
Anna Wojtyś. 2017. *The Non-Surviving Preterite-Present Verbs in English: The Demise of *dugan, munan, *-nugan, *þurfan, and unnan.* Studies in English Medieval Language and Literature 51. Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 258 pp., 12 tables, € 50.95.

Reviewed by **Sune Gregersen**, University of Amsterdam
E-Mail: bjh945@alumni.ku.dk

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This monograph is devoted to five verbs which disappeared from (southern) English during the Middle Ages: **dugan* ‘avail’, *munan* ‘remember; must, may’, **nugan* ‘suffice’, **þurfan* ‘need’, and *unnan* ‘grant’. All of these belong to the small group of ‘preterite-present’ verbs, so termed because their present-tense forms are assumed to derive from historical perfect forms. As is well known, the Present-Day English modal auxiliaries (and *owe*, although now a weak verb) are the only

surviving members of this inflectional class. The study under review attempts to account for the loss of the other members of the group (with the exception of *wit*, which survived long into the modern period; cf. *OED* s.v. *wit*, v.¹). The corpora used are the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* and, for the Middle English material, the *Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English*, the *Corpus of Middle English Prose and Verse*, and the *Innsbruck Computer Archive of Machine-Readable English Texts*.

The book contains six chapters and a brief conclusion. The first two chapters introduce the goals of the study and the class of preterite-present verbs. The remaining four chapters are devoted to **-nugan* and **dugan* (ch. 3), *unnan* (ch. 4), **þurfan* (ch. 5), and *munan* (ch. 6). The verbs are all treated in the same way: first the entries on the verbs in the major dictionaries are summarized and compared, then the corpus data from Old English and Middle English are presented, and finally one or more reasons for the loss of the verbs are suggested. Each verb is given a thorough treatment with numerous examples, a list of all excerpted forms, and for the Middle English period a table showing the number of attestations in the individual corpus texts. The author also provides the raw and normalized frequencies of each verb per corpus, but since the corpora used for the investigation are not in any way comparable in terms of sampling, included text types, or dialectal coverage, these statistics are only of limited value.

The study suffers from two major problems. The first is the speculative nature of the attempts to explain why the five verbs disappeared. Although one of the central aims of the book is “to establish the causes of that process” (13), there is no discussion of the fundamental empirical problems posed by such an endeavour, and the suggested causes are at best unconvincing, at worst even contradicted by the data. For instance, after finding that *unnan* is particularly frequently attested in legal texts in Old English but is much rarer in Middle English, the author suggests that *unnan* disappeared (from the language as a whole, not just from the surviving record) because legal documents were not generally written in English anymore (115–116). It is explicitly rejected that the Anglo-Norman loan word *grant* replaced *unnan* because this loan word only “gains frequency” later, in the 14th and 15th centuries, and is rare in legal language in Middle English (117). This rise in frequency is, of course, unsurprising given the increasing number of surviving texts from the 14th century onwards, but since the author does not use a balanced corpus to compare the various subperiods, we have no way of knowing to what extent the increased frequency reflects an actual change in the use of *grant* or is merely an artefact of the written record.¹ For some of the

¹ This failure to take the nature of the corpus into account is a recurring problem. Later, **þurfan* is claimed to have had a “preference for verse” (167) in the 14th century, but what is not mentioned

other verbs under investigation, the problem is that there is no explanandum, since they did not actually disappear. According to the author, **þurfan* was lost because it was restricted to non-assertive contexts and could easily be confused with the verb *dare* (181), while the auxiliary use of *munan* died out because it had an overly broad range of modal meanings ('may, must, will', etc.; 235–236). However, as is also mentioned in the book, while these two verbs disappeared from the standard language, they survived in northern and Scottish dialects – in other words, *munan* survived precisely in the area where it was used as an auxiliary. The proposed functional explanations thus beg the question why the verbs could remain in use in these dialects when not in the standard language.

The second major problem concerns the treatment of the historical data. Many Old English and Middle English forms are misidentified or misinterpreted, and the translations of the examples are often inaccurate or nonsensical. A few examples will have to suffice here, given in (1) and (2):

- (1) Fight he aght ai quiles he doght,
And fle quen he na langer moght.

