THE QUALITY OF THE MIDDLE AND EARLY MODERN ENGLISH SHORT VOWELS

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ABSTRACT

The argument of this paper is that diatopic and diachronic variation in ME spelling relates directly to the evolution of vernacular literacy in England during the Middle Ages. In this paper, three areas with very different patterns of literacy are examined, with reference to the Post-Old English, Early Middle English, Late Middle English and Early Modern English periods: London, Kent and Yorkshire. Texts from all three areas will be examined in detail.

KEY WORDS: Middle and Early Modern English, short vowels, diatopic and diachronic variation, spelling.

RESUMEN

La tesis de este artículo es que la variación diatópica y diacrónica en la escritura del inglés medio está directamente relacionada con la evolución de la capacidad lectora en lengua vernácula en la Inglaterra de la Edad Media. En este artículo se examinan tres áreas con distintos patrones de capacidad lectora y con referencia a los períodos del inglés antiguo tardío, el inglés medio temprano, el inglés medio tardío y el inglés moderno temprano, en las zonas de Londres, Kent y Yorkshire. Los textos de estas tres áreas se examinan en detalle.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Inglés medio y moderno temprano, vocales cortas, variación diatópica y diacrónica, escritura.

One of the *more* notorious footnotes in Alistair Campbell's classic *Old English Grammar* reads as follows:

> I merely suggest the probable approximate position of the [Old English] vowels, and do not attempt to decide if they were tense or lax. *It is fundamental to the history of the English vowels that the long and short vowels were practically identical in quality till about 1200, and that afterwards they became distinguished by the short sounds becoming more open or more lax than the long sounds to which they bad previously corresponded.* (Campbell 14, fn.2: my italics)

It is clear that this axiom was, for Campbell, obvious: so obvious, indeed, that he does not explain the basis upon which it rests. But it is not so obvious for

other scholars; thus, for instance, Roger Lass, in his surveys of Middle and Early Modern English phonology in the *Cambridge History of the English Language*, argues on evidential grounds that the qualitative distinction between Middle English **i** and **ī** did not emerge until the middle of the seventeenth century.[1]

There would seem therefore even now to be some unresolved issues to do with the quality of the Middle English short vowels. The present paper attempts to deal with some of the problems of interpretation and explanation to which the history of these vowels gives rise. Its major focus is on the reflexes of Old English **i** and **u**, but other Middle English short vowels are also brought under review.

We might begin our argument by rehearsing the traditional account. It is usually assumed by students of the history of English sounds that Campbell's axiom is based on the different outcomes of two lengthening processes in late Old and early Middle English: Late Old English Homorganic Lengthening and Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening.

These changes, along with shortening before other consonant groups, all derive from attempts to sustain what is known as isochronicity, *i.e.* regularly timed intervals between prominent or stressed elements in the spoken chain.[2] We know, from the analysis of Old English verse, that stressed syllables were generally "long." That is, their rhyming component consisted of a long vowel followed by a single consonant (VVC), *e.g.* **stān** "stone," a short vowel followed by two consonants (VCC), *e.g.* **storm** "storm." By a process known as "resolution," the sequence "short vowel —single consonant— short vowel" (VCV) seems also to have been regarded as an acceptable equivalent to the long syllable. *e.g.* **nama** "name."[3]

However, length or shortness in syllabic structure was not, it would appear, fixed in the history of English. In late Old English —that is, Old English of ca. 1000 A.D— Lengthening before Voiced Homorganic Consonant Groups took place, *e.g.* Old English **cild** "child" > late Old English **cīld**. Old English **bindan** "bind" > late Old English **bīnden**. Old English **lāng** "long" > late Old English **lang**. Homorganic consonant groups are clusters of consonants made using the same vocal organs, *i.e.* the same place of articulation: **l** and **d**, for instance, are both made using the tip of the tongue and the alveolar ridge. It seems that such clusters, when both consonants were voiced (*i.e.* sharing the same manner of articulation), became per-

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[1] See Lass 87-88. The useful distinction between philological symbols, *e.g.* **i**, **ī** etc... and phonetic / phonological, graphetic / graphological notation is sustained in this paper. The usual conventions ([...], /.../ and <...>) are used throughout for the latter.

