Dialectology (IHD) and its precursors. In 2013 the IHD published A Corpus
The LAEME corpus is lemmatized, tagged for part-of-speech, uses functional tags to distinguish subjects from objects and distinguishes personal pronouns from possessive pronouns. Personal pronouns are additionally tagged to indicate grammatical person and number. These features greatly facilitate the identification of third-person personal pronoun tokens spelled with an <s>. The corpus provides 236 such tokens in all: 154 tagged as a 3pl. object and 82 as a 3sg. object. As LAEME tags additionally distinguish among direct objects (DOs), indirect objects and objects of prepositions, it was immediately apparent that all but one of these 236 tokens function as DOs in particular. The exception is tagged as a 3pl. indirect object: I return to its analysis in Section 4.

Table 2 lists and localizes the 20 LAEME texts in which the 153 pl. DO examples occur and gives manuscript dates according to LAEME. It also quantifies all other 3pl. DO pronouns with which 3pl. HIS co-varies in those texts. The results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>HEM</th>
<th>HI</th>
<th>Others</th>
<th>HIS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'ayenbitet' [Kent]</td>
<td>1340</td>
<td>22</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'vvat' [SW Essex]</td>
<td>1200–1225</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'corp145selt' [NW Berks]</td>
<td>1310–1320</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>2 (it)</td>
<td></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'genexodt' [W Norfolk]</td>
<td>1300–1325</td>
<td>25</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'trimpmt' [W Essex]</td>
<td>1175–1200</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'vibt' [SW Essex]</td>
<td>1200–1225</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'laud108at' [W Oxon]</td>
<td>1275–1325</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>1 (heo)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'havelokt' [W Norfolk]</td>
<td>1300–1325</td>
<td>46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'bestiaryt' [W Norfolk]</td>
<td>1300–1325</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'lamhomA2t' [NW Worcs]</td>
<td>1200–1225</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'laud471kst' [Kent]</td>
<td>1275–1300</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'trhomBt' [W Suffolk]</td>
<td>1175–1200</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'trhomAt' [NW Essex]</td>
<td>1175–1200</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'worchgrglt' [Worcs]</td>
<td>1200–1250</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3 (heo)</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'adde6ct' [N Essex]</td>
<td>1275–1325</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'adde6at' [N Essex]</td>
<td>1275–1300</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'culhht' [Hunts]</td>
<td>1200–1300</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'maidspat' [SW Northants]</td>
<td>1200–1250</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'maidststt' [?]</td>
<td>1200–1250</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'royal12e1bt' [NW Norfolk]</td>
<td>1275–1325</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

of Narrative Etymologies from Proto-Old English to Early Middle English (CoNE), which comprises a set of form histories for several hundred morphemes and spanning some 800 years. The present paper is one of three that present in detail CoNE’s analyses of personal pronouns. The other two are Lass and Laing (2013) on “I” and Laing and Lass (2014) on “she”.
indicate that in early ME, 3pl. *his* was in competition with *hem* (< OE 3pl. dat. *him*), see, e.g. Wright and Wright 1928: §376; Mossé 1952: §65. V. 1.) and (originally acc.) *hi* and, further, that *his* had more or less replaced *hi* as a distinctive acc. form. Notice too that there are no texts in which *his* is in competition with the progenitor of ModE *them*.

Table 3 lists the 11 texts containing the 3sg. tokens and indicates co-existence of 3pl. *his* tokens for ease of comparison. Grammatical gender is not identified in *LAEME* so it is not immediately apparent whether all examples are fem. in particular. I return to the question of gender in Section 3.2.

**Table 3:** Attestations of 3sg. *his* in *LAEME*.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>His sg.</th>
<th>His pl.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'vvat' [SW Essex]</td>
<td>1200–1225</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'laud10at' [W Oxon]</td>
<td>1275–1325</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'trinpmt' [W Essex]</td>
<td>1175–1200</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'vvbtt' [SW Essex]</td>
<td>1200–1225</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'lampm' [NW Worcs]</td>
<td>1200–1225</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'egpm1' [SW Worcs]</td>
<td>1225–1275</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'ayenbitet' [Kent]</td>
<td>1340</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'buryFf' [W Norfolk]</td>
<td>1275–1300</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'egpm2' [SW Worcs]</td>
<td>1225–1275</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'corp145selt' [NW Berks]</td>
<td>1310–1320</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'trhomBt' [W Suffolk]</td>
<td>1175–1200</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>82</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1 shows the areal spread of sg. and pl. DO *his* in early ME. Each dot on the map indicates a survey point: a black dot indicates attestation, a white dot non-attestation. The distribution is exactly as described by Fulk (2012: 65) for 3pl. examples occurring in early and late ME (see Section 2.1).

