

**Thomas Jefferson to John Wilson, August 17, 1813 ,
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Leicester Ford.**

TO JOHN WILSON J. MSS.

Monticello, August 17, 1813.

Sir, —Your letter of the 3d has been duly received. That of Mr. Eppes had before come to hand, covering your MS. on the reformation of the orthography of the plural of nouns ending in *y* and *ey*, and on orthoepy. A change has been long desired in English orthography, such as might render it an easy and true index of the pronunciation of words. The want of conformity between the combinations of letters, and the sounds they should represent, increases to foreigners the difficulty of acquiring the language, occasions great loss of time to children in learning to read, and renders correct spelling rare but in those who read much. In England a variety of plans and propositions have been made for the reformation of their orthography. Passing over these, two of our countrymen, Dr. Franklin and Dr. Thornton, have also engaged in the enterprise; the former proposing an addition of two or three new characters only, the latter a reformation of the whole alphabet nearly. But these attempts in England, as well as here, have been without effect. About the middle of the last century an attempt was made to banish the letter *d* from the words bridge, judge, hedge, knowledge, &c., others of that termination, and to write them as we write age, cage, sacrilege, privilege; but with little success. The attempt was also made, which you mention in your second part, to drop the letter *u* in words of Latin derivation ending in *o ur*, and to write honor, candor, rigor, &c., instead of honour, candour, rigour. But the *u* having been picked up in the passage of these words from the Latin, through the French, to us,

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is still preserved by those who consider it as a memorial of our title to the words. Other partial attempts have been made by individual writers, but with as little success. Pluralizing nouns in *y*, and *ey*, by adding *s* only, as you propose, would certainly simplify the spelling, and be analogous to the general idiom of the language. It would be a step gained in the progress of general reformation,

if it could prevail. But my opinion being requested I must give it candidly, that judging of the future by the past, I expect no better fortune to this than similar preceding propositions have experienced. It is very difficult to persuade the great body of mankind to give up what they have once learned, and are now masters of, for something to be learnt anew. Time alone insensibly wears down old habits, and produces small changes at long intervals, and to this process we must all accommodate ourselves, and be content to follow those who will not follow us. Our Anglo-Saxon ancestors had twenty ways of spelling the word "many." Ten centuries have dropped all of them and substituted that which we now use. I now return your MS. without being able, with the gentlemen whose letters are cited, to encourage hope as to its effect. I am bound, however, to acknowledge that this is a subject to which I have not paid much attention; and that my doubts therefore should weigh nothing against their more favorable expectations. That these may be fulfilled, and mine prove unfounded, I sincerely wish, because I am a friend to the reformation generally of whatever can be made better, and because it could not fail of gratifying you to be instrumental in this work. Accept the assurance of my respect.