[2] Prominence is to do with relations between adjacent elements: elements may be more or less prominent. More prominent units are "stressed"; less prominent units are "unstressed." Stress is expressed through one of, or a combination of, the following: loudness, pitch, length. We thus distinguish stressed and unstressed syllables. Of course, a binary distinction is an oversimplification, and it is often necessary to distinguish primary and secondary stress. Thus in a word like "explanation" there is a distinction between the syllable with primary stress (-**na**-), the syllable with secondary stress (**ex**-) and the unstressed syllables (-**pla**-, -**tion**).

[3] Hogg 210-214, and references there cited.

ceived as a single consonant, and the preceding vowel was therefore lengthened in order to preserve isochronicity, thus VCC > *VC > VVC. Homorganic Lengthening (hence HOL) failed when the consonant cluster consisted of three consonants, cf. Old English and late Old English **cildru** "children." There are also sporadic instances where HOL failed anyway (cf. the Present-Day English distinction between "wind" (noun) and "wind" (verb), Old English **wind**, **windan**, though this distinction may be the result of a disambiguating choice between variant pronunciations to avoid confusion between two meanings).

Correlating in time with HOL and clearly deriving from the same impulse, is the other major late Old English quantitative change: shortening before non-Homorganic Consonant Groups, *e.g.* late Old English **cepte** (< **cēpte**) "kept," **wifmann** (< **wifmann**) "woman." This process would seem to be the reverse of Homorganic Lengthening, and probably arose through the reassignment of the consonant beginning the second syllable to the end of the preceding syllable: a non-homorganic double-consonant cluster resulted, and the stressed syllable became "over-long," *i.e.* VVCC. Paradigmatic variation resulted, *e.g.* the Present-Day English distinction between the vowels in "keep" (cf. Old English **cēpan**) and "kept" (cf. late Old English **cepte**).[4]

The Early Middle English quantitative change is known as Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening (MEOSL). Early in the thirteenth century, most scholars agree that the short vowels **a**, **e** and **o**, which by ibis time were qualitatively [a, ɛ, ɔ] were lengthened in so-called "open syllables" of disyllabic words, *e.g.* Old English **beran** > Middle English **bēre**(**n**) "bear" (= verb), Old English **macian** > Middle English **maken** "make," Old English **þrote** > Middle English **throte** "throat." The development seems to have taken place a little earlier in Northern Middle English.

Later, or so it is generally held, in the late thirteenth (northern) and fourteenth (southern) centuries, **i** and **u** also underwent lengthening to **ē**, **ō** respectively, *e.g.* Old English **wicu** > Middle English **wēke** "week," Old English **wudu** > Middle English **wōde** "wood"; that Middle English had a long vowel in these words is flagged by the Present-Day English <ee>-, <oo>-spellings. MEOSL developed as the unstressed vowels began to lose metrical weight, *i.e.* VCV > *VCv (= defective) > VvCv (= compensated) > VvC (= defective) > VVC (= compensated). There is some evidence that MEOSL took some time to affect the phonological structure of English, and that though the change may be dated to the early thirteenth century it was still working its way through the phonological structure of the language in Chaucer's time (see further Dobson 1962; see also Smith 1996, 96-98 and references there cited).[5]

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[4] The reassignment of consonants between syllables raises some quite complex matters to do with syllable-boundaries, something I propose to examine in a future paper on quantitative adjustments.

[5] MEOSL did of course fail to affect a few words where it might have been expected to have manifested itself, e.g. **sunu** "son," **lufu** "love." The failure of such forms to undergo lengthening is traditionally associated with early loss of final -e; see Jordan 1974, §36.3 and §38.3.

One implication of all these developments is that the short vowels were closer in quality in the late Old English period than they became in Early Middle English. <**i**>-spellings in **cīld**, derived from HOL, beside unlengthened **i** in **cildru**, contrast with <**e**(**e**)>-spellings in **wēke**, where the **ē** derived from MEOSL seems to be the reflex of Old English **i** in **wicu**. Lengthened forms of [ɪ, ʊ], viz. [ɪː, ʊː], would have merged with the reflexes of Old English **ē**/**ēo**, and **ō** respectively. As Ladefoged and Maddieson (285-286) point out, [ɪː, ʊː] and [eː, oː] are acoustically very close, and mergers are to be expected. It is no surprise therefore that <e, o> were used as the spellings for both "original" long vowels and those long vowels which resulted from MEOSL. It is also no surprise that, conversely, when the Old English vowels **ē**, **ēo** underwent sporadic shortening, they merged with / ɪ/ and shared in its subsequent history, *e.g.* Old English **sēoc** "sick."