(*Cursor Mundi* [Cotton MS Vespasian A III], 23771–23772)

The sentence in (1) is translated twice as “He would fight if he was able to, / and he could no longer flee from the queen” (72, 80). However, *quiles* and *quen* here are simply Northern spelling variants of the conjunctions *while(s)* and *when*: ‘He ought to always fight while he was capable, / and flee when he no longer could’.

- (2) Ic singode and gemunde þe facnes, þær nan næs.

(*Nativity of Mary the Virgin* [Bodley MS Hatton 114]; LS 18.2, 634)

The author translates (2) “I sang and reminded thee of the deceit, there was none” (211), mistaking the weak verb *singian* ‘sin’ for the strong verb *singan* ‘sing’, and misinterpreting the meaning of *gemunan*: in this context, from a homily for the Nativity of Mary, Joseph is apologizing for suspecting Mary of adultery, and the meaning of *gemunan* is ‘consider, suspect’ rather than ‘remind’. A more accurate translation would thus be ‘I have sinned and suspected you of deceit where there was none’. Other obvious mistakes include the rendering of the Old English causal conjunction *for ðan/for ðam ðe* as “for then” (50) and “for them” (58), the translation “said” (76) for ME *sagh* ‘saw’, “him” (100) for OE *him* ‘them’, and

is that the 14th-century material consists almost exclusively of verse texts (158–159). In addition, nearly a third of the excerpted examples come from a single (verse) text, the *Cursor Mundi*.

“both the famous and the unfamous” (152) for OE *æigðer gea cuðen gea uncuðen* ‘both acquaintances and strangers’.²

Occasionally the misinterpretations have consequences for the author’s conclusions. For instance, on the basis of *dowe be* in (3), it is claimed that **dugan* could take a bare infinitive complement in Middle English (79):

- (3) Be driȝtin, sirs, I am a duke dedelike my-selfe,
 Forþi vnde[d]lynes to dele I dowe be na ways
 (*Wars of Alexander* [Bodley MS Ashmole 44], 4057–4058)

The complement of *dowe* here is evidently not *be*, which is a preposition, but the *to*-infinitive *to dele* ‘distribute, grant’ (*OED* s.v. *deal*, v.): ‘By God, Sirs, I am a mortal lord myself; / therefore I am by no means able to grant immortality’. Similar mistakes are made in the case of **þurfan*, which is claimed to be attested with a *to*-infinitive in two Old English examples (139). In the first of these, *to* is part of the phrasal verb *don to* ‘add’ (cf. *OED* s.v. *do*, v., † *to do to*). In the second, the *to*-infinitive is not the complement of **þurfan*, but a non-finite purpose clause: *ne þærf he nan oðres laðtewes ne larewas þas sunnan to geseonne* (*Solil* 1, 45.22) ‘he does not need any other guide or teachers in order to see this sun’.

A number of errors might have been avoided if the existing literature had been surveyed better. For instance, it is claimed that **þurfan* is attested as an impersonal verb in Old English, i.e. without a nominative subject (143–144, 174), but the author fails to distinguish between **þurfan* as an impersonal verb and its use as a raising verb where the impersonal argument structure is determined by the infinitive complement (e.g. *Ne þearf nanne man tweogian* ‘No one needs to doubt’ [HomU 9, 93], with the accusative assigned by *tweogian*). Only the latter pattern is attested in Old English, as discussed by Denison (1989) and Warner (1993: 122–132). The author refers to neither of these studies in her discussion of **þurfan*.

It is a pity that so many obvious and avoidable mistakes have been allowed in a most likely time-consuming study. According to the publisher’s website, all submitted book proposals “undergo a rigorous peer review”,³ but with all due respect to the editor and the anonymous readers, the manuscript for this study does not appear to have been reviewed with much rigour. The detailed overviews

² There is also quite a number of typographical errors and stylistic infelicities, such as “forwards” for “onwards” (117), “context verb” for “content verb” (187), “reasonable” for “conscious” (211), “attestation” for “attestation” (219), the recurring use of “especially that” for “especially because”, and the frequent misuse of the definite article. In the bibliography, *Niederdeutsches Jahrbuch* has been rendered as “JAHR” (247), and the publication date of Ringe and Taylor (2014) is misprinted as 2017.

³ <<https://www.peterlang.com/page/authors/publier-avec-nous>> (accessed 15 September 2018).

of spelling variants and attestations in the Middle English corpora may prove useful to scholars interested in the five investigated verbs, but both the historical material and the linguistic analyses in the monograph have to be approached with caution.

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