

1 The Middle English Development of Old English \bar{y} and Lengthened y : Spelling Evidence

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1. Introduction¹

The ‘Great Vowel Shift’ is the term used about a set of changes in the phonetic realisation of Middle English (ME) long vowels, which took place around 1400–1750 according to the handbooks. In this shift, the non-close vowels /e:/, /ɛ:/, /a:/, /o:/, /ɔ:/ were raised one step in the vowel space, and the close vowels /i:/ and /u:/ were diphthongised (Jespersen 1909: 231 ff.; Luick 1914–40: §§479–488; Dobson 1957 *passim*).

In the late Old English (OE) and early ME periods, changes happened to the long vowels /y:/, /ɑ:/, and /o:/, as described by e.g. Luick (1914–40: §§287, 369–370, 406) and Jordan (1968: §§39–42, 44–46, 53–54). However, these changes are not regarded as part of the ‘GVS’, because (i) they are said to have been completed before the earliest stages of the ‘GVS’ took place (the changes to /y:/ and /ɑ:/), and/or (ii) did not take place in those dialects which later contributed to the phonology of StE (the fronting of /o:/ in dialects north of the Humber). Critical voices have been raised, suggesting that the ‘GVS’ started earlier than textbooks suggest, most notably by Stockwell & Minkova (1988a, 1988b). This paper treats the ME development of OE \bar{y} and lengthened y , for convenience called ‘eME \bar{y} ’, seeking to establish (a) its phonetic

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developments in the dialects of ME, (b) the approximate dates at which its various developments started, and (c) whether the said changes were in fact completed before the ‘GVS’ set in. The answers to these questions may have far-reaching consequences for our interpretation of the Shift.

2. Handbooks on the development of OE \bar{y}/y

According to standard handbooks, the reflexes of OE /y:/ and /y/ in lengthening contexts were unrounded to [i:] in late OE or early ME in “all northern counties”, in parts of the East Midlands, “including Lincolnshire, Norfolk, and the districts bordering on these counties”, and in parts of the South-West, “especially Devonshire, Dorsetshire, and Wiltshire” (Wright & Wright 1928: §57 1; cf. Jordan 1968: §41). They became [e:] “in Kent and parts of Middlesex, Sussex, Essex, and Suffolk during the OE period” (Wright and Wright 1928: §57 2; cf. Jordan 1968: §40). In the remaining areas, i.e. parts of the South and the West Midlands, the \bar{y} remained until the late fourteenth century, when it was unrounded to [i:] (Jordan 1968: §§39, 42–43; Luick 1914–40: §§287–288; Wright & Wright 1928: §57 3). Thus, the changes to the reflexes of eME /y:/ and lengthened /y/ are believed to span a period of at least three hundred years, even by conventional accounts.

In those dialects where late OE /y:/ was unrounded to [i:], this [i:] later participated in the ‘GVS’, yielding PDE /aɪ/; an example is OE *hwȳ* WHY, RP /waɪ/. In those dialects where the /y:/ was unrounded and lowered to [e:], this [e:] also participated in the ‘GVS’. For instance, OE *mȳs* MICE became *mēs* in Kentish, and, after the ‘GVS’, is reflected as [mi:s] in the modern dialect (Wright & Wright 1928: §57). It should therefore be possible to infer something about the probable ME reflexes of eME \bar{y} from its modern dialectal pronunciations.

3. Middle English spellings and dialect material

Dialect material in the form of spellings has been extracted from the *Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English (LAEME)*, which covers the period c. 1150–1325 for all of England, as well as from the *Survey of Middle English Dialects 1290–1350 (SMED)*, and the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English (LALME)*, which covers the period c. 1350–1450. All tokens for the lexical items listed in the Appendix were abstracted from all *LAEME* source texts; from *SMED* and *LALME*, material was extracted for all relevant lexical items.