The arguments just cited are the basis for Campbell's footnote. Campbell's dating derives most probably from the analysis of one well-known collection of metrical sermons, *The Ormulum* (MS Oxford, Bodleian Library Junius I), so named "forrþi þatt Orrm itt wrohhte" (because Orm made it). *The Ormulum* is usually dated to ca. 1200 and survives in an authorial holograph.[6] Orm's "phonetically written" spelling-system though eccentric to present-day eyes, is completely logical for the purposes for which it was devised: it seems to have been designed to help reading aloud, quite possibly by intoning.

One of Orm's characteristics is, in closed syllables, to double consonants after short vowels but not after long vowels. Orm distinguishes between (*e.g.*) **follc** "people, folk" and **child** "child"; since the long vowel in the latter derives from HOL, Orm's language demonstrates that HOL had occurred in the ancestor of his dialect.

On the other hand, it has been traditionally held that MEOSL had not occurred in Orm's language. This view is supported by an observation about Orm's prosodic practice. Orm has two kinds of line: four-beat (*e.g.* Annd Sannte Marȝess time wass) and three-beat (*e.g.* þatt ȝho þa shollde childenn). At the end of his three-beat lines, Orm has a restricted range of usages: he uses disyllables with short vowels in closed root-syllables and long vowels, and long vowels in all kinds of syllables. However, he never uses disyllables where a long vowel was to result from MEOSL: thus **takenn** (from Old English **tācn** "sign") appears at the end of a three-beat line, but never **takenn** ("take," "taken").[7]

The traditional view has not, of course, gone unchallenged. The most cogent recent contrary arguments have been put forward by Roger Lass, most thoroughly in his contribution to the third volume of the *Cambridge History of the English Language* (Lass).

[6] See further, Parkes.

[7] See further Bennett and Smithers 361 and references there cited: for other views, see Phillips, Fulk. Bennett and Smithers indicate, *contra* Jordan §25 remark 4, that Orm's use of the acute accent is not used to distinguish length but rather to distinguish homographs.

Lass's differences from the traditional views are concentrated on the reflexes of Old English **i** and **u**. When these forms underwent MEOSL, he argues that they also underwent a lowering, but lowering did not happen when there was no quantitative change. His argument derives from his analysis of orthoepistical evidence:

> no orthoepist before Robinson (1619) reports a quality difference between [Middle English] /e:/ and /i/, or /o:/ and /u:/ they all give *e.g.* **beet**/**bit**, **pool**/**pull** as length-pairs. And most later writers, through Wallis (1653), still show no difference. The first modern-sounding description is Cooper (1687), who marches the reflexes of [Middle English] /i, u/ with long mid rather than high vowels: **win**/**wean** are a short/long pair (**wean** had [e:] for Cooper), and **pull** has the short correspondent of the vowel in **hope**, which is [o:]. If Cooper doesn't clearly describe centralisation, he does indicate lowering. Even if some adventurous speakers in the early seventeenth century had lowered [Middle English] /i, u/, the modern values were not established until close to the end of the century. (Lass 88)

Supporting evidence for Lass's view, as he indicates in the citation above, is given by those orthoepists who flag a qualitative identity between Middle English **i** and Middle English **ē** /e:/, the latter being raised to /i:/ by 1600 at the latest. Alexander Gil in his *Logonomia Anglica* (l619, 1621; see Dobson 1968, 138; ch. I) links Middle English [e:, ɪ] as distinguished only by quantity, but Gil is often rather old-fashioned in his usage and also failed "to make certain distinctions of vowel-quality which must have existed" (Dobson 1968, 153; ch. I; this of course could be special pleading for the traditional view). A high-vowel matching between the reflexes of Middle English **i** and **ē** is flagged by the reputable spelling-reformer Richard Hodges (*Special Help* 1643, *The English Primrose* 1644: see Dobson 1968, 168, 170; ch. I), though Hodges does give early evidence for an unrounded reflex of Middle English **u**, *i.e.* /ʌ/.