All findings from *LAEME* were checked against data from *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English (LALME)*. Unlike *LAEME*, *LALME* was compiled from a corpus of linguistic profiles (LPs), each “an inventory, for some specified sample of text, of the forms observed which correspond to the test-items on the...”

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6 *LAEME* Dot Maps are accessible from *LAEME* > Maps > Browse/Search Feature Maps. One text, ‘maidststt’, is too short to be localized so all its forms are omitted from *LAEME* Dot Maps. It does, however, supply just one *his* token – a 3pl. acc. form.
questionnaire” (*LALME* vol. 3: ix), the “questionnaire” being a list of dialectal discriminants. Object personal pronouns spelled with an *s* are recorded only for test items 5 (“her”) and 8 (“them”) as expected. The “her” examples are found in five LPs, the “them” examples in 12. Unfortunately, *LALME*’s LPs do not record token numbers, nor do they differentiate objects by function, so a quantitative comparison of *LAEME* and *LALME* data is not possible. The LPs do, however, confirm that *his* persisted as a 3pl. and 3sg. object pronoun throughout the ME period, and that “s”-ful forms of “her” and “them” remained unattested in texts exhibiting borrowed *p-/th*-initial 3pl. variants.

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7 *LALME* also does not provide access to its base texts so tokens cannot easily be viewed in context either.
LALME Dot Maps “Item 8 THEM: ‘his’ type’ and ‘Item 5 HER: ‘his’ type” further show that the forms in question did not spread into new regions.

3.2 Genitive HIS

Earlier it was suggested that, in some cases at least, the use of 3sg. HIS as a DO pronoun might be a straightforward continuation of OE 3sg. masc./neut. gen. HIS. I now show that this is probably not so. For the purposes of this study, potentially genitive examples are identified as those 3sg. DO tokens of HIS which are governed by a verb associated with genitive rection in OE by Visser (1966: §§373–391) and/or Mitchell (1985: §1092) and have an antecedent noun that is historically masc. or neut. The gender of antecedent nouns was identified by examining each example in context.

Of the 82 sg. examples, 36 (44%) are governed by a verb associated with genitive rection in OE, but only six of them also have a historically masc. or neut. antecedent. We have already seen one of these examples at (4a). Another two are given at (5).

(5)  a. ic an þat lond at lauenham mine douhter childe gif þat God wille þat heo ani haueð buten Atelfled her wille him his vnnen
   ‘I grant the estate at Lavenham to my daughter’s child if God wills that she will have any, unless Æthelflæd should wish to grant it to him first’

   b. He seið □ ðis scarpe iwitt swelð ðane mann ðe hes haueð wiðuten charite
   ‘He says that this keen knowledge puffs up the man who has it without charity’

The other three examples are similar to (5a): each occurs in “buryFft”, and each involves lond₁ ... hisᵢ and a reflex of OE unnan. Although all six tokens satisfy criteria of genitive objects, their governing verb governs accusative on every other occasion in their source texts. It therefore appears that these six examples of 3sg. HIS are accusative rather than genitive. One further example, (6), is also like (5a) except that his appears to be a recapitulatory pronoun. There is no reason to classify this as genitive rather than accusative either.

8 LALME Dot Maps are accessible from eLALME > Maps > Dot Maps.
9 There is no comprehensive list of genitive-governing verbs for ME.
10 All remaining example references are to LAEME’s Corpus of Tagged Texts.
(6) And ic an þat lond at Grenstede in to Stok for mine soule & for Athelwardes & for wiswiðe · And ic Athelfled þere Brice wille hire lif beth on þe red þat heo do for þa saule so wel so heo best may · nu his me god uþe
‘And I grant the estate at Greenstead to Stoke for my soul and for Æthelweard’s and for Wiswith’s. And I grant to Æthelflæd the use of it for as long as her life lasts, on condition that she does the best she can for those souls. Now may God grant me it’
(‘buryFft’)

3.3 Accusative his

This section completes the description of the 3sg. his tokens occurring in the LAEME corpus.