However, ME spelling is not phonetic transcript, so the implied sound value can only be inferred. Traditionally, <i> and <y> for eME \bar{y} are taken to indicate unrounded [i:]; <u> and <ui/uy> are believed to correspond to a retained front rounded [y:], whereas <e> and <ee> imply lowering and unrounding to [e:].² When OE \bar{y} -words are spelt with <i> in late OE or early ME, it seems safe to assume that such spellings do indeed indicate unrounding, especially if the modern dialect shows /aɪ/, which is the ‘GVS’ output of ME \bar{i} . This assumption is strengthened if spellings with <y> for etymological \bar{i} also appear in the same ME dialects. However, it would be a mistake to view the continued use of <y> to simply represent [i:] *a priori* in dialects where the *rounded* vowel is believed (in hindsight) to have been retained. In such cases, <y> *could* correspond to [y:], although such an interpretation would be highly improbable if <y> also appears for etymological \bar{i} .³ In other words, the scribe’s entire orthographical system must be taken into account before his likely pronunciation is inferred, since occasional spellings are by definition deviations from the scribe’s norm, and may reveal something about his spoken system.

In those dialects where the OE \bar{y} remained front and rounded, i.e. in parts of the South, and in the West (and Central) Midlands, this vowel is usually represented by <u>, <ui/uy> in ME – and not by <y> alone – from around 1100 onwards (Wright & Wright 1928: §57). The use of <u> for this purpose was made possible when OE \bar{u} , traditionally spelt <u>, started to be spelt <ou/ow> during the ME period, due to French spelling practice (Stenbrenden 2013).

Gradon (1962) cites spellings indicating late OE unrounding of the reflex of OE y , as well as conditioned rounding of the reflexes of OE i and \bar{i} , in the SW Midlands. Forms with <y> for etymological i in a set of Exeter documents “are probably to be regarded merely as back-spellings” (1962: 66), based on the merger between OE y and i at [i], but a number of other such spellings in ten Winchester texts cannot be so dismissed. More specifically, Gradon claims that OE \bar{i} after w seems

² Anderson (1988) argues convincingly that in Kentish, the reflexes of OE \bar{y}/y must have lowered to [ø(:)] first, before unrounding to [e(:)].

³ For instance, the latter part of the account of Othere’s voyage in the OE *Orosius*, which is found only in the later, eleventh-century MS (MS Cotton Tiberius B.1), shows numerous back spellings with <y> for etymological OE \bar{i}/i , which suggests that in late WS, etymological \bar{y}/y had already been unrounded. Examples of back spellings are <swyþe> for OE *swīþe* ‘very’, <scypa> ship gen.pl., <swyna> swine gen.pl. Such back spellings are absent from the earlier Lauderdale MS, which has been dated to the first half of the tenth century.

to have undergone rounding. Besides, there is evidence that OE *y* was unrounded before palatals even in the SW Midlands, whereas it was retained in other phonetic contexts (1962: 72).

4. Discussion

The extracted *LAEME* material shows a variety of spellings for eME \bar{y} : <i>, <y>, <e>, <ee>, <eo>, <ey>, <u>, <ui>, <uy>, <yu>, <ou>. Again, it must be stressed that spellings cannot simply be interpreted as transcriptions of sounds. However, interaction between written norms and spoken systems must be assumed, resulting in hyper-adaptations, back spellings, and the like, and when the material is systematised, patterns emerge. Most *LAEME* sources show a mixture of spellings for etymological \bar{y} which seem to contradict each other in terms of their implied sound value. A case in point is the text with index number 1300, whose language has been localised to Suffolk and dated to the second half of the twelfth century: it has dominant <i> (indicating unrounding), a secondary variant <u> (implying a retained front rounded vowel), and minor variants <ui> (implying retained [y:]) and <e>, <eo> (implying lowered and unrounded [e:]). Thus, it is difficult to draw any definite conclusions from the material. Nevertheless, the following observations can be made.

Unrounding of OE \bar{y}/y to [i:] started in late OE and is indicated in source texts whose language has been localised to Essex, Suffolk and perhaps Hampshire from the late twelfth century; in sources localised to Oxfordshire, Kent, Northamptonshire and Worcestershire from the early thirteenth century; in texts localised to Cumberland, Cheshire, Somerset and Surrey from the mid-thirteenth century; in sources localised to Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Devon, Gloucestershire and Herefordshire from the late thirteenth century; and in texts localised to Ely, Huntingdonshire and the North Riding of Yorkshire from the early fourteenth century. Thus, unrounding seems to have started in the South-East and South-West, and to have spread northwards, which goes against the assumption that the unrounding originated in the North (Jordan 1968: §41). However, the paucity of ME texts from northern England from the early ME period precludes any definite conclusion regarding the locus of this change.

Lowering and unrounding to [e:] is indicated in sources whose language has been localised to Essex and Suffolk from the late twelfth century; in texts localised to Kent from the early thirteenth century; in texts localised to Somerset and dated to 1240; in sources

localised to Gloucestershire and Wiltshire from the second half of the thirteenth century; and in a text whose language has been localised to Lincolnshire from the early fourteenth century. Hence, eME \bar{y} > [e:] seems to have started in the South-East (Kent, Essex, Suffolk), but also to have taken place independently barely a half-century later in the South-West. Forms with <e> are dominant in sources whose language has been localised to Kent (the texts with index nos. 8, with a secondary variant <i>, and 142, with minor variants <ée> and <ie>), Essex (no. 160), Gloucestershire (no. 161), Somerset (no. 156, with <y> co-varying with <e>), and Lincolnshire (no. 169, also with <y> co-varying with <e>).

Retained [y:] is indicated in sources whose language has been localised to Berkshire, Essex, Suffolk and Worcestershire from the latter half of the twelfth century; in texts from Northamptonshire, Herefordshire and Shropshire from the early thirteenth century; in texts localised to Cheshire, Gloucestershire, Wiltshire and Surrey from the mid-to-late thirteenth century; and in sources from Oxfordshire, Ely and Huntingdonshire from the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.

The <u> spellings from Berkshire, Essex, Suffolk and Surrey are early, but they seem to suggest that Wright & Wright (1928: § 57) may be wrong in stating that the reflex of OE \bar{y} had become [e:] in Essex and Suffolk in the late OE period; <e> forms do indeed occur in Essex (text nos. 4, 64, 1200) and Suffolk (text no. 1300), but they are not dominant. Sussex is poorly represented in the early ME material, but text no. 67 (1200–50), shows <i>, not <e>, for eME \bar{y} . Surprisingly, <u>-type spellings also linger on in the East (Ely, Huntingdonshire) as late as the early fourteenth century, although the <u> forms here are minor variants.

Regarding retained [y:], the *LAEME* material seems to also run counter to Wright & Wright's explicit claim concerning the development of \bar{y} in Wiltshire: dominant <u> in text no. 280 (1250–74) suggests that \bar{y} had *not* been unrounded in Wiltshire in late OE, but remained rounded. The same text shows dominant <ou> and <u> for the reflex of eME \bar{u} , and interestingly shows one <ou> for the reflex of eME \bar{y} as well, which indicates a rounded vowel.

Lass & Laing (2005) suggest that, despite what is traditionally claimed, western ME did *not* have front rounded vowels, i.e. [y(:)] and [ø(:)] from OE \bar{y}/y and \bar{e}/eo respectively.⁴ Instead, they maintain that \bar{y}

⁴ Lass & Laing's claims regarding the reflexes of OE \bar{e}/eo will not be addressed here.

became [i:] or [e:] or merged with the reflex of eME \bar{u} in different areas. That \bar{y} changed to [i:] and [e:] is no more than the traditional account, but Lass & Laing's claim that it merged with the reflex of eME \bar{u} in the SW Midlands certainly needs closer examination. Lass & Laing use material from *LAEME* texts 277 (Worcestershire), 272 (Shropshire), and 280 (Wiltshire) to back up their claims, which is why spellings for eME \bar{y} in these three texts must be investigated in some detail.

