

“DOWNS AND UPS” OF SHORT [e] BEFORE NONPREVOCALIC  
[r], OR LATE MIDDLE ENGLISH *e*-LOWERING

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1. General remarks

From the outset of studies on English sound change the Late Middle English lowering of short [e] to [a] before tautosyllabic [r] (e.g., ME *fer* > LME *far*), an important development which affected a relatively large number of words, was overshadowed by the co-occurring transformation of the English long vowel system, known as the Great Vowel Shift. Such coincidence of both processes caused that the lowering came to be treated as a second-rank phonological event and was consequently relegated to the marginal position among English sound changes. A negligibly small number of contributions substantially devoted to the lowering (e.g., Rau 1956 or Trnka 1982) have seemed to indicate that the standard handbooks and studies of historical phonology, such as Jordan (1925 [1974]), Wright – Wright (1928), Wyld (1936), Luick (1940), Dobson (1968) and several others, contain comprehensive and satisfactory accounts of both the process and its effects on the phonological system of English.

One of the reasons for such lukewarm interest must have been the simplicity of the relevant phonological rule which offered little to a linguist examining the circumstances of the change. The rule, here labelled as *e*-Lowering, just states that the short stressed mid front vowel [e] before a tautosyllabic liquid [r], i.e. appearing in the sequences *er#* or *erC*, became lowered and ultimately yielded fully open [a]. Unlike the Great Vowel Shift, a systemic change which involved a whole range of vowels, *e*-Lowering only produced a new alignment of segments which, originally members of the phoneme /e/, joined the ranks of the phoneme /a/, to use the terms of classical structuralist theory. The only interesting aspect seems to have been the extent of the change which involved the rivalry of the new sequence [ar] with the restored old pronunciation [er] (> ModE

[ɜ:], a competition best exemplified by instances where ModE [ɑ:] occasionally corresponds to present-day spellings such as <er> (e.g., *clerk*, *derby*) and <ear> (e.g., *heart*, *hearth*).

On the basis of the *OED* and several other sources, including the *MED*, the present paper sets out to (1) verify linguists' opinions concerning the time and the area of the change (see section 2 below), (2) interpret *e*-Lowering as a process involving two distinct stages (LOE/EME [e > æ], LME [æ > a]), and (3) determine the extent of the restoration of [er] in native words affected by *e*-Lowering. Also, an attempt is here made at explaining why the restoration took place in some words but not in others. Such aims follow from the present author's belief that the fates of *er/ar*-words in Early and New English were not as simple as is assumed by, for instance, Scragg (1974: 54) who writes that "[w]ords with a discernible Latin etymology were usually fixed in <er> and /ɜ:/ (e.g., *certain*, *merchant*, *perfect*, *servant*), and native words in <ar> and /ɑ:/ (e.g., *dark*, *far*, *star*, *yard*)."

## 2. The date and the area

The instances of the first *ar*-spellings adduced in handbooks of historical phonology which apparently point to the incipient stage of the change come from the 13th century, although most scholars are sceptical about such an early date of the lowering. Consequently, forms like *darc* 'dark' (c. 1250) in St. Juliana, 1. 30 MS. Royal, West Midland, or more numerous *ar*-forms from the 14th century, like *harkne* 'hearken', adduced by Wyld (1936: 212-222) to confirm the early occurrence of the change, are, according to Dobson (1968: 558-564), spellings going back to Old English *ea*- and *æ*-forms, respectively. However, as will be seen from the data below, a significant number of words with the original sequence <er> rendered as <ar> in the 14th century and even much earlier make Dobson's hypothesis convincing only as regards part of the relevant words.

The evidence of the Middle English sources and the statements of most authorities on English phonological change allow one to date *e*-Lowering to either the 14th century (Jordan 1925 [1974]; Wyld 1936: 212; "early 14 century", Luick 1940: 477 "im Laufe des 14. Jahrhunderts...", Mincoff 1972: 216; "early 14c. ... the whole country by the end of the century.", etc.) or the 15th century (Jones 1989: 246-247: "a process ... operative from the fifteenth century, especially in Northern dialectal areas ... initiated even as early as the late fourteenth century."). Thus the suggested time of the change covers the 14-15th centuries.

Equally controversial are statements concerning the localization of the area where the change originated. Although, in the 1920s, Jordan (1925 [1974]: 98) postulated that its origin was to be sought in the northern dialects of England, his statement was ignored by Wyld (1936: 212-222) who launched a drastically different hypothesis of the southeastern provenance of *e*-Lowering which subse-

quently spread to the nearby shires of Essex, Suffolk, Norfolk and then, from Essex and Kent, to London. Wyld's theory was rejected almost unanimously by both his contemporaries (cf. Luick 1940, etc.) and a later generation of scholars (cf. Brunner 1960: 332; Dobson 1968: 558, etc.) although it contained some valuable statements, including a pioneering quasi-sociolinguistic interpretation of the diffusion of the new pronunciation which was claimed to have been transmitted by "merchants from the eastern counties", to be finally anchored in "the speech of the lowered strata", whence it spread upwards.