As ME 3sg. acc. his is consistently described as a fem. pronoun in the literature, it is no surprise to find that 69 (or 84%) of the 82 sg. examples in LAEME form a set that is defined by the grammatical or semantic fem. gender of their antecedent nouns. Of these 69 fem. examples, 62 have a grammatically fem. antecedent, e.g. (2) and (7).

(7) a. Þe þet echte (< OE æht fem.) wile halden wel hwile þe he muge es wealdan
‘He that intends to hold property well while he can wield it’

b. and nimeþ þe tresor of þe herte (< OE heorte fem.) and hise uelp a-yen mid ydelenesse
‘and (they will) take the treasure from the heart and fill it again with idleness’
(‘ayenbitet’)

Another two have a neut. antecedent but refer to a human female, (3a) and (4a). Yet another two, each from the same text and given at (8), share the same antecedent which – although historically neut. – is co-referential with nom. 3sg. fem. heo in (8a), thereby implying semantically fem. gender.

(8) a. þe grete templei ... For a buyldinge heoi was sixe and fourti ȝer ... Iwam þenchez him sulue make · þat so sone as; wolde a rere
‘the great templei ... For in building iti was six and forty year ... Who does he make himself out to be, that he would so soon raise iti up?’
(‘laud108at’)

1 Pronoun innovation in ME
b. Bringez þe temple ore loured seide · ȝif þe wollez to grounde / And Ich as wolþe þane þridde day · a rere op in one stounde
   “Bring the temple,” our Lord said, “if you will, to (the) ground / And I will raise it up (on) the third day in an instant’
   (‘laud108at’)

In the other three examples with a fem. antecedent, (9), the pronoun co-refers with an ME borrowing. These nouns have no historical gender in English but each denotes a virtue, and virtues were commonly presented as fem. in early ME texts. Notice also that in (9a) and (9b) fem. gender is encoded in co-referential 3sg. nom. hie.11

(9) a. Honestas, ... Wurðliche hie, deð lokin de manne de hes luueð
   ‘Honesty, ... It, makes the man who loves it look worthy’
   (‘vvbt’)
   b. Perseuerancia, ... for ðan hie, makeð ðanne man ðe Godd his to sant
   ‘Perseverence, ... because it makes the man to whom God sends it,’
   (‘vvbt’)
   c. ... ðanne ne habbe oc naht charite · ne ich iboregen. a none wise ne mai bien · bute ic hes habbe
   ‘... then I do not have charity, nor may I be saved in any way unless I have it’
   (‘vvat’)

So 69 of the 82 examples of 3sg. acc. his can be characterized by fem. gender.

Twelve of the remaining 13 examples have either a grammatically neut. antecedent, as in (5), or a semantically neuter one, e.g. (10). Those at (10) involve the ME borrowings that denote entities that are not typically encoded as fem. in ME.

(10) a. Muche was þe ioie of þe crois · þ men made þo þere / Wip gret song & procession to þe queen hi is bere
   ‘Great was the joy of the cross that men then made there / With great song and procession, to the queen they it bore’
   (‘corp145selt’)

11 Laing and Lass (2014: 33) derive hie in ‘vvbt’ from OE nom. 3sg. fem. heo via monophthongization (> [he::]) with as a diacritic for height.
b. For ȝwane men comen ofte to is toumbe · ase liȝthliche up huy as bere / And heuen as up and doun as huy wolden · ase þei liȝth treov were
‘For when men come often to his coffin, as lightly up they it bore / And lifted it up and down as they wished, as though it a light tree were’
(‘laud108at’)
While hire was taking over as the new 3sg. fem. “object case”, it would appear that his had pretty much replaced hi as the distinctive, albeit recessive, 3sg. fem. acc. form. This is suggested by the existence of only 28 tokens of 3sg. hi functioning as DO in the whole of LAEME compared to the 82 tokens of 3sg. his. The addition of “s” to 3sg. fem. acc. hi as well as to 3pl. acc. hi also makes sense in that it maintains the well-established correspondence pattern that existed between these paradigmatic slots (cf. forms of se “the, that” and hes “this”).

Whether the “s” was inspired by the most common nominal plural inflection, as suggested by Fulk (2012), by genitive forms in object function or by something else entirely is probably unknowable, but its use by multiple scribes in multiple locations (see Figure 1) implies that its source was probably not exotic. Regardless of its source, [s] would certainly have the capacity to distinguish case rather well thanks to its phonetic prominence. Moreover, as a derivative of OE 3sg. and 3pl. acc. hi, his would presumably have had a long vowel, in contrast to the short vowel of 3sg. poss. and gen. his. Its meaning in the written language would also be unambiguous, being rarely mistakable in context for 3sg. masc. poss. his or for vanishingly rare 3sg. masc./neut. gen. his.