The extracted *LAEME* material for text 272 shows dominant <u>, and a secondary variant <v> for eME \bar{u} ; and dominant <u>, and secondary <i>, <e> for eME \bar{y} . Likewise, text 277 shows dominant <u> and secondary variants <ou>, <v>, <o> for eME \bar{u} ; and dominant <u>, and minor variants <i>, <eo> for eME \bar{y} . Text 280 shows dominant <ou>, <u>, and minor variants <v>, <o>, <ow> for eME \bar{u} ; and dominant <u>, and minor variants <i>, <ou>, <eo> for eME \bar{y} . Lass & Laing also claim that there are no instances of <y> for eME \bar{y} in the SW Midlands. Close inspection of all *LAEME* source texts localised to the W Midlands reveals that there are, but only for WHY, in text nos. 246 and 1100 from Herefordshire, 2002 from Gloucestershire, and 1600 from Oxfordshire.

Table 1 provides a complete list of all *LAEME* texts whose language has been localised to the W Midlands, and their spellings for eME \bar{y} and \bar{u} . It seems to be true that many W Midlands texts show <u> for both eME \bar{u} and \bar{y} , but most of them also show different secondary and minor spellings co-varying for each reflex. For instance, <ou/ow>, <o>, <uu>, <v>, <ov>, <w> are not infrequent as non-dominant variants for eME \bar{u} , whereas such spellings are rare for eME \bar{y} . For eME \bar{y} , non-dominant spellings such as <ui/uy>, <e>, <eo>, <i> are more frequent. In some W Midlands texts, the two reflexes appear to be kept apart; in these, the spellings suggest unrounding (and sometimes lowering) of eME \bar{y} . Such sources are no. 232 (Oxfordshire, 1175–1224), no. 189 (Herefordshire, 1200–24), no. 273 (Herefordshire, 1225–49), as well as no. 161 (Gloucestershire), no. 248 (Herefordshire), and no. 3 (Worcestershire; all 1275–99). Again, most of the W Midlands sources show a mixture of spellings which often contradict each other in terms of their implied sound value.

LAEME spellings for lengthened OE y may prove helpful. Most of the source texts whose language has been localised to the W Midlands show dominant <u> for the reflexes of OE y in lengthening contexts, though quite a few show minor <i>, particularly for OE yht , and particularly towards the later period. In other words, lengthened OE y seems to have remained rounded in most of the W Midlands in the ME period.

Table 1. LAEME spellings for eME \bar{y} compared to spellings for eME \bar{u} ; W Midlands texts only.

Text no.	Date	County	OE \bar{y}	OE y ; $-yht$	OE \bar{u}
63	12b†	Brk	u	∅	u, ou
170	12b2	Wor	u	∅	u ((o)) [†]
5	c.1200	Wor	u ((i*))	u	u
2000	c.1200	Wor	u (i*)	u; -uht/uct	u ((o, ow, v))
2001	c.1200	Wor	u	-uht/iht	u ((o))
232	12b2–13a1	Ox	i	∅	u
189	13a1	Hrf	i* ((u))	u	u ((o))
260	13a1	Sal	u (i*)	ey; -uht/uh	u
261	13a1	Sal	u ((i*, ui))	-uht	u ((v, e))
262	13a1	Sal	u ((i*))	-uht	u
1000	13a1	Sal	u ((i*))	u; -uht	u ((v))
6	13a	Wor	u (i)	i	u
7	13a	Wor	u ((i*))	i, u	u ((v))
1900	13a	Wor	u ((i, ui))	u; -urht/iht	u ((v, o, ?eo))
245	13a2	Wor	u (i*) ((ui))	u; -uht	u ((v, o, uu))
272	13a2	Sal	i*	∅	u ((v, o, uu))
273	13a2	Hrf	i*	∅	u (v) ((o, uu))
275	13a2	Hrf	u (i*)	u	u ((v))
1800	13a2	Wor	i* (u) ((uu, ei))	u; -uht	u ((w))
118	1240–50	Chs	u ((i, ui))	-iht/uht	u ((v, o))
122	1240–50	Chs	u, ui	u; -uht/iht	u
124	13b1	Chs	∅	ui	ou, u
158	13b1	Gl	u, i*	e, u	ou ((u, o, ow))
276	13b1	Wor	u ((i*))	u; -ucht/ugh	u ((v, i, o))
280	13b1	Wlt	u ((ou, i*, eo))	u, i; -iþ(t)/iht	ou, u ((v, o, ow))
271	13b	Gl	u, ui, i*	∅	ou (u) ((o, ow))
2	13b2	Wor	u (i*)	-i3t	u ((o, v, w))
3	13b2	Wor	i*	u	u ((ou, o, uu))
136	13b2	Chs	∅	-it	u, ou, ow, ey
161	13b2	Gl	e	ey; -eyt/e3t	ou ((o, u))
229	13b2	Gl	u	∅	u ((o))
246	13b2	Hrf	u (ui, y*, i*)	u, i; -ist	u ((ou, o, v, oi, uu, w, eo, eþ))