However, other major seventeenth-century phoneticians give less clear evidence. John Wilkins does not describe sounds with "great accuracy" (Dobson 1968, 255; ch. I); William Holder's apparent high-vowel matching seems to be an error, indicated by internal evidence (Dobson 1968, 270; ch. I); and Francis Lodwick's identification of a qualitative parallel between the vowels in **sin**, **seen** seems to be derived from his being a native speaker of Dutch (see Dobson 1968, 277; ch. I). John Wallis's evidence in his *Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae* (1653) is not unproblematic, and may flag hyperadapted usages. Dobson (1968, 240; ch. I) points out that "Wallis seems not to distinguish clearly between [ʊ] and [u:] when the spelling does not guide him."

More certain evidence for lowered reflexes of Middle English **i** and **u** is offered by Isaac Newton who, in his manuscript notes on matters of pronunciation, links Middle English /ɛ:/ (not /e:/) to Middle English **i**. Fairly clearly demonstrating that the short vowel was for him pronounced /ɪ/ (cf. Dobson 1968, 248; ch. I), as they were for Robison and Cooper (see above). Robert Robinson (*The Art Pronuntiation* 1617) and Christopher Cooper (*Grammatica Linguae Anglicanae* 1685, *The English Teacher* 1687), who also record a mid-vowel matching, were among the

best phoneticians of the seventeenth century, and it would therefore not be surprising if they noticed distinctions which other writers missed.

Interestingly, the speech of all three men was probably to some degree "non-prestigious." Newton's usage was markedly non-standard, reflecting the Lincolnshire origins which are indicated by other features of his usage as recorded in his notes (Dobson 1968, 253; ch. I); and Robinson, though an educated Londoner, seems to have had a number of progressive and "vulgar" features in his speech (Dobson 1968, 209; ch. I). Cooper, a highly intelligent and educated man, was not only "of comparatively humble origin" (Dobson 1968, 310; ch. I), but also someone who spent almost his entire life in Hertfordshire.

Evidence for the quality of the short vowels —or any vowels— from the sixteenth century is hard to interpret, especially because the interests of the sixteenth-century spelling-reformers did not include making delicate qualitative distinctions. The best evidence for reflexes of Old English **i** and **u** in [ɪ, ʊ] is provided by *The Welsh Hymn to the Virgin*, where a Welsh spelling-system used for an English text flags a "lax" pronunciation of the English short vowels (Dobson 1968, 4; ch. I). This qualitative observation is confirmed by William Salesbury's *Dictionary in Englyshe and Welshe* (1547) (Dobson 1968, 15; ch. I), The mid-vowel matching is also suggested, though perhaps more problematically, by others.[8]

To sum up the orthoepistical evidence: there would seem to be two systems in existence throughout most of the Early Modern English period, one with /i, u/ as the reflexes of Old English **i**, **u** and another with /ɪ, ʊ/. It seems likely, from analysis of other orthoepistical evidence, that the early spelling-reformers and phoneticians often demonstrate an old-fashioned or conservative usage which was paralleled by a "vulgar" usage throughout —a vulgar usage which became dominant from the middle of the seventeenth century. We will be returning to these two systems later in this paper.

It will be recalled that, according to the traditional accounts, MEOSL seems to have taken place in two phases: an earlier phase in which **a**, **e** and **o** were lengthened, and a later phase in which lengthening of **i** and **u** took place. The lengthening of **i** and **u** seems to have been accompanied by lowering, as is indicated (though not consistently) in a few Northern texts by such spellings as **dreuen** "driven" (see *Middle English Dictionary*, sv. **drīven**), and rhymes such as **gome** "man" (Old English **guma**); **dome** ("doom," cf. Old English **dōm**).[9]

The appearance of distinct Northern developments is of course not particularly surprising in the history of English. It is probably no coincidence that a lowering of short vowels is widely recorded in the Norse dialects (Haugen 254); it is also probably no coincidence that this lowering is dated to the thirteenth century, at roughly the same time that it took place in England (Gordon and Taylor 267).

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[8] See Dobson, *Pronunciation* 11; §79, §93.

[9] See Gordon 25; lines 697, 699 and Jordan §36.3.

The Northern usage may be the result *of* contact with Norse, which probably triggered other specifically Northern developments such as "Northern fronting" of the reflexes of Old English **ā** and **ō**:[10] it may alternatively be a parallel development associated with the "North Germanic" aspect of Anglian.[11]

In Southern varieties, lengthening is more sporadic, as demonstrated by the retention of short vowels in Present-Day English "written" (past participle: cf. Old English **gewriten**) and "come" (infinitive: cf. Old English **cuman**). Now it has been argued that the lowering of **i** and **u** was delayed or even halted because closer vowels seem to have a built-in tendency to resist lengthening (Jones 114). It is worth noting in this connexion that, even in Present-Day English, vowels in northern dialects of English, and in Scots, tend to be realised allophonically as more open in realisation than in southern English dialects (Wells 356). I have developed elsewhere the implications of this difference for the origins of the Great Vowel Shift.[12]

The reluctance of **i** and **u** to undergo lengthening in the ancestor of the Present-Day southern English is thus well-attested, and indeed careful analysis of the operation of MEOSL in southern dialects would indicate that lengthening of **i** and **u** was even more restricted there than has hitherto been argued. It is an interesting fact that many of those forms cited by Jordan (§36.3., §38.3) and Luick (405-409) as demonstrating the operation of MEOSL in "[Modern English] literary language" (Jordan §36.3) are in some sense problematic, thus:

"week" is traditionally seen as descending from Old English **wicu**, with MEOSL and lowering of **i** to **ē** /e:/. However, there is some evidence for a form with a retained short vowel in Early Modern English: the word is paired with **wick** by Hodges in his "near alike" list, though this may signal a common pronunciation with /i:/ (Dobson 1968, ch. I, §10).

"weet" (for "wit," verb = "know"), <e>-forms are quite widely recorded in evidence of later developments is that it only rarely underwent lengthening. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the usage is a fairly rare, archaistic form reflecting rural usage, chiefly poetical, and it occurs in Spenser; since there is some evidence that Spenser's rural connexions were with Lancashire, a northern provenance for the form would seem to be indicated.[13]

[10] See SAMUELS.

[11] See SMITH, forthcoming.

[12] See further SMITH, *Historical* 97.

[13] The varying reflexes of Old English **i** perhaps cast some light on the spelling <e> for this item which is commonly found in some varieties of Middle English. Dot-map 581 in *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* shows the distribution of the form **wete** for "wit" ("know"): although the form has a fairly wide distribution in the southern half of England it is dominant in East Anglia, and there are pockets elsewhere, notably in the North-West Midlands. See also Dobson 1968, 11. §80. The <e>-spelling would be replaced gradually by <i> as London usage began to spread out into the countryside during the late Middle and Early Modern English periods.

“weevil” may derive from Old English **wifel**, with MEOSL and lowering of **i**: thus the *Oxford English Dictionary.* However, cf. the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, sv. “weevil”: “Continuity with [Old English] **wifel** is not shown, and the word may be due to commercial relations with the Low Countries.” The Middle Low German form is **wevel**: if the loan were early enough, the -**e**- would simply lengthen along with other MEOSL-influenced **e**-types.

“beetle” in Present-Day English has two chief meanings: “beating implement” and “coleopterous insect” *(Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*). The first is from Old Anglian **bētel**; the second is from Old English **bitula**, related to **bītan** “bite.” *Oxford English Dictionary* flags some semantic overlap between the two (nb. the component “hurting”), and it is at least possible that the two words underwent a formal merger during the Middle English period (as is indicated by the Present-Day English pattern). The *Oxford English Dictionary* also offers an alternative etymology to **bitula**, citing the form **betlas**, “pointing to a nom. **betel**, [which] has not been etymologically explained, but it may, if genuine, be the source of [Middle English] **betylle**, 16th c. **betel**, mod. **Beetle**...”