This new analysis also provides a straightforward explanation for a number of facts that the accounts surveyed in Section 2 are unable to accommodate, viz.: why acc. his emerged when it did, why sg. and pl. his emerged concurrently and why sg. and pl. tokens are able to occur in the same text. It also explains why acc. his disappeared when it did, i.e. just as the distinction it signalled ceased to be signalled altogether. Lastly, this new account can also explain why acc. his emerged where it did, or rather where it did not: it did not appear in dialects that borrowed 3pl. forms from ON because in those dialects, competition between 3pl. acc. hi and 3pl. dat. hem was fast giving way to the new p-/th-initial type.  

Even the exceptional examples can be accommodated in this account without special pleading. One of the features of the linguistic context in which acc. his emerged is the collapse of the system of grammatical gender. It is therefore not surprising to find evidence of the spread of his to historically neut. contexts, as with 12 of the 13 examples identified at the end of Section 3.3, the rationale being that if his can refer to (originally fem.) inanimates like echte and herte, as in (7), then – once grammatical gender has been lost – it can also refer to (originally neut.) inanimates like brede and heued, as in (11).

12 Even the texts that only attest 3sg. his (see Table 3) do not have any p-/th-initial 3pl. forms.
(11) a. Swines brede is swiðe swete · swa is of wilde dore · alto dore he is abuh · þe gefð þer fore his swore
   ‘Pig’s flesh is very pleasing, so is (that) of wild deer. All too dear he buys it, (he) who gives for it his neck’
   (‘lampmt’)
b. And ssewedhe hom ware is heued lay · as it were in a siȝte · And hy wende forþ & is soȝte sone
   ‘And showed them where his head lay, as it were in a vision. And they went forth and sought it at once’
   (‘corp145selt’)

In a similar vein, if 3pl. HEM can be used in both direct and indirect object function, as in (12), then – once the accusative-dative distinction has been lost – so too can 3pl. HIS, (13). Note that (13b) is the only example of 3pl. HIS in LAEME that does not function as a DO.

(12) a. And caste hom in þe deope se
   ‘And cast him into the deep sea’
   (‘corp145selt’)
b. He broȝte hom mete & drynke
   ‘He brought them food and drink’
   (‘corp145selt’)

(13) a. Mine glouene ich bileuede þer & mi ring also / Ich bitok is þe sextein
   ‘My gloves I left there and my ring also / I entrusted them to the sexton’
   (‘corp145selt’)
b. Oure leuedy as to teche þe wey • hure sulf ȝeode biuore
   ‘Our lady, to teach them the way, herself went ahead’
   (‘corp145selt’)

As for the example of recapitulatory HIS, (6), it appears that in this text (‘corp145selt’) 3sg. HIS has extended, first, to historically neut. acc. contexts, e.g. (11b), where it co-varies with expected IT (< OE 3sg. neut. acc.), e.g. (14).

(14) Þis false quene þ þe heued hudde · þ þi it nere ifonde nosta
   ‘This false queen hid the head, (so) that it was not found’
   (‘corp145selt’)

Once HIS is able to co-vary with IT in historically neut. acc. contexts, it becomes possible for it to co-vary with IT in other contexts too, e.g. as a recapitulatory pronoun.
5 Summary and conclusions

The history of a language should not be confined to the history of present-day forms and systems: it should extend to all variants regardless of the outcome of competitions between them. The present study has focused on two minor variants in the history of English personal pronouns, viz. 3pl. acc. *His* and 3sg. fem. acc. *Hīs*, both attested exclusively in ME. I have argued that Fulk (2012) is probably correct in his assumption that these pronouns originate in OE acc. *hi* with the addition of “s”, but I conclude that the innovative forms more likely signalled a distinction in case than in number. The analysis I have proposed entails, paradoxically, that 3sg. and 3pl. *Hīs* instantiate linguistic conservatism (i.e. the preservation of historical systems of case and gender) by innovative means (i.e. the addition of “s” to historical *hi*).

Admittedly, this new account is necessarily still somewhat speculative and difficult to test. On the other hand, it is also more compatible with, and provides, for the time being, the most plausible explanation of the best data that are currently available.

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eLALME. See LALME.