Table 1. Continued

Text no.	Date	County	OE \bar{y}	OE y ; $-yht$	OE \bar{u}
247	13b2	Hrf	u, ui, i*	u, uy; -it	ou ((ov, o, u))
248	13b2	Hrf	i (u)	Ø	u ((ou, o))
249	13b2	Hrf	u	Ø	u ((o, ou, e))
277	13b2	Wor	u ((i*))	u; -iht/uht/(ih)	u ((v, ou, o))
278	13b2	Wor	u ((i, v))	u, i; -ih(t/uht)	u ((ou, o, v, eo, eu, eou, uo, e, u-u))
1100	13b2	Hrf	u (i*) ((y*))	u; -iht/yht/uht	u ((v, w, ow/ou, o, uo, uw, e, ey))
2002	13b2	Gl	ui (i*) ((y*, u))	ui, u, ey; -izt/ uizt	ou ((o, ow, u, e, ei))
187	c.1300	Wor	uy	Ø	ou
10	13b2-14a1	Gl	u, i	u, ei	u ((o))
126	13b2-14a1	Wrk	u	Ø	ou
1600	13b2-14a1	Ox	u, uy ((i, y, yu))	u, uy (ui); -izht	ou (o) ((u, ov, ow, v, uy))
125	14a1	Hrf	ou	Ø	ou, o
140	14a1	Wlt	u	Ø	ov ((u, v, o))

‡ Suggested dates for source texts follow *LAEME*: the first number refers to century; ‘a’ and ‘b’ refer to the first half and the second half of the century, respectively; and ‘1’ and ‘2’ refer to the first and second quarter of each half-century.

† Use of round brackets to enclose non-dominant spellings follows *LALME* practice: single brackets enclose secondary variants, and double brackets enclose minor variants.

* An asterisk indicates that the text has <i> or <y> for why and/or OE *bȳsen* only.

Exceptions are found in the following sources: no. 260 (Shropshire, 1200–24) has dominant <ey> for lengthened OE y other than *yht* (for which <uht>, <uh> are found); no. 158 (Gloucestershire, 1250–74) has <e> as well as <u>; no. 161 (Gloucestershire, 1275–99) shows only <ey> for lengthened OE y ; no. 10 (Gloucestershire, 1275–1324) has <u> and <ei>. All of the preceding forms may point to lowering and unrounding of \bar{y} to [e:]. However, generally speaking, the reflex of OE *yht* appears to be in the process of merging with the reflex of OE *iht*.

Thus, examination of spellings from all *LAEME* sources localised to the W Midlands corroborates at least two of Lass & Laing’s claims: (a) there is no “neat geographical tri-partition for /y/”, and (b) not “only are the symbol-to-sound mappings more multiplex than is suggested,

but there is a strong element of lexical specificity in the set of reflexes” (Lass & Laing 2005: 281). In other words, certain lexical items seem to be spelt in certain ways, which supports the theory of change by lexical diffusion (Phillips 2006a, 2006b): sound changes seem to start in certain phonetic contexts, and/or in very frequent words, whence they spread from context to context, and from frequent to less frequent words. Their third claim, that there are no “particular spellings uniquely associated with OE /y(:)/” (*ibid.*), is not entirely correct, as <ui/uy> seem to be used for the reflex of eME \bar{y} only.⁵ It is their assumption that the reflex of eME \bar{y} fell in with the reflex of eME \bar{u} in the SW Midlands which is the most difficult to prove. ME spellings seem to lend support to their view: Table 1 shows clearly that <u> remains dominant for the reflexes of both eME \bar{y} and \bar{u} in the SW Midlands up until the last quarter of the thirteenth century, although <ou/ow> slowly take over as the dominant spellings for eME \bar{u} from c. 1250. A very few examples of <ou> for the reflex of eME \bar{y} appear to support the merger hypothesis also.

