Chapter 11 - *Sir Gawayn & þe Grene Knyȝt* - spelling & pronunciation

Spelling & pronunciation - vowels

Letter <e>:

ME pronunciation still distinguished between long and short vowels as in OE. But unlike OE, there were two contrasting long front vowels [eː] (half-close) and [ɛː] (half-open), both spelt <e> or <ee>, as well as a short vowel [e] also spelt <e>. (Compare the French vowels spelt <é> and <è>, which represent different vowels, [e].and [ɛ].)

These two long front vowels had developed from the OE long vowels [eː] and [æː], and the long diphthongs spelt <ea> and <eo>. There were dialectal variations in the pronunciation of words with these vowels in OE and ME and through into the 18th century. It is a rather complex part of the changes in pronunciation, and we can only look at it briefly and in outline.

In the text of *Sir Gawayn* the two long front vowels are spelt alike with <e>, but you will find elsewhere the use of <ee> for the close vowel [eː] and <ea> for the open vowel [ɛː], although this useful way of distinguishing the vowels was not consistently adopted.

The words in Text 66 with a main syllable spelt with <e> fall into the following three groups. Other later changes can be noted by comparing the spelling and pronunciation of the MnE reflexes.

Long front half-close vowel [eː]

OE grēne	**grēne**	*green*
OE stēle + boga	**stēl/stēlbawe**	*steel + bow*
OE fēt	**fēte**	*feet*
OE fēoll	**fēl**	*fell*
OE freca	**frēke**	-
OE þǣr	**þēre**	*there*
OE hēr	**hēre**	*hair*

When followed by [r], [eː] later became a diphthong in RP and other accents.

Long front half-open vowel [ɛː]

OE heafod	**hede**	*head*
AF grece	**grece**	*grease*
OE fela	**fele**	-

Short front vowel [e]

OF dresser	**dresses**	*dress*
OE let	**let**	*let*
OE hnecca	**nec**	*neck*
OE sette	**sette**	*set*
OE stede	**stedde**	*(in)stead*
OE næfre	**neuer**	*never*

OE stæpþ	**steppeȝ**	*steps*
OE sceawian	**schewe**	*show/shew*
OE gaderaþ	**gederes**	*gathers*
ON heldr	**helder**	-
OE rincas ON rekkr	**renkkeȝ**	-
OE secg	**segge**	-
OE eorþ	**erþe**	*earth*
OE blēdde	**bledde**	*bled*
OE rǣdde	**redde**	*read*

stedde/bledde/redde rhyme together, although they had different vowels in OE. Long vowels before two consonants or a double consonant in OE had shortened in early ME, so OE past tense *blēdde* became ME *bledde* and the vowel of OE past tense *rǣdde* shortened and shifted to *redde*.

Letter <o>:

Just as two mid-front long vowels [eː] and [ɛː] had developed in ME dialects, so had two mid-back long vowels, the half-close [oː] and the half-open [ɔː]. The vowel [oː] is today regional, and RP has a diphthong which has moved to [əʊ] in words like *stone*. The other vowel [ɔː] would have sounded something like the vowels in MnE RP *saw, corn, floor*. ME short <o> was probably pronounced as a half-open vowel [ɔ].

Many ME words with [ɔː] were the result of the shift, or rounding, of OE [ɑː]. In the dialects where the shift took place, the vowel moved far enough away from [ɑː] to be written with letter <o>, but not far enough to fall in with the half-close [oː].

Also, the writing of letter <o> for short [u] had been adopted from the practice of French scribes in writing Latin. So today we still spell with letter <o> many words containing the short vowel [u] (now pronounced [ʌ] in RP), eg *some, love, son, monk*. So words in Text 66 spelt with <o> in a stressed syllable therefore fall into four groups:

1   **Long back half-close vowel {oː}**

OE tō	**tō**	*to*
OE fōt	**fōt**	*foot*
OE blōd	**blōd**	*blood*
OE stōdon	**stōden**	*stood*
OE sōna	**sōne**	*soon*
OE bugeþ	**bōȝeȝ**	*bows*

The <oo> spelling still retained in MnE *foot, blood* and *stood*, also eg *goose*, was adopted in ME to mark the long vowel [oː], in contrast with <o> for the short vowel, but like other spelling conventions it was not consistently used, as there was no standard spelling system. Later sound changes have diversified the pronunciation of this vowel, and there are still dialectal variations.

