

## Chapter 3 – Old English pronunciation

### Spoken Old English – stressed and unstressed syllables

In every word of two or more syllables in MnE, one syllable is pronounced with a heavier stress, or accent, than the others. For some pairs of words, the stress marks the difference between a noun and a verb, eg:

an  attribute	to at tribute
his  conduct	to con duct
a  convict	to con vict
an  import	to im port
the  present	to pre sent
a  record	to re cord

People argue about the pronunciation of words like *controversy*: Is it |*controversy*, con|*tro*versy, or contro|*versy*? American pronunciation sometimes differs from British English in placing the stress – |*defense* as against de|*fence*. The position of the main stressed syllable sometimes changes as the form of a word changes: |*photograph* – pho|*to*graphy – photo|*graph*ic.

In OE, stress usually fell on the first syllable of a word, the **stem**. The only exceptions were verbs with prefixes, like for|*sacan* – *forsake*, be|*bydan* – *hide*. This means that most OE words were pronounced with a "falling" stress pattern, from strong to weak:

|Her |sendon |brytwala to |rome and |heom |fultomes |bædon wið |piohtas  
|ac hi |þar |næfdan |nanne

This falling rhythm is a special feature of OE poetry:

|hæbbe ic ge|frugnen þætte is |feor |heonon  
|east|dælum on |æþelast |lond  
|firum ge|fræge ...

It is one of the reasons for the loss of most of the suffix inflections of OE. The vowels in the final syllables of words like *geref-a*, *mæst-an*, *wold-on*, were unstressed, and so tended to be pronounced with the common mid-central vowel [ə] (like the <-er> in MnE *winter*) – [jɛrɛvə], [mæstən], [woldən]. In time the final consonant [n] was lost, and they were reduced to the common vowel only, usually spelt <e>. This too eventually ceased to be pronounced, as in MnE *reeve* [ri:v], *most* [məʊst], *would* [wʊd] and *reeve* also lost the prefix *ge-*, which was unstressed.

It is probable that by the late OE period all **unstressed syllables** were pronounced with the vowel [ə], as in MnE *letter* [lɛtə], *photograph*, [fəʊtəgræf], or *among* [əməŋ]. Part of the evidence is in the variations of vowel-letter spelling of suffixes and final syllables which can be seen in manuscripts.

The reduction of vowels to [ə] in unstressed syllables was one of the most important factors in the gradual loss of most of the OE suffixes. It began in OE times, and continued throughout the Middle English period of the language.

### Spoken Old English – vowels

Because the Roman alphabet was used to represent the sounds of OE, we know roughly how OE was pronounced, although we cannot know the exact phonetic quality of the sounds. We also have to forget many of the sound-letter relationships of present-day pronunciation and spelling. Today's spelling system suited the pronunciation of English up to Chaucer's times in the late 14th century, but

the pronunciation of many words has changed considerably since then, while our spelling system has not been adapted to match the changes.

We have to hear the sounds of the Roman alphabet in OE in their "continental" values, which are still retained in the modern Romance languages derived from Latin, like Italian and Spanish for example. These sound-values are used in the International Phonetic Alphabet. There are also no "silent letters" in OE.

### Single vowels in OE

Here are examples of some of the pure, or single vowels of OE.

<i>Letter</i>	<i>OE</i>	<i>IPA</i>	<i>MnE</i>
<a>	sacc	[sak]	sack [sæk]
	swan	[swɔn] <i>before m n</i>	swan [swɒn]
<æ>	æppel	[æppəl]	apple [æpəl]
<e>	nest	[nɛst]	nest [nɛst]
<i>	crisp	[krisp]	crisp [krisp]
<o>	box	[bɔks]	box [bɒks]
<u>	sunu	[sʊnʊ]	son [sʊn]; RP [sʌn]

The letter <y> in OE represented a vowel which has since been lost from most dialects of the language. It is a "rounded" high front vowel, similar to the vowel in French *mur*, [myr], and can be heard, for example, in the rural Devon pronunciation of the word *foot* as [fyt].

### Long and short vowels

There was, however, one very important difference between spoken OE and MnE in the pronunciation of vowels which needs to be explained.

The vocabulary of MnE contains hundreds of words of OE, but they have survived in a variety of forms. A MnE word directly derived from an OE word is called the **reflex** of that word. There are examples of words with changed meanings in Chapter 1 of *From Old English to Standard English*. Some reflexes are unchanged in spelling and pronunciation, or have minor changes in pronunciation; some are spelled differently but have the original pronunciation; others have changed in both spelling and pronunciation. For example:

**1 Same or similar spelling and pronunciation** (in practice pronunciation can never remain completely unchanged, and minor changes in spelling convention also occur, so that an exact match of both spelling and pronunciation is rare).

<i>OE</i>	<i>MnE</i>	elm	<i>elm</i>	linen	<i>linen</i>
bedd	<i>bed</i>	finger	<i>finger</i>	mattoc	<i>mattock</i>
colt	<i>colt</i>	gold	<i>gold</i>	mist	<i>mist</i>
dim	<i>dim</i>	helm	<i>helm (=</i>	salt	<i>salt</i>
dumb	<i>dumb</i>	<i>helmet)</i>		winter	<i>winter</i>
dust	<i>dust</i>	horn	<i>horn</i>		
forst/frost	<i>frost</i>	hors	<i>horse</i>		

**2 Same or similar pronunciation, different spelling**

<i>OE</i>	<i>MnE</i>	<i>OE</i>	<i>MnE</i>
æfter	<i>after</i>	hamor	<i>hammer</i>
bræs	<i>brass</i>	hecƷ	<i>hedge</i>
broþ	<i>broth</i>	hungor	<i>hunger</i>
cicen	<i>chicken</i>	lifer	<i>liver</i>
dic	<i>ditch</i>	loc	<i>lock</i>
fisc	<i>fish</i>	scip	<i>ship</i>

**3 Different spelling and pronunciation**

<i>OE</i>	<i>MnE</i>	<i>OE</i>	<i>MnE</i>
ban	<i>bone</i>	pol	<i>pool</i>
boc	<i>book</i>	fæder	<i>father</i>
brom	<i>broom</i>	feld	<i>field</i>
brycg	<i>bridge</i>	heafod	<i>head</i>
cild	<i>child</i>	hlaford	<i>lord</i>
cneo	<i>knee</i>	hlæfdige	<i>lady</i>
cyning	<i>king</i>	hlud	<i>loud</i>
deorc	<i>dark</i>	monaþ	<i>month</i>

The following words are in pairs, first the OE word and then its MnE reflex. The OE words contain examples of the OE single vowels. All the words have survived into MnE, but some have changed more than others. First transcribe the MnE words into phonemic script using IPA symbols. If there is more than one current MnE pronunciation (RP and dialectal), write down both. For each group of words,

- (i) Divide the group into two sets,
  - (a) words which are more or less unchanged in pronunciation, and
  - (b) words whose vowels have changed in pronunciation.
- (ii) Make a note of any other changes that you observe.

**Group 1 - with letter <a>**

and - *and*  
 assa - *ass*  
 crabba - *crab*  
 hlaf - *loaf*  
 rap - *rope*  
 snaw - *snow*  
 stagga - *stag*  
 ta - *toe*

**Group 2 - with letter <æ>**

æfen - *even(ing)*  
 æx - *axe*  
 bæc - *back*  
 dæd - *deed*  
 fæt - *vat*  
 nædl - *needle*  
 stræt - *street*  
 þæt - *that*

**Group 3 - with letter <e>**

bedd - *bed*  
 cwen - *queen*  
 elm - *elm*  
 ges - *geese*  
 hecg - *hedge*  
 swete - *sweet*  
 teþ - *teeth*  
 west - *west*

**Group 7 - with letter <y>**

brycg - *bridge*  
 bryd - *bride*  
 fyr - *fire*  
 fyxen - *vixen*  
 hyf - *hive*  
 hype - *hip*  
 mys - *mice*  
 pytt - *pit*

**Group 4 - with letter <i>**

cin - *chin*  
 fif - *five*  
 hring - *ring*  
 lif - *life*  
 ribb - *rib*  
 tima - *time*  
 þing - *thing*  
 wif - *wife*

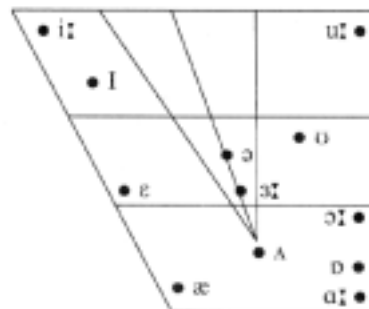
**Group 5 - with letter <o>**

cnotta - *knot*  
 col - *cool*  
 foda - *food*  
 loc - *lock*  
 mona - *moon*  
 oxa - *ox*  
 stol - *stool*  
 topp - *top*

**Group 6 - with letter <u>**

bucca - *buck*  
 cu - *cow*  
 hlud - *loud*  
 hnutu - *nut*  
 lufu - *love*  
 prud - *proud*  
 sunne - *sun*  
 tun - *town*

A vowel diagram shows which vowels are close to each other, and which are further apart:



## Commentary

Each group has eight pairs of words. In each group, the MnE pronunciation of four words has stayed more or less the same. In the other four it has changed considerably.

There are many more examples of this split in the development of vowels; some remain the same in MnE, but others have shifted. Those that have shifted are now either long vowels or diphthongs, and those that are the same are short vowels.

This long/short distinction was true of the original OE vowels, although they were otherwise identical in sound, and this could signal a difference of meaning in words.

One pair of examples from each group will show the differences; RP pronunciation is given for MnE (other dialectal pronunciations are different in some words):

<i>Letter</i>	<i>OE word</i>	<i>IPA</i>	<i>vowel</i>		<i>MnE word</i>	<i>IPA</i>	<i>vowel</i>
<a>	and	[and]	[a]		and	[ænd]	[æ]
	ta	[tɑ:]	[ɑ:]		toe	[tɜʊ]	[əʊ]
<æ>	x	[æks]	[æ]		axe	[æks]	[æ]
	d d	[dæ:d]	[æ:]		deed	[di:d]	[i:]
<e>	elm	[elm]	[e]		elm	[ɛlm]	[ɛ]
	ges	[ge:s]	[e:]		geese	[gi:s]	[i:]
<i>	ting	[θiŋg]	[i]		thing	[θiŋ]	[i]
	tima	[ti:ma]	[i:]		time	[taim]	[aɪ]
<o>	loc	[lɔk]	[ɔ]		lock	[lɔk]	[ɔ]
	foda	[fo:da]	[o:]		food	[fu:d]	[u:]
<u>	lufu	[lʊvʊ]	[ʊ]		love	[lʌv]	[ʌ]
	cu	[ku:]	[u:]		cow	[kaʊ]	[aʊ]
<y>	hype	[hypə]	[y]		hip	[hip]	[ɪ]
	mys	[my:s]	[y:]		mice	[maɪs]	[aɪ]

(The development of the vowel [y] is more complicated than that of the others, but there are similar contrasts in this vowel.)

## Vowel length in modern English

In MnE also, vowels in some words are pronounced longer than the same vowels in other words. For example, if we transcribe the sound of words containing the vowel [i] into phonemic script, and mark the vowels which are longer in sound with a colon [i:] as a length-mark, we find:

beat	[bit]	greet	[grit]
bead	[bi:d]	greed	[gri:d]
bleat	[blit]	neat	[nit]
bleed	[bli:d]	need	[ni:d]
feet	[fit]	leek	[lik]
feed	[fi:d]	league	[li:g]

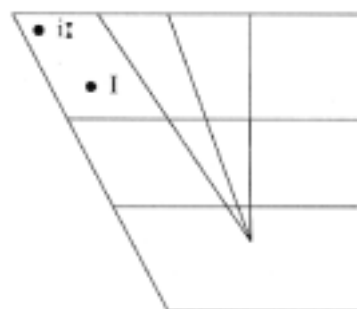
*Shorter vowels:* [bit] [blit] [fit] [grit] [nit]

*Longer vowels:* [bi:d] [bli:d] [fi:d] [gri:d] [ni:d] [li:g]

The vowels of *bead*, *bleed*, *feed*, *greed*, *need* and *league* are longer because they are followed by a voiced consonant [d] or [g] - the voicing in the vowel is not cut off to pronounce the [d] or [g]. The vowels of *beat*, *bleat*, *feet*, *greet*, *neat* and *leek* are shorter because the consonants [t] and [k] are voiceless, and the vowel is cut off short. (In fact, it is the length of the vowel which most clearly identifies the words. Try speaking them aloud.) But we think of the vowel as being the same in both kinds of word. The differences of spelling, <ea> <ee>, are not relevant here. When transcribing, we use the same symbol [i], with the length-mark [:] if we want to distinguish the longer form from the shorter. The length of the vowel is conditioned by the following sound.

This difference between long and short pronunciations of the same vowel is called a difference of **quantity**, and in MnE does not itself affect meaning. There are no pairs of words in RP in MnE in which the length of the vowel alone changes the meaning, and [i] is classified as one of the long vowels in MnE.

However, the vowels of *greet* [i] and *grit* [ɪ], or *greed* [i:] and *grid* [ɪ], do produce differences of meaning. The vowels [i] and [ɪ] are close together and similar in sound, but are different in **quality** as well as quantity, which is why they have different IPA symbols (although our spelling system does not show it). It is the quality that marks the meaning of the two words in each pair, as also in *short/shot* ([ʃɔ:t] [ʃɒt]), *pool/pull* ([pu:l] [pʊl]), for example.



### Vowel length in Old English

The evidence we have already seen suggests that in OE the same letters represented both long and short pronunciations of the same vowels. We cannot be completely sure, however, that the only difference was length, because we do not know when differences of quality began to appear, and so cannot say for certain exactly how the vowels were pronounced.

The evidence for the long/short distinction comes from the later changes of vowel pronunciation which we have begun to examine, and is confirmed by the existence of pairs of such words which were identical in spelling in OE, but which had different meanings. Such pairs of words are called **minimal pairs**. Here are some examples, with a translation. The long OE vowels are marked with a macron:

<i>OE</i>	<i>MnE</i>
on <b>b</b> ær lic	on the <b>bare</b> body
sie seo <b>b</b> ær gearo	let the <b>bier</b> be ready
creow se <b>c</b> oc	the <b>cock</b> crew
spræc se <b>c</b> oc	the <b>cook</b> spoke
Nys nan man <b>g</b> od, buton <b>g</b> od ana	No one is <b>good</b> except <b>God</b> alone
þa bead he <b>f</b> ul gyld to his here	The he commanded <b>full</b> tribute for his army
byrgen utan fæger, and innan <b>f</b> ul	a sepulchre fair outside, and <b>foul</b> within

In MnE, the vowels in the pairs of words *bare/bier*, *cock/cook*, *good/God*, *full/foul* are clearly different in quality. In OE they were probably only different in quantity. The sounds must have been similar enough to justify the same spelling. They were written with the same letter, but one vowel is short, the other long.

Sometimes the written long vowels were marked with an accent - <cóc>, or a vowel-letter would be doubled to mark a long vowel - <goos>, <tiid>, which became common in the following Middle English period. But there was no general need to mark vowel length, because the context of the word would prevent any ambiguity of meaning.

So, pairs of OE words with vowels which were spelt with the same letter have reflexes in MnE with vowels different in quality of sound as well as quantity (either short or long) as a result of later sound changes. The OE vowels differed in length only, and this was sufficient to mark differences of meaning.

In most modern printed editions of OE, long vowels are marked with a macron. In *From Old English to Standard English*, they are left unmarked, except where it is useful to show the difference of length.

From the evidence just given, decide which of the following OE words probably had short or long vowels. They have been chosen as examples of minimal (or nearly minimal) pairs of,

- (a) OE words with short vowels whose MnE reflexes still have the same (or a very similar) vowel, and
- (b) OE words with long vowels which have shifted in quality and changed into different vowels in their MnE reflexes.

Identify the words with long vowels and transcribe the MnE words into phonemic script, to show the similarity or difference of vowel quality.

<b>OE</b>	<b>MnE</b>	<b>OE</b>	<b>MnE</b>
batt	<i>bat (stick)</i>	hwæt	<i>what</i>
bat	<i>boat</i>	hwæte	<i>wheat</i>
crop	<i>croup</i>	is	<i>ice</i>
cropp	<i>crop</i>	is	<i>is</i>
dun	<i>down (hill)</i>	lim	<i>limb</i>
dunn	<i>dun (brown)</i>	lim	<i>lime</i>
ham	<i>ham</i>	rod	<i>rood (= cross)</i>
ham	<i>home</i>	rodd	<i>rod</i>

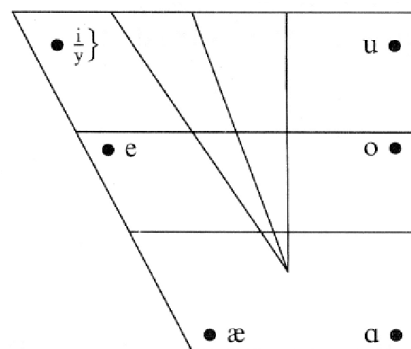
Here are some other pairs of words which illustrate the long/short vowel contrast in OE. If a word has no MnE reflex, a translation is given.

<b>OE</b>	<b>MnE</b>	<b>OE</b>	<b>MnE</b>
bana	<i>(= murderer)</i>	bān	<i>bone</i>
dæg	<i>day</i>	dāge	<i>(= bread-maker)</i>
hol	<i>hole</i>	hōl	<i>(= slander)</i>
man	<i>(= one, impersonal pn)</i>	mān	<i>(= crime)</i>
mann	<i>man</i>		
mos	<i>moss</i>	mōs	<i>food</i>
sæd	<i>(= satiated)</i>	sād	<i>seed</i>
sceatt	<i>(= wealth)</i>	sceāt	<i>(= corner)</i>
scolu	<i>(= troop)</i>	scōl	<i>school</i>
wine	<i>(= friend)</i>	wīn	<i>wine</i>
wita	<i>(= wise man)</i>	wīte	<i>(= punishment)</i>
wit	<i>(= we two, pn)</i>		

The evidence, then, that long and short vowels with the **same quality** were different in OE, and affected the meaning of words, comes partly from the big differences to be seen in words which have come down into MnE with vowels of **different quality**. These shifts of quality in long vowels began to happen at the end of the ME period, between the 14th and 16th centuries, and are described as the Great Vowel Shift. This and other sound changes that had taken place in the late OE and early ME period are described in *From Old English to Standard English*.

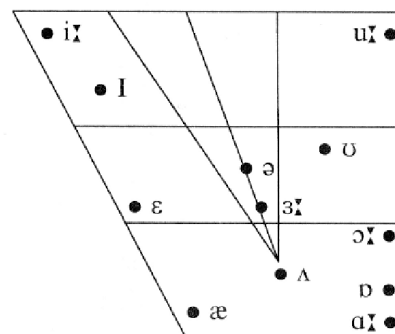
So the number of pure or single vowels in OE is fourteen, twice the number of vowel-letters used in the OE alphabet, for each letter is used to represent a short and a long vowel. Their position on a vowel chart will help you to remember their relationship in terms of front-back and high-low:

OE letter	vowel sounds	
	short	long
<i>	[i]	[i:]
<y>	[y]	[y:]
<e>	[ɛ]	[e:]
<æ>	[æ]	[æ:]
<a>	[ɑ]	[ɑ:]
<o>	[ɔ]	[o:]
<u>	[u]	[u:]



We cannot write out such a simple diagram of letters/sounds for MnE pure vowels, because our spelling system is no longer in a one-to-one relationship of sound to symbol. The pure vowels of RP in MnE are,

short		long	
[i]	<i>fix</i>	[i:]	<i>feed</i>
[ɛ]	<i>fed</i>	[u:]	<i>food</i>
[æ]	<i>add</i>	[ɑ:]	<i>star</i>
[ɒ]	<i>odd</i>	[ɔ:]	<i>store</i>
[ʊ]	<i>stood</i>	[ɜ:]	<i>stir</i>



[ʌ] (RP) *sun*

[ə]\* *among*

\*(in unstressed syllables only)

### MnE diphthongs

There are other vowels in present-day MnE called **diphthongs**, which are not pure vowels, but "glide" from one sound to another. In fact, so-called pure vowels often have an element of a glide in them, and the number of diphthongs varies from one dialect to another and from one speaker to another, so the exact number and quality of the different kinds of vowels are not easy to determine. The diphthongs generally recognised in RP are:

[ɛɪ]	made	[ɪə]	clear	[əʊ]	road
[aɪ]	side	[ɛə]	fair	[aʊ]	crowd
[ɔɪ]	joy	[ʊə]	cure		



The five letters <a>, <e>, <i>, <o> and <u> in the MnE alphabet are clearly not sufficient to represent twenty vowels, so pairs of letters, or digraphs, (<ee>, <ea>, <oo>, <ai> etc), or the the sequence vowel-consonant-<e> (eg *made*, *here*, *wrote* etc) are used.

The following activity will remind you of some of the irregularities of the English spelling system today in representing vowels. Some of the reasons for this irregularity are made clearer in *From Old English to Standard English*.

Check the vowel sounds represented in MnE pronunciation by letters and digraphs in the following words, and write them in phonemic script. (Not all combinations of letters are included.)

Letter	Words
<a>	sat pass all bass many was village ape
<e>	set pretty complete
<i>	sit child children police time
<o>	dock woman women son no lose note
<u>	sun put putt busy bury sure tune
<ai>	said again plait waist
<au>	aunt because gauge
<ee>	tree seed beet
<ea>	leaf great dead
<ei>	seize either
<ie>	piece friend die
<oo>	blood good food brooch
<oa>	broad road
<ou>	country cough group soul house rough

The correspondence of letter to sound in OE writing was much closer and more regular, so it is usually not necessary to make a phonemic transcription of an OE word, although some sound changes which had taken place by the late OE period were not reflected in the spelling.

### OE diphthongs

The evidence from written documents suggests that there were two pairs of diphthongs in late OE. They were written <ea> and <eo>. Like the pure vowels they had a long and a short pronunciation. There is some disagreement about the actual sounds represented by these digraphs, but it seems likely that the pronunciations were:

letters	sound	OE word
<ea>	[æ̃]	cealc ( <i>chalk</i> )
	[e:̃]	dream ( <i>dream</i> )
<eo>	[ẽ]	deorc ( <i>dark</i> )
	[e:̃]	cneo ( <i>knee</i> )

To sum up, the present-day pronunciation of the vowels in many words derived from OE is different from the OE pronunciation, while in other words it has remained the same. We begin in late OE with a system of fourteen pure vowels in seven pairs, and four diphthongs in two pairs, contrasting in

length, or quantity. The length of vowel changed the meaning in some pairs of words, and later changes have resulted in a much wider difference of pronunciation in MnE between such words.

In MnE we now have a system of twelve pure vowels, some long and some short, and eight diphthongs in RP - other dialectal accents will have a different distribution.

### OE consonants

The OE consonant-letters are listed in section 3.1.3.3 of *From Old English to Standard English*. They have mostly retained the same pronunciation, but there are some differences between OE and MnE usage which need to be explained.

- All OE consonants were pronounced.

OE word	pronunciation	MnE reflex
<i>cnafa</i> (boy)	[knɑvə]	<i>knave</i>
<i>cneo</i>	[kne:ə]	<i>knee</i>
<i>cnif</i>	[kni:f]	<i>knife</i>
<i>cniht</i> (servant)	[kniçt]	<i>knight</i>
<i>cnyll</i>	[knyll]	<i>knell</i>
<i>gnætt</i>	[gnæt]	<i>gnat</i>
<i>gnagan</i>	[gnayən]	<i>gnaw</i>
<i>hladan</i>	[hlədən]	<i>load</i>
<i>hlædel</i>	[hlædəl]	<i>ladle</i>
<i>hlæfdige</i>	[hlæ:vdi:jə]	<i>lady</i>
<i>hlaford</i>	[hla:vɔ:d]	<i>lord</i>
<i>hlaf</i>	[hla:f]	<i>loaf</i>
<i>hnægan</i>	[hnæyən]	<i>neigh</i>
<i>hnutu</i>	[hnutu]	<i>nut</i>
<i>hræfn</i>	[hrævən]	<i>raven</i>
<i>hreac</i>	[hre:ək]	<i>rick</i>
<i>hring</i>	[hriŋg]	<i>ring</i>
<i>hroc</i>	[hro:k]	<i>rook</i>
<i>hrof</i>	[hro:f]	<i>roof</i>
<i>hrycg</i>	[hrydʒ]	<i>ridge</i>

<i>hwa</i>	[hwa: ]	<i>who</i>
<i>hwæl</i>	[hwæl]	<i>whale</i>
<i>hwær</i>	[hwæ:rə]	<i>where</i>
<i>hwæs</i>	[hwæs]	<i>whose</i>
<i>hwæt</i>	[hwæt]	<i>what</i>
<i>hwæte</i>	[hwæ:tə]	<i>wheat</i>
<i>hweol</i>	[hwe:əl]	<i>wheel</i>
<i>hwettan</i>	[hwet:ən]	<i>whet</i>
<i>hwil</i>	[hwil]	<i>while</i> (n)
<i>hwinan</i>	[hwi:nən]	<i>whine</i>
<i>hwit</i>	[hwit]	<i>white</i>
<i>hwy</i>	[hwy:]	<i>why</i>
<i>wlisp</i>	[wlisp]	<i>lisp</i>
<i>wlanc</i> (proud)	[wlank]	-
<i>wlitan</i> (to look)	[wli:tən]	-
<i>wlitig</i> (beautiful)	[wli:tij]	-
<i>wrænna</i>	[wræ:n:ə]	<i>wren</i>
<i>wræþþo</i>	[wræ:ð:ə]	<i>wrath</i>
<i>wræstlian</i>	[wræ:stliən]	<i>wrestle</i>
<i>wrist</i>	[wrist]	<i>wrist</i>

The pronunciation of all letters includes <r>. When [r] follows a vowel, it is called post-vocalic [r]. The pronunciation of [r] after a vowel, either at the end of a word like *boar* (OE *bar*), or before a consonant, as in *darling* (OE *deorling*) changed in those dialects from which MnE RP and other accents have derived. The change began in the 17th century, and was completed in the early 18th century. (If [r] is followed by another vowel, as in *daring*, it is still pronounced in all dialects of MnE.)

- (i) Transcribe the MnE RP pronunciation of the following OE words  
 (ii) Describe the changes that have taken place in the pronunciation.  
 (iii) Can you identify any present-day dialects in which the post-vocalic [r] is still pronounced?

<i>OE word</i>	<i>pronunciation</i>	<i>MnE</i>
ar	[ɑ:r]	<i>ore</i>
bær	[bær]	<i>bare</i>
beorcan	[beørkən]	<i>bark</i>
beor	[be:ər]	<i>beer</i>
brid	[brɪd]	<i>bird</i>
caru	[kɑru]	<i>care</i>
cyren	[tʃyrən]	<i>churn</i>
cirice	[tʃɪrɪtʃɛ]	<i>church</i>
duru	[duru]	<i>door</i>
fyr	[fy:r]	<i>fire</i>
hær	[hæ:r]	<i>hair</i>
hara	[hara]	<i>bare</i>

iren	[i:rən]	<i>iron</i>
leogere	[le:əjərə]	<i>liar</i>
lifer	[lɪvər]	<i>liver</i>
mara	[mɑ:rə]	<i>more</i>
mor	[mɔ:r]	<i>moor</i>
norþ	[nɔθ]	<i>north</i>
purs	[pʊrs]	<i>purse</i>
rarian	[ra:rɪən]	<i>roar</i>
cearu	[ʃeəru]	<i>share</i>
scyrte	[ʃyrtə]	<i>shirt</i>
spora	[spɔrə]	<i>spur</i>
þrida	[θrɪdə]	<i>third</i>

The post-vocalic consonant [r], in RP and some other present-day dialectal accents, has either been reduced to the vowel [ə] to form a diphthong with the preceding vowel, as in *beer* [bɪə] and *hair* [hɛə], or it has been lost and so has caused the lengthening of the preceding vowel, as in *bird* [bɜ:d], *north* [nɔ:θ], and *spur* [spɜ:]. It affected many words, and MnE dialectal accents are divided into those which have kept post-vocalic [r], called **rhotic** accents, and those which have lost it, called **non-rhotic** (*rho* is the Greek letter <ρ>, MnE <r>).

- OE had both short and long consonants

Consonants in OE were both long and short, just as vowels were. The pronunciation of continuants, that is, consonants that can be held on, like the fricatives [f], [h], [s], can obviously be made longer or shorter. But plosive (stop) consonants were also doubled in spelling to indicate a pronunciation similar to that of, for example, the MnE <-pp-> combination in a compound word like *hop-pole*, or <-tt-> in *part-time*. There are only a few minimal pairs to prove the contrast, eg

hopian	[hopiən]	to hope
hoppian	[hoppiən]	to dance, hop
cwelan	[kwelən]	to die
cwellan	[kwel:ən]	to kill

but the present and past tenses of certain verbs also formed minimal pairs with single and double consonants. Although they have the same long vowel in OE, they have different vowels in their MnE reflexes, and are no longer minimal pairs. For example,

	present		past		vowels	
OE	blēde	[ble:də]	bledde	[ble:d:ə]	[e:]	OE
MnE	bleed	[bli:d]	bled	[bled]	[i:], [ɛ]	MnE
OE	fede	[fe:də]	fedde	[fe:d:ə]	[e:]	OE
MnE	feed	[fi:d]	fed	[fed]	[i:], [ɛ]	MnE
OE	mete	[me:tən]	mette	[me:t:ə]	[e:]	OE
MnE	meet	[mi:t]	met	[met]	[i:], [ɛ]	MnE

In all three OE verbs, the vowels of both present and past tenses are long [e:]. Both the vowels have changed, but OE [e:] has shifted to [i:] in the present tense, and to [ɛ] in the past tense in MnE. The only difference between the two words in OE is in the length of the [d] or [t] consonant, therefore this must in some way have caused the later divergence of the vowels. It is further evidence that there were long and short consonants in OE.

In MnE writing, double consonant-letters are used differently.

- (i) Transcribe the stressed vowels in the following words.  
(ii) Identify the function, in MnE spelling, of the double consonant-letters which follow stressed vowels.

abbey	banner	fuss	holly	mute	possible	write
adder	code	fuse	lady	mutton	ripper	written
age	collar	herring	ladder	navvy	riper	
baby	dine	here	manner	navy	sore	
bacon	dinner	holy	mane	pose	sorrow	

In OE, double consonant-letters represented consonant sounds which were pronounced long, differently from single short consonants. They became simplified in time to short consonants, but the double letter spelling was often retained, especially if the consonant was at the end of a word, as in eg, bucc (*buck*), eall (*all*), hyll (*hill*).

In MnE, double consonant-letters are used to indicate that the preceding vowel is short. There is no difference in the pronunciation of the consonants themselves.

If a letter is used to mark the pronunciation of another letter, and is not itself pronounced, it is called a **diacritic**. The doubled consonant-letter in MnE is therefore a diacritical use of the second letter, as is the "silent <e>" at the end of words like *age*, *code* etc, which is said to "change the preceding vowel".

### • Pronunciation of some OE consonants

#### (a) Letters <f>, <s>, <þ> and <ð>

Letter <v> was not used in OE, and <z> was very rarely used. This does not mean, however, that the sounds [v] and [z] did not occur in OE. They did, but only as "conditioned variants" of [f] and [s], that is, under certain conditions, <f> and <s> were pronounced [v] and [z]

In present-day speech we write <dogs> but say [dɒgz], because the voicing of the [g] causes us to use the voiced form of <s>, which is [z]. This particular MnE example did not occur in OE, but something similar did. When the sounds [f], [s] or ær occurred between two voiced sounds (and in some dialects at the beginning of a word also), they were voiced, and pronounced [v], [z], or [ð]. These voiced sounds never caused a difference of meaning in a minimal pair, so there was no need for separate letters. <f> stood for [f] or [v], <s> stood for [s] or [z] (as it does in present-day spelling and pronunciation) and either <þ> or <ð> for [r] and [ð].

What was the probable pronunciation of the following OE words? Is the MnE pronunciation similar or different? Check the meaning and MnE reflex in a dictionary.

æfen	cnafa	fals	hrof	nosu	stafas
bosm	cnif	fæþm	hrofas	ofen	toþ
baþian	cnifas	feþer	leaf	sceofl	wefan
broþ	delfan	hefig	lifer	seofon	wif
broþor	drifan	heofon	lufu	seolfor	wifes
ceosan	eorþe	hræfn	muþ	stæf	wulfas

**(b) Letter <c>:**

There were two pronunciations, which have developed into MnE [k] and [tʃ], as in *kin* (OE *cynn*) and *chin* (OE *cinn*). In Scots and northern dialects, the [k] is found unchanged in some words (eg *kirk*, OE *cirice*), often derived from an Old Norse word with [k]. MnE *seek* and *think* look very much like reflexes of OE *secan* and *þencan*, but the OE pronunciation of the <c> in these words was [tʃ]. In fact, they were sometimes written *secean* and *þencean* to show this, the letter <e> in the digraph <ce> acting as a diacritic. The MnE pronunciation with [k] probably comes from Scandinavian pronunciation in the Northern dialect (although we cannot be certain) - the ON form of the words was *soekja* and *ðekkja*.

The pronunciation of [k] was affected if the consonant occurred before or after the vowel [i], and sometimes before or after [y], [e] and [æ]. These are front vowels, and the velar stop [k] became the affricate [tʃ]. The consonant was conditioned by the front vowel because of the position of the tongue as it prepared to make the front vowel sound.

The MnE pronunciation of <c> as [s], as in *city centre*, is not OE, and is the result of the later influence of French spelling in the Middle English period.

Here are some OE examples, with their MnE reflexes. Words marked \* contain both kinds of pronunciation:

## (i) &lt;c&gt; pronounced as [k]

bæc	<i>back</i>
brecan	<i>break</i>
camb	<i>comb</i>
castel	<i>castle</i>
cæg	<i>key</i>
cepan	<i>keep</i>
clap	<i>cloth</i>
cnedan	<i>knead</i>
coc	<i>cook</i>
colt	<i>colt</i>
crabba	<i>crab</i>
cropp	<i>crop</i>
crycc*	<i>crutch</i>
cu	<i>cow</i>
cwacian	<i>quake</i>
cwen	<i>queen</i>
cycene*	<i>kitchen</i>
cynn	<i>kin</i>
drincan	<i>drink</i>
flasce	<i>flask</i>
flocc	<i>flock</i>
forca	<i>fork</i>
hoc	<i>hook</i>
locian	<i>look</i>
ploccian	<i>pluck</i>
socc	<i>sock</i>
strican	<i>strike</i>

## (ii) &lt;c&gt; pronounced as [tʃ]

bec	= <i>books</i>
birce	<i>birch</i>
ceaf	<i>chaff</i>
ceap	<i>cheap</i>
ceosan	<i>choose</i>
ceowan	<i>chew</i>
cest	<i>chest</i>
ciese/cyse	<i>cheese</i>
cild	<i>child</i>
cirice	<i>church</i>
crycc*	<i>crutch</i>
cycene*	<i>kitchen</i>
cyren	<i>churn</i>
dic	<i>ditch</i>
feccan	<i>fetch</i>
stenc	<i>stench</i>
tice	<i>stitch</i>
þæc	<i>thatch</i>

## (iii) &lt;c&gt; pronounced as [tʃ] in OE or West Saxon dialect, but as [k] in MnE and in Scots or Northern dialects, possibly from ON.

OE	ON	MnE	Scots and/or N
bece	bekkr	<i>beck</i>	<i>beck</i>
ceald ( <i>W Saxon</i> )	kaldr	<i>cold</i>	<i>cauld</i>
cealf ( <i>W Saxon</i> )	kalfr	<i>calf</i>	<i>cauf</i>
ceallian ( <i>W Saxon</i> )	kalla	<i>call</i>	<i>call, ca</i>
cietel	ketill	<i>kettle</i>	<i>kettill</i>

## (iv) &lt;c&gt; pronounced as [tʃ] in OE and MnE, but as [k] in Scots or Northern dialect.

OE	ON	MnE	Scots and/or N
birce	bjork	<i>birch</i>	<i>birk</i>
cest	kista	<i>chest</i>	<i>kist, kest</i>
cirice	kirkja	<i>church</i>	<i>kirk</i>
cyren	kirna	<i>churn</i>	<i>kirn</i>
dic	diki	<i>ditch</i>	<i>dike</i>
þæc (n)	þekja	<i>thatch</i>	<i>thack</i>

Each of the following OE words contains <c>, and all of them have reflexes in MnE. The cognate ON word is also given, if there is one.

- (i) Identify the probable MnE reflex for each word, and then check in a dictionary.
- (ii) Divide the words into two groups,  
 (a) those in which the <c> is probably pronounced [k], and  
 (b) those in which the <c> is probably pronounced [tʃ].

OE/ON	OE/ON	OE/ON	OE/ON
ac/eik	cicen/kyk-lingr	crycc/krykkja	hnecca/hnakki
benc/benkr	cin/kinn	cuppe/-	loc/loka
blæcan/bleikja	climban/klifa	cwellan/kvelja	munuc/munkr
boc/bok	cnafa/-	cwicu/kvikr	ræcan/-
cald/kaldr	coc/kokr	cyning/konungr	scol/skoli
candel/kindill	col/kol (n)	cyrnel/-	sucan/suga
catt/kottr	corn/korn	duce/-	tæcan/-
cene/koenn	creopan/krjupa	folc/folk	

(c) **Digraph <cg>**

The digraph <cg> was used in OE for the consonant [dʒ], as in MnE *hedge*, which developed in southern dialects from an earlier double consonant written <gg>. Words which have modern reflexes sometimes have two surviving forms, eg *bridge* (Standard English and southern dialects) and *brigg* or *brig* (Scots and northern dialects). For example:

OE		StE & Southern	Scots & North
brycg	[brydʒ]	bridge	brig
bycgan	[bydʒən]	buy	
cycgel	[kydʒəl]	cudgel	
ecg	[edʒ]	edge	
hecg	[hedʒ]	hedge	
hrycg	[hrydʒ]	ridge	rig
licgan	[lidʒən]	lie	lig
mycg	[mydʒ]	midge	
secg	[sedʒ]	sedge	seg
secgan	[sedʒən]	say	
wecg	[wedʒ]	wedge	

(d) **Letter <g>:**

There were three variant pronunciations of the consonant <g>, conditioned by the sounds that came before or after. Examples are given with their MnE reflexes. Remember that the OE form of the letter was <Ʒ>, yogh. Words which contain two different pronunciations of <g> are marked \*.

- (i) Before and after front vowels [i], and usually [y], [e], and [æ], the consonant is drawn forward and becomes the **semi-vowel** [j], the sound which is spelt <y> today, eg:

æmtig	[æmtij]	<i>empty</i>
dæg	[dæj]	<i>day</i>
fæger	[fæjær]	<i>fair</i>
geard	[jæərd]	<i>yard</i>
geong*	[jeŋg]	<i>young</i>
giest	[jiəst]	<i>yeast</i>
haligdæg	[hɑ:lɪjdæj]	<i>holiday</i>
igland	[i:jlænd]	<i>island</i>
prættig	[præt:ij]	<i>pretty</i>
werig	[we:ri:j]	<i>weary</i>

- (ii) Between two back vowels, [a], [o] or [u], the consonant becomes a fricative sound towards the back of the mouth [ɣ], which is no longer an English sound, eg:

feolaga	[feəlayə]	<i>fellow</i>
fugol	[fuɣəl]	<i>fowl</i>
magan	[mɑɣən]	<i>may</i>
trog	[troɣ]	<i>trough</i>

- (iii) Before a back vowel [a], [o], [u] or before or after a consonant, it was generally pronounced [g]. The double consonants <gg> were always pronounced [g]

dogga	[doggə]	<i>dog</i>
dung	[dʊŋg]	<i>dung</i>
frogga	[froggə]	<i>frog</i>
gamen	[gamən]	<i>game</i>
gast	[gɑ:st]	<i>ghost</i>
gat	[gɑ:t]	<i>goat</i>
geong*	[jeŋg]	<i>young</i>
gold	[gold]	<i>gold</i>
grund	[grund]	<i>ground</i>
lang	[lɑŋg]	<i>long</i>
stagga	[staggə]	<i>stag</i>
sting	[stiŋg]	<i>sting</i>

These variants can often explain how an OE word with <g> has developed into its MnE reflex. For example, *fugol* (*bird*) was pronounced [fuɣəl] (not [fugəl]), and so developed into MnE *fowl* via spellings like *fugel*, *fuhel*, *fuel*, *foul* etc.

In MnE the digraph <ng> represents the consonant [ŋ], but in OE, this was not a contrastive sound and the letters did not form a digraph. The <g> was pronounced, and the <n> became [ŋ] because it was conditioned by the [g], as in MnE *anger* and *finger*. Both sounds are pronounced at the back of the mouth, and are called velar sounds. So in the word *bring* the <n> was pronounced [ŋ] and the <g> was also pronounced - [hrɪŋg].

There was a very common prefix in OE, <ge->, pronounced [jɛ] or [jə]. Before some nouns, it added the meaning "togetherness", as in *gebeorscipe* (*drinking party*), *gefera* (*companion*). Before some



verbs, it added a sense of completion, "to achieve by an action". The verb *winnan* meant *to toil* or *to fight*; the verb *gewinnan* meant *to win*, that is, "to achieve by fighting".

- (i) Divide the following list of OE words into the previous groups (i), (ii), or (iii), according to the probable pronunciation of the <g> as [j], [v], or [g].
- (ii) Does the present-day spelling of those words which have MnE reflexes relate to the OE pronunciation? (If it does not, then there must have been later sound changes to account for it.)

agan	<i>owe</i>	geascian	(= <i>to find out</i> )	heg	<i>hay</i>
ænig	<i>any</i>	gebindan	(= <i>to bind, tie up</i> )	hlæfdige	<i>lady</i>
bisig	<i>busy</i>	geoc	<i>yoke</i>	hungrig*	<i>hungry</i>
boga	<i>bow (shooting)</i>	geolu	<i>yellow</i>	lagu	<i>law</i>
borgian	<i>borrow</i>	giefan	<i>give</i>	ifig	<i>ivy</i>
bringan	<i>bring</i>	giellan	<i>yell</i>	nægel	<i>nail</i>
æg	<i>key</i>	giet	<i>yet</i>	regen	<i>rain</i>
dogga	<i>dog</i>	gift	<i>gift</i>	regen	<i>rain</i>
eage	<i>eye</i>	glæd	<i>glad</i>	saw (n)	<i>saga</i>
finger	<i>finger</i>	god	<i>god</i>	scogan	<i>shoe (v)</i>
folgian	<i>follow</i>	gos	<i>goose</i>	singan	<i>sing</i>
geap	(= <i>open</i> )	gretan	<i>greet</i>	stagga	<i>stag</i>
gear	<i>year</i>	growan	<i>grow</i>	weg	<i>way</i>

(c) Letter <h>

In MnE, the digraph <gh> is either pronounced [f], or is "silent". Here are some examples, with the OE words from which they derive:

OE boht	<i>bought</i>	[bɔt]
OE heah	<i>high</i>	[haɪ]
OE hlehhan	<i>laugh</i>	[laf]
OE ahte	<i>ought</i>	[ɔt]
OE þurh	<i>through</i>	[θru:]
OE trog	<i>trough</i>	[trɒf]

In each word, the OE spelling corresponding to MnE <gh> is either <g> or <h>/<hh>. The consonant æh<sup>h</sup> was pronounced much more forcibly than today when in the middle or at the end of a word, as in Scots *loch*, [lɒx]. It was similar to the fricative pronunciation [ɣ] of <g>, so that, for example, the word from which *borough* has derived was spelt *burg* or *burh* in OE. The <gh> spelling was introduced later in the Middle English period. The pronunciation has now changed, but the <gh> spelling has been retained.

Look up the original OE spelling of the following words spelt with <gh>.

bough	dough	knight	nought	sought
brought	eight	light	right	tough
daughter	height	might	rough	wright

Examine the list of OE words beginning with <hw->. All of them are now spelt <wh->, and the pronunciation today ranges from [w], from which the [h] has disappeared, through an aspirated, "breathy" [w] transcribed [ʍ], to a pronunciation like the OE [hw].

(f) **Digraph <sc>**

In early OE <sc> would have been pronounced [sk], but by late OE times it had become [ʃ], and can be recognised in MnE reflexes by the later spelling <sh>. For example,

scacan	<i>shake</i>	scield	<i>shield</i>	scyttan	<i>shut</i>
scad	<i>shade</i>	scip	<i>ship</i>	blyscan	<i>blush</i>
sceal	<i>shall</i>	scoh	<i>shoe</i>	flæsc	<i>flesh</i>
scarp	<i>sharp</i>	scort	<i>short</i>	wascan	<i>wash</i>
sceran	<i>shear</i>	scur	<i>shower</i>	þrysce	<i>thrush</i>

When <sc>, pronounced [ʃ], was followed by back vowels [a] or [o], it was sometimes spelt <sce>. The <e> is a diacritic, indicating that the pronunciation is [ʃ] and not [sk], so spellings like <sceacan> <scead>, <scearp> and <sceort> occur.

Identify the MnE reflexes of the following OE words with <sc>.

scaft	scell	scrincan
scearu	scinan	scytel
sceaf	scufan	þerscan
sceap	scyrte	wyscan
sceaphierde	sceotan	englisc
sceap	sculdor	fisc

As you look up words in the dictionary, you will see that for many of them the OE is followed by a another word marked either *ON*, or *fr ON*, which stand for *Old Norse*, or *from Old Norse*. For example,

<i>dim</i>	OE dim	ON dimmr	<i>hit</i>	OE hittan fr ON hitta
<i>eye</i>	OE eage	ON auga	<i>loft</i>	OE loft fr ON loft
<i>knee</i>	OE cneo	ON kne	<i>plough</i>	OE plog fr ON plogr
<i>oak</i>	OE ac	ON eik	<i>take</i>	OE tacan fr ON taka