“sweep”: The *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* considers this form to result either from the development of Old English ***swipian**, Old Norse **svipa** or from the extension of ē in the preterite (Old English **swēop**); “shortening of vowel in pt. and pp. is shown before 1400.” The *Oxford English Dictionary* (sv. “sweep”) flags some uncertainty; “[Middle English] **swepe** (taking the place of the original SWOPE, [Old English] **swápan**, **swéop**, **swápen**), first recorded from northern texts: of uncertain origin. Two suggestions of source have been made, both of which involve phonological difficulties. (1) The mutated stem **swp**-... This would normally have produced a mod.Eng. ***sweap**, but in its transference from the northern to the southern area, **swepe** may have been assimilated to words like **slepe** ([Old English] Anglian **slépan**) to SLEEP, or **crepe** ([Old English] **créopan**) to CREEP, the process being perhaps assisted by the pa. tense **swep-e** ([Old English] **swéop**) of the original strong verb. (2) [Old Norse] **svipa** to move swiftly and suddenly. This etymology involves the assumption that [Old Norse] became [Middle English], which is not otherwise clearly authenticated, and that the intransitive sense... is the original.”

“peel” is usually derived from Old English ***peolian**, ***pilian**, “recorded only late in **pyleđ**” (*Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*). However, The *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* goes on to state as follows: “The differentiation in literary Eng[lish] between **peel** and **pil** may have been assisted by (O[ld])F[rench] **peter** peel, **piller** pillage.” A complex interchange of **e**- and **i**- type forms are recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

“creek” may result from lengthening and lowering of **i** in Middle English **crike** “chink,” “nook,” but equally probably derives from Middle Dutch **krēke**. The *Oxford English Dictionary* derives Present-Day English “creek” from the latter: “(2) **creke**, rare in [Middle English]..., but common in the 16th c. (whence the current “creek”)...”

“evil,” Old English **yfel**, is commonly used to illustrate the operation of MEOSL: **yfel** > ***ifel** > **ēuel**; **ē** subsequently raises to /i:/ through the operation of the Great Vowel Shift. However, it is worth observing that the form **euel** may have two distinct origins depending on its geographical distribution. In the south-eastern dialects, **e** as the reflex of Old English **y** is commonplace, so there would be no need there to posit a stage ***ifel** > **ēuel**. It is of course quite common in historical linguistics for the same form to emerge in different places as the result of distinct processes: we might note, for instance, the Middle English form **efter** “after,” which derives from Old Norse **eptir** in northern varieties, but from Old Mercian **efter** in the West Midlands (cf. West Saxon **æfter**).

“wood,” from Old English **wudu**, is problematic etymologically. Dobson (1968, 11; §36, note 2) states as follows:

> **Wood** does not show shortening of [Middle English] **ō** [*i.e.* /o:/]; its **u** (which is preserved as [ʊ] by the influence of the preceding [w]) is the normal [Middle English] vowel (< [Old English] **wudu**); but the spelling represents a late [Middle English] variant with **ō** [*i.e.* /o:/] by lengthening in the open syllable...

“door” “shows variation because of its twofold origin” (Dobson 1968: 11. §155(b)), viz. Old English **duru**, **dor**. Blending between these two forms would allow for the Present-Day English “door” to emerge without positing the lowering of Old English **u** and the operation of MEOSL on the resulting **o** /o/.

come: **Rome** would seem to be an odd rhyme in Southern texts, at first sight flagging an identity of <o> in **come** (cf. Old English **cuman**) and in **Rome** (with the reflex of Old English **ō**); however, there is evidence that such rhymes were conventional in much Middle English verse (cf. the common rhyme **Rome** “Rome”: **to me** “to me”).

In sum, many of the forms used by the standard authorities to illustrate MEOSL-lowering are shown to be Northern or in some way problematic. It would thus seem that lowering of the reflexes of Old English **i**, **u** is at best only sporadic in southern English, and arguably barely took place there until well after MEOSL ceased to be operative; lowering seems to have been a slow diffusing phenomenon, and its eventual effect in London English no doubt relates to massive immigration into London from the Midlands, East Anglia and the North during the Early Modern English period. The situation was clearly different in northern varieties, where lowering took place early enough to allow for the operation of MEOSL.

Alongside the evidence just adduced for the reluctance of **i** and **u** to lengthen in Southern dialects might be placed developments in the remaining short vowels. We might first examine the reflexes of Old English **e** and **o**. As discussed in Smith (1996, 98), when these vowels underwent lengthening through the process of MEOSL, there is good rhyming evidence that in Midland varieties they merged with Middle English /ɛ:, ɔ:/. Thus, in *On god ureisun of ure lefdi* (MS London, British Library, Cotton Nero A.XIV), **iureden** “injure” (Old English **gewerdan** with

metathesis) rhymes with **reade** "red" (Old English **rēad**), and **uorloren** "abandoned" (Old English **forloren**) rhymes with **ore** "mercy" (Old English **ār**).

However, there is some evidence that Old English **e** and **o** in MEOSL environments had distinct reflexes in some London varieties, as evidenced by the rhyming practices of Geoffrey Chaucer (see Smith 1996, 101-102, also Dobson 1962, 134-135). These rhymes seem to show that MEOSL-affected **e**, **o** were realised as [ɛː˔, ɔː˔], indicating pre-MEOSL realisations in [ɛ˔, ɔ˔], *i.e.* rather closer than their more northerly congeners. In sum, as with the reflexes of Old English **i** and **u**, certain southern dialects seem to have closer realisations of these short vowels than elsewhere.

There remains the question of Middle English **a**. The lengthening of **a** in the reflex of **macian** flags that Early Middle English **a** was a front and not a back vowel, and this conclusion is supported by the fact that in most dialects it merged with the reflexes of Old English **æ**.

In Present-Day English, southern English dialects prototypically have a higher realisation of Middle English **a**, and this seems to have also been the case during the Early Modern English period. The co-existence of a higher and a lower realisation of Old English **a** perhaps explains the appearance, sporadically, of forms such as **Crenmer** (for the personal name "Cranmer") in the diary of the Londoner Henry Machyn (see for instance Wyld 1956, 198); such usages can be explained as hyperadaptations resulting from "rising-class" figures (such as Machyn) encountering "risen-class" usage in a situation of considerable social ferment.[14]

What, then, does the evidence indicate about the quality of the short vowels of Middle and Early Modern English? Is Campbell's axiom to be supported? Or does the evidence support Lass's view that the short vowels, notably the reflexes of Old English **i** and **u**, were of a close quality until the middle of the seventeenth century?

The argument of this paper is that Campbell and Lass are both right and wrong, and that the rightness or wrongness of each depends on whether the history of the language is seen from a unitary or variationist perspective. Campbell is right if the history of English is focussed on the North and the Midlands; Lass is right if the focus is on the prestigious usages of London. Once the evidence has been examined, it becomes fairly clear that the short vowels of Middle English varied diatopically in precise realisation: in broad terms, southern varieties had closer realisations than

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[14] The "hyperadaptation" argument does, I think, supply an answer to Dobson's view (1968, II, §59 note 2) that "no Englishman could conceivably use **e** as a means of representing [æ]... No English-speaking child learning to spell, whatever other errors he might make, would write **ket** for [kæt]..." However, a classic parallel is the pronunciation [ɛ] for [a] in the "Kelvinside" accent of Glasgow, where Received Pronunciation [æ] is aimed at, overshot and realised as [ɛ]: thus the old joke, "in Kelvinside, sex (i.e. sacks) are what your coal comes in." Dobson then goes on to deny the reality of <e>-spellings as the reflex of Old English **a**, with detailed discussion. Despite Dobson's erudition, the evidence could just possibly stand reassessment.

northern ones. That this pattern coincides with Present-Day English usage would seem to confirm the late medieval and Early Modern situation.

Where Campbell and Lass are wrong is in seeing the history of the English short vowels as a series of pan-dialectal developments where general statements can be made about the quality of the vowels at given points in time. Rather, the evidence shows a congeries of interacting usages whose defining characteristic is diatopic and diachronic variation. The discussion of the short vowels of Middle and Early Modern English offered here suggests that a variationist perspective gives a truer, albeit more complex, picture of the situation, whereby systems with lowered reflexes existed alongside systems where lowering had not taken place. The general conclusion to be drawn from the argument here offered is that histories of the language give a truer picture of developments when they take on board fully the complex nature of linguistic variation.

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