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0521022916 - Quantity Adjustment: Vowel Lengthening and Shortening in Early Middle English

Nikolaus Ritt

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This is a unified account of all quantity changes affecting English stressed vowels during the Early Middle English period. Dr Ritt discusses Homorganic Lengthening, Open Syllable Lengthening, Trisyllabic Shortening, and Shortening before Consonant Clusters. The study is based on a statistical analysis of the Modern English reflexes of the changes. The complete corpus of analysed data is made available to the reader in the appendices.

All of the changes are shown to derive from basically the same set of quasi-universal tendencies, while apparent idiosyncrasies are shown to follow from factors that are independent of the underlying tendencies themselves. The role of tendencies – probabilistic laws in the description of language change – is given thorough theoretical treatment. In his aim to account for the changes as well as trace their chronology, Dr Ritt applies principles of Natural Phonology, and examines the conflict between phonological and morphological ‘necessities’.

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QUANTITY ADJUSTMENT

VOWEL LENGTHENING AND SHORTENING
IN EARLY MIDDLE ENGLISH

NIKOLAUS RITT

University of Vienna



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Preface

This study had its origins in my doctoral dissertation on Early Middle English changes of vowel quantity. Since I was a student at Vienna University, it is no big surprise that my thesis took the great Viennese philologist Karl Luick's treatment of the topic as a starting point. In some way, even, it started out as an attempt to translate the story Luick had told of the changes into the language of historical linguists of our time. As often happens with translations, however, mine turned out to become an interpretation, a deconstruction and eventually an almost complete recreation of the text it set out merely to 'make understandable'. The obvious reason for this was, of course, that many of the Neogrammarian concepts Luick had employed have come to be refuted by the linguistic community and that even the very existence of sound laws that had long counted as well established has come to be questioned in brilliant and convincing ways by modern historical linguists. Most eye-opening to me, in this respect, was Donka Minkova's radical re-interpretation of Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening in her 1982 paper in *Folia Linguistica Historica*. At some stages during my work, then, I thought that the purpose of my study was to discover 'errors' in the stories of Luick and my other predecessors, to set them right and to make their accounts more 'true'. Certainly, while I was working on my dissertation, such a heroic search for 'truth' appeared as a noble and worthy task to me and motivated me greatly. Afterwards, however, and particularly during the phase in which I reworked my thesis for publication, my attitudes towards 'God's truth' and what I may believe to have grasped of it underwent the unavoidable change and became considerably more modest. Now, I feel that the essential difference between my version of Early Middle English quantity changes and the accounts Luick and other scholars after him have given is not one of truth. Rather than answering the question of Early Middle English changes of vowel quantity 'once and for all' I hope to have highlighted some relevant aspects concerning this question and shown how concepts and methods of contemporary linguistic science can be applied to them to yield surprising results and to make new sense of old stories.

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Apart from my friends and colleagues from the English department of Vienna university, I owe great thanks to the following people: *Dieter Kastovsky* for suggesting Early Middle English vowel quantity as a topic to me and for supervising my thesis; *Harald Mittermann* for showing me what it really means to ask scientific questions, for honestly pointing out to me whenever I was on a really false track, for suggesting literature to me of which I never would have dreamed that it could be relevant for my topic and, generally, for applying his sharp mind to the task of straightening out my sometimes confused way of thinking; *Donka Minkova* mostly for her outstanding work in the field of Middle English vowel quantity, but also for her careful reading of earlier versions of this study and for her useful comments and corrections; *Wolfgang Dressler* for introducing me to natural linguistics; *Ádám Nadasdy* for his meticulous reading of my thesis, as well as for representing in my eyes a reincarnation of Karl Luick himself; finally *Roger Lass* for his great encouragement, for his careful and sympathetic reading of my thesis, for pointing out its rough edges and suggesting ways of smoothing them, as well as for adjusting my perspective of what it was that I was really doing, and for flooding me with interesting questions to pursue.

What I owe to Laura, Jakob and Julian, Marille, Ernie and all other family members (particularly *zio* Pierre Giorgio with his impressive moustache) as well as to all my friends is expressed only inadequately by the word form *thanks*.