Evidence from the modern dialects may settle the issue: if present-day SW Midland accents show a merger between the reflexes of eME \bar{u} and \bar{y} , the ME spellings may be taken to indicate just that; if not, the same spellings simply show a lack of distinct representations on the orthographic level, but not phonetic or phonological merger. The *Survey of English Dialects* (Orton & Dieth 1962) yields material for the lexical items listed in the Appendix for the W Midlands, and for Wiltshire and Berkshire. This phonological material from the modern dialects implies that there was no merger between the reflexes of eME \bar{y} and \bar{u} in the W Midlands, since generally eME \bar{y} is reflected as a number of diphthongs with *unrounded* off-glides, and eME \bar{u} is reflected as a series of diphthongs with *rounded* off-glides. However, exceptions are found in some localities in Cheshire and Staffordshire:

Cheshire

- Locality 1: merger in [aɪ] or [ɑɪ];
- Locality 2: merger in [æɪ] for some words;
- Locality 3: merger in [ɛɪ] for some words;
- Locality 4: merger in [aɪ];
- Locality 5: merger in [ɛɪ] or [ɑɪ].

Staffordshire

- Locality 2: merger in [ɛɪ];

⁵ Only text no. 1600 (Oxfordshire, 1275–1324) has <uy> for the reflex of eME \bar{u} .

Localities 7–9: merger in [ɔɪ];

Locality 10: minimal distinction between [ɑ:ɪ] and [a:ɪ];

Locality 11: merger in [aɪ].

That is, in these localities, there is sometimes a diphthong with an *unrounded* off-glide for the stressed vowel of *cows/kyes* (OE *cȳ*), *mouse*, *house*, *mouth*, *drought*, *thousand*, *clouds* (all with eME *ū*), as well as for *dry*, *hide*, *fire*, *wright*, *why* (all with eME *ȳ*). Interestingly, these have converged on the ‘normal’ reflex for eME *ȳ* and not for eME *ū*. Thus, the ME spellings from the SW Midlands likely indicate merger of *spellings*, but not of *sounds*, as otherwise it would have been impossible for the reflexes of the two sounds to be distinguished again later on an etymologically correct basis. The only way in which merged sounds could unmerge would be if two different systems co-existed, one of which kept the reflexes apart, and the distinction was re-introduced into the system in which merger had taken place. But such a scenario remains speculative and unlikely.

Interestingly, even in many *LAEME* source texts with dominant <u> for eME *ȳ*, there is only <i> for the lexemes *WHY* and OE *bȳsen* ‘example’. This seems to suggest that if the unrounding of *ȳ* started in any one word, that word is most likely *WHY*, although it should be noted that there was an OE variant *whie*.⁶

5. Summary of early ME material

The material from *LAEME* suggests the following developments for the reflex of eME *ȳ*:

1. It was unrounded to [i:] across the country, and this process seems to have started in the (South-)East and the W Midlands.
2. It was lowered and unrounded to [e:] in Essex, Suffolk and Kent in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century; in Somerset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire in the latter half of the thirteenth

⁶ Likewise, if the lowering and unrounding of *ȳ* to [e:] started in a specific word, it may have been in the OE word *þȳster* ‘dark, gloomy’ and cognates, since there are frequent <e> and <eo> for these lexemes even in texts with dominant or exclusive <u>, <ui/uy> for all other words with eME *ȳ*. However, OE *þȳster* and cognates also appear with OE *ie*, *eo*, so ME <e>, <ie> etc. for these probably go back to forms which did not have OE *ȳ*, since they show a very distinct pattern in the extracted material. For this reason, ME spellings for OE *þȳster* and cognates have not been included in Table 1.

century; and perhaps in Lincolnshire in the early fourteenth century.⁷

3. It remained as [y:] in the W Midlands and parts of the South-West, as well as in Ely and Huntingdonshire (at least as a minor variant) in the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century.

With regard to Lass & Laing's hypothesis concerning the phonetic nature of the ME reflex of OE \bar{y} , the modern material does not support their claim that the reflex of eME \bar{y} had merged with the reflex of eME \bar{u} in the ME dialects of the W Midlands, even though <u> is the dominant spelling for both in ME in the area in question.

6. The later ME material

The *LAEME* material for eME \bar{y} needs to be tied up with the later material from *SMED* and *LALME*. Conclusions based on analysis of this material are briefly summarised below.

Kristensson (*SMED*_{I-5}) finds that, in the fourteenth century, all the Northern counties except two were [i:]-areas. The case for the West Riding of Yorkshire and Lancashire is less straightforward: Kristensson concludes that they most likely had [i:], but that [y:] was also used in Lancashire south of the Ribble. As for the W Midlands, [y:] was found in Cheshire, Staffordshire, Shropshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Gloucestershire and Oxfordshire. Derbyshire also had [y:], except in the easternmost tip, which had [i:]. Leicestershire seems to have had [y:] in the west and [i:] in the east and south. Nottinghamshire had [i:]. In the E Midlands, Rutland, Huntingdonshire and Norfolk had [i:], Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Middlesex and Buckinghamshire had [y:], Suffolk and Essex had [e:]. Northamptonshire had [i:] in the northern half, [y:] in the southern half. Kristensson thinks Cambridgeshire had [i:] north of the city of Cambridge (including Ely); south of it, it had [e:] to the east and [y:] to the west. In the South, Devon seems to have had [i:] and [y:]; Somerset, Dorset, Wiltshire, Hampshire, Berkshire and Surrey had [y:] (although Surrey may have had [e:] in the easternmost tip). Sussex had [e:] in the east, [y:] in the west; Kent had [e:].

The development of eME \bar{y} before palatals appears to have been different from that in other contexts: in this environment, \bar{y} was unrounded

⁷ Perhaps more likely, lowered and unrounded [e:] spread occasionally to Lincolnshire from Suffolk through Norfolk, although in that case, one would expect <e>-type spellings in Norfolk too. That is, however, not the case.

to [i:] in Hampshire and Dorset, and also in Berkshire, Wiltshire and Somerset. There are traces of such a development in Surrey also, but not in Sussex or Kent. Finally, Devon shows a tendency to unrounding regardless of phonetic context.

Ek (1972) investigates the ME development of OE $\bar{e}o$ and \bar{y} in the South-East, using onomastic material which partly overlaps with that of *SMED*, although much of Ek's material is earlier. His conclusions differ somewhat from Kristensson's, particularly regarding the extent of the [e:]-area. However, Kitson (1998: 170) concludes that since Ek's material is earlier, "what the two investigations show between them is a retreat of the *e*-reflex in favour of the *u*-reflex as well as, further north, the *i*-reflex".⁸ In other words, Ek's and Kristensson's data demonstrate change in progress.

The *LALME* material suggests that the reflexes of eME \bar{y} had been unrounded to [i:] in the East and the North in the late ME period. Retained [y:] is implied by spellings from the West and the South, and from the West Riding of Yorkshire, whereas <e>-type spellings linger on in most of the East, and in parts of the West (Gloucestershire, Worcestershire, Oxfordshire), the South-West (Devon, Dorset, Hampshire, Wiltshire) and the South-East (Kent, Sussex, Surrey). That is, <i>-type and <e>-type forms co-vary in the East, but whether these systematically correspond to [i:] and [e:] is an open question.

7. Conclusions and implications

The three corpora exploited all contain spellings which seem to indicate that the 'GVS' started much earlier than 1400, perhaps around 1250 or 1300 (Stenbrenden 2010). For eME \bar{y} , for instance, *LAEME* text 142 (1275–99), whose language has been localised to Kent, shows dominant <e>, but has one <i-hierde> for the 3.pres.sing. of OE *hȳran* HIRE v. (beside three tokens with <e> for the same), which may indicate raising of \bar{e} to [i:]. Source text no. 2002 (1275–99), whose language has been localised to Gloucestershire, has dominant <ui> and a secondary variant <i> as well as minor variants <y> and <u>. It has <fleī> for FLY (noun); this may however go back to OE *flēoge* or *flȳge*. For OE \bar{y} in lengthening contexts, text no. 137 (Cambridgeshire, 1275–99) has <bein> for OE *bycgan*

⁸ Wyld's two articles (Wyld 1913–14a, 1913–14b) on the dialectal development of eME \bar{y} are classics, but have not been included in the discussion in the present paper. For a full account, see Stenbrenden (2010).

BUY (verb); this text has <i> for the long vowel, so vowel-shift may be inferred. Text no. 269 (Norfolk, 1275–1324) likewise shows <beyn> for OE *bycgan*, but there are no tokens for the long vowel in this source text, so it is difficult to assess whether this form indicates vowel shift or not.

Generally, there are more irregular spellings which may indicate vowel shift for the lengthened OE y than for the etymologically long vowel, which may suggest that the vocalisation of post-vocalic *-h*, *-g* in late OE produced a minimal diphthong [iɪ] (rather than a long monophthong). This diphthong would have been an allophone of /i:/ (since words with OE *-iht*, *-ig* and *-yht* subsequently had the same development as OE \bar{i} -words), and may have triggered the vowel shift, as suggested repeatedly by Stockwell (1964, 1972, 1978), and by Stockwell & Minkova (1988a, 1988b). *LAEME*, *SMED* and *LALME* also contain irregular spellings indicating early vowel shift of eME \bar{u} , \bar{e} and \bar{o} (Stenbrenden 2010), lending support to this ‘Early Vowel Shift Hypothesis’.

It must be concluded, therefore, that there is a long temporal overlap between the constituent ‘GVS’ changes and the assumed earlier set of changes. Consequently, the two sets of changes cannot be treated separately: the changes to early ME \bar{y} must be seen as part of the Shift, as must the changes to OE \bar{a} (south of the Humber) and OE \bar{o} (north of the Humber). This points to a very lengthy period of long-vowel shifting, from c. 1100 (or earlier) to c. 1750, which raises the question, Is it possible for one unitary and coherent ‘Great Vowel Shift’ to take place over 650 years or more? Clearly not. Rather, Stockwell seems right when he states that “the series of changes of which the GVS is a part have been going on at a remarkably steady rate for more than 1500 years” (Stockwell 1969: 93), a claim which has not received much support until now.

Appendix

A. *LAEME*: lexical items with OE \bar{y} / y searched for in all source texts

For OE \bar{y} :

4scȳte, *ālȳfedlic*, *ālȳman*, *ālȳsedness*, *ālȳsend*, *ālȳsendness*, *behide*, *bride*, *bridegift*, *bridegroom*, *bȳsen*, *bȳsnian*, *cȳpan*, *dry* (adj., v.), *drȳ* (n.), *dryfoot*, *fire*, *fireburning*, *hide* (n. and v.), *hire* (n. and v.), *hireman*, *lȳt*, *lȳberlice*, *lȳberness*, *lȳpre*, *lȳtlian*, *lȳtlum* (adv.), *pride*, *þwȳrian*, *þȳfel*, *þȳster*, *þȳsterness*, *þȳstrian*, *þȳstrig*, *why*

For lengthened OE *y*:

bitight, buy, buyer, crockwright, flight, forbuy, fright, frighten, frighy, frighyhood, frighyly, byht, byhtan, byhtlic, kind (n.), mankind, offrighten, wright

B. The *Survey of English Dialects*: questionnaire items examined for the W Midlands, and for Wiltshire and Berkshire

For OE \bar{u} and lengthened *u*:

plough, cow(s), sow, snout, mouse, boughs, house, mouth thousand, clouds, drought

For OE \bar{y} and lengthened *y*:

dry (III.1.9), hide (noun), fire, dry (VII.6.19), wright, why

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