2   **Long back half-open vowel [ɔː]**

OE lang/long	**lōnge**	*long*
OE notu	**nōte**	*note*
OE bān (pl)	**bōnes**	*bones*
ON frā	**frō**	*(to and) fro*

OE hand/hond	**hōnde**	*hand*
OE nān	**nōn**	*none*

Notice that the rounding of OE [ɑː] to [ɔː] in *bān, frā* (ON) and *nān* has taken place in this dialect - *bones, fro* and *non*. This is evidence for its being a West Midlands, rather than a Northern dialect, because rounding did not occur in the North.

3   Short back vowel [ɔ]

OE loccas	**lokkeȝ**	*locks (of hair)*
OE ofer	**ouer**	*over*
OE folde	**fold**	*-*
OE on	**on**	*on*
OF rol(l)er	**roled**	*roll*
OE bodig	**body**	*body*
OE forþ	**forth**	*forth*
OE up + on	**vpon**	*upon cp ON upp a*
OE scancan	**schonkes**	*shanks*
OE blanca	**blonk**	*-*
ON a loft	**alofte**	*aloft*
OE bodig	**bodi**	*body*
OE manig/monig	**moni**	*many*

4   Short back vowel [u], written with <o>

OF descouvrir	**discouereȝ**	*discovers*
OE luflic	**louelych**	*lovely*
OE butan	**bot**	*but*

Letter (digraph) <ou>:

The spelling <ou> or <ow> for the long high back vowel [uː] was adopted by many ME writers as a result of the influence of the conventions of French writing. This can be seen in these words from Text 66, which are derived from French:

crōun	OF coroune	crown
dōute	OF doute	doubt*

*The letter <b> was added later, probably in the early 16th C, by analogy with the Latin *dubitare*, from which the OF had derived long before. Numbers of English words were re-spelt in the 16th century in the belief that the new spelling was more "correct" because it showed the original source of the word.)

   This spelling <ou> was also applied to words with the long vowel spelt <u> in OE. Notice that the spelling <ow> was an alternative to <ou>.

OE ofdūne	**dōun**	down
OE brūn	**brōun**	brown
OE abūtan	**abōute**	about

The following example is an OE word with short [u] which lengthened in early ME:

OE grund	**grōunde**	ground

Letter \<u\>

\<u\> remained the symbol for the short vowel [ʊ], as in

OE þurh	**þur3**	through
OE lufu	**lufly**	love
OE up	**vp**	up
OF bloc	**bluk**	block
ON uggligr	**vgly**	ugly
(*origin not known*)	**runyschly**	
OE lūtan	**lūt**	-

The word *lut* [luːt] is also spelt *lutte* and *loute* elsewhere in the poem, and the \<ou\> form confirms its origin from OE lūtan (*to bow*), so that it must have had the long vowel [uː].

Letters \<i\> and \<y\>:

Letter \<y\> no longer represented the vowel [y] as in OE but [ɪ] or [iː]. The letters \<i\> and \<y\> were to a large extent interchangeable, as in these words derived from words with \<i\> in OE or OF:

by/bi	**brydel**	**hym/his/hit**	**kny3t**	**styþly**	**syþen**
bit	**discouere3**	**hit** (*v*)	**ly3t/ly3tly**	**styf**	**twynne**
blykked	**gripped**	**hy3t**	**schyire**	**stryde3**	**wyth**

The same alternative spelling convention applies to *littel, schyndered, lyft*. The spelling with \<y\> does not represent vowel [y], but [ɪ].

Letter \<a\>

Words spelt with letter \<a\> in Text 66 illustrate the variety of OE and other sources of the long and short vowels [ɑː] and [a] in ME. There are examples of vowels which had lengthened or smoothed as well as those which had remained unchanged:

OE haldan/ON halda	**hālde3**		OF cachier	**cachche3**
OE nacod	**nāked**		OE læhte	**la3t**
OE scād/scēad	**scāde**		OE rǣhte	**rā3t**
OE hals	**halce**		OE scealc	**schalk**
OE sadol	**sadel**		OE scearp	**scharp**
OE scranc	**schrank**		OE æx	**ax**
ON faltrask	**faltered**		OE sæd + ly	**sadly**
ON unhapp	**vnhap**		OE þæt	**þat**

Diphthongs

The OE diphthongs spelt \<ea\> and \<eo\> were lost in ME, but new diphthongs developed. The OE consonant spelt \<3\> had a variety of pronunciations in OE, depending upon the preceding or following sounds. In early ME the consonant became a vowel and formed a diphthong with a glide to [ɪ] or [u], depending upon the preceding front or back vowel. Some examples in Text 66, spelt \<ay\> and \<aw\> are,

	[ai]		[au]
OE eglode	**ayled**	OE nahwæþer/ nawþer	**nawþer**
OE brægd	**brayd/brayde**	OE stele + boga	**stelbawe**
OE fæger	**fayre**		
OE legde	**layd**		

Another source of the [ai] diphthong was the ON diphthong [ei],

ON greiðilga	**grayþely**	ON kei	**kay**

There are single examples of two other new diphthongs, [eu] and [ɪ], in *schewe* (OE *sceawian*) and *foyned* (OF *foine*).

Spelling and pronunciation - consonants

Letter <g>

The familiar closed form of the letter <g> was not adopted until the 12th C. Until then, English writers had used the "open" form <ʒ> in the insular script which was used for OE. The French influence in writing and copying after the Conquest meant that a different script called "carolingian" began to be used, which included the letter form <g>. It represented the consonant [g], and distinguished it from the other variants which had developed in OE, for which <ʒ> was still used. For example in Text 66,

     gederes / grayþely / grene / gripped / grounde

Digraph <gg>

In *Sir Gawayn* the double letters <gg> replaced the former OE <cg> to represent the consonant [ʤ], as in *segge* [seʤ]. Other words in the poem include *brygge* (OE *brycg*, MnE *bridge*) and *egge* (OE *ecg* MnE *edge*).

Letters <þ> & <th>

The OE letter <þ> survived into the 15th century, but the digraph <th> was also used and eventually replaced it. Both forms are used in the poem:

     erþe / grayþely / styþly / syþen / þe / þere / þurʒ / forth / wyth

Letters <c> & <k>

Letter <k> was rarely used in OE, and <c> was unambiguous as either [k] or [ʧ], never as [s]. The use of <c> as [s] before front vowels [e] and [i] was another innovation under French influence. Letter <k> tended to replace OE <c> for consonant [k], though <c> continued to be used in many words. Text 66 contains a number of examples in which OE <c> has been replaced by <k>, and one example of the substitution in a French word:

OE blanca	**blonk**	OE loccas	**lokkes**
OE blican	**blykked**	OE nacod	**naked**
OE freca	**freke**	OE rincas	**renkkes**

OE cniht   **kny3t**   OF bloc   **bluk**

The spelling *kay* is from the ON *kei*. In *discouere3, croun*, and *nec* letter <c> is retained for [k], but in *halce*, OE *hals*, <s> has been replaced by the French <c>. We can see here the historical origins of the ambiguity of spelling and sound relationships in MnE between letters <k>, <c> and <s>.

Trigraph <sch>

In OE the spelling <sc>, formerly pronounced [sk], remained unchanged after the sound had changed to [ʃ]. The spelling <sch> was a 13th C development, and was favoured in the West Midlands, though elsewhere the forms <sc>, <ss> and <ssch> were used as well as <sh>, which eventually became the standard.

schalk / scharp / schewe / schyire / schyndered / schonkes / schrank / runyschly

Digraph <ch>

As OE had no separate letter for [ʧ], <ce> was sometimes used before back vowels to distinguish the sound from [k], as in *scearp* (MnE *sharp*) and *sceort* (MnE *short*. The digraph <ch> was adopted from French usage in the early 13th C and spread throughout ME writing, and obviously supplied a need. The use of <h> as a diacritic letter can be seen in each of the <th>, <sh> and <ch> combinations in MnE. In Text 66, *louelych* is from OE *luflic*, with similar pronunciation, and the digraph is doubled in *cachches*, from OF *cachier*. In fact, its use in the poem is not always consistent, and it is sometimes confused with <sch>.