As will be seen from the data below the arguments favouring the hypothesis of the northern origin of the change even long before the 14th century, its diffusion to the south at the turn of the 15th century, and its acceptance in the home counties in the latter half of the same century are much better grounded. That the lowering had failed to gain a firm foothold in London earlier is confirmed by the relatively rare occurrence of *ar*-spellings in such standard sources as Caxton's works or the letters of the Paston family, perhaps the most characteristic specimens of Late Middle English literature. The preservation of *er*-forms in the South as opposed to the rise of *ar*-forms in the North is best illustrated by the divergent developments of OE *berze* (> ME *berry*) and OE *herzian* (> ME *herwen* > ModE *harrow/harry*; cf. Flasdieck 1954: 194-195).

The extent of the process is not easy to determine for lack of an immediate adjustment of spellings to modified pronunciation. To put it differently, the numerous conservative *er*-spellings in the latter half of the 15th century are no proof of the failure of *e*-Lowering to occur in words exhibiting an appropriate context. First found only as isolated instances, the new *ar*-spellings became generalized towards the end of the 15th century, unless the traditional orthography with <er> in loanwords was protected by the form of a French or Latin source word (e.g., ME *certain*, *person*, vs. *parson*, *serve*, etc).

It ought to be emphasised, however, that in comparison with other changes parallel in time, like the Great Vowel Shift, whose effects were only rarely reflected in writing, *e*-Lowering was relatively frequently recorded by scribes and printers who employed *ar*-spellings, particularly in words of Anglo-Saxon origin, a convention which perhaps mirrored a tendency to represent the transfer of allophones from one phoneme to another. Because in later Middle English short [e] before nonprevocalic [r] became an integral part of the phoneme /a/, its former graphemic representation had to be discarded. At the same time, neither the raising [e:] > [i:], as in *cheese*, *green*, etc., nor the remaining four Great Vowel Shift changes involved an analogous transfer of allophones.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An analogous phonemic development, the New English lowering and centralization [u > ʌ] (cf. *cup*, *strut*), a spontaneous change, left practically no traces in spelling. As a result the date of the change remains controversial; cf. Kökeritz (1953) and Dobson (1968), who suggest an early or late occurrence of the change respectively.

3. The Old English input to *e*-Lowering

The Old English words affected by the change included items originally containing stressed (1) short [eo], a diphthong produced by the pre-Old English processes of breaking and back mutation, as in *beorcan* > *berken* > *bark*, *feor* > *fer* > *far*, etc. and a fair number of words with short unbroken or unmutated [e], as in *mersce* > *marsh*, (2) several instances of long [e:ɔ] subsequently shortened, as in *stēorbord* > *sterbord* > *starboard*, etc., and (3) short [e] alternating with [ie], as in *\*st(i)ertan* > *sterte* > *start*. It should be noted that when followed by a voiced homorganic cluster with initial [r], as in *ʒ(i)erd* > *yērd* (later > *yerd* > *yard*), short [e] merged with the original long [e:] due to Late Old English Homorganic Lengthening.

The effects of the lowering are also evident in words where the sequence *-erC-* reflected the deletion of an intervening vowel which originally separated the liquid from the following consonant, as in *heorot* (> ME *herte*) 'hart'. Last but not least, analogous effects are evident in loanwords, especially from French, which contained the relevant sequence, cf. *certain* > *cartain*, *ferme* > *farm*, *werre* > *war*, etc. How loanwords, especially from French and Latin, were affected by *e*-Lowering demands a separate treatment (cf. Welna forthcoming).

The exploration of entries in various Old English dictionaries yields a relatively high number of items containing sequences listed above as (1-3), all potentially subject to the operation of the lowering rule. About 250 such words, including derivatives, in Holthausen (1934), of which 60 survived beyond the 14-15th centuries, exhibit contexts potentially exposed to the operation of *e*-Lowering. Some of the stressed nuclei underwent diphthong simplification and/or vowel shortening in Late Old and Early Middle English.

In view of such a significant amount of words originally containing the environment which triggered the lowering, a relatively low number of around 60 native words which survive beyond the 14-15th centuries may come as a surprise. Based on Holthausen's etymological dictionary, the study corpus analysed in the ensuing sections includes items preserved in New English dialects as well as archaic and obsolete forms, but it excludes those which failed to survive beyond the 15th century. Words under examination are split into two groups according to whether [e] is followed by a word-final [r] and a non-homorganic cluster with initial [r] (see section 4) or by a homorganic cluster with initial [r] (see section 5).

4. *e*-Lowering before word-final [r] and non-homorganic clusters with initial [r]

Generally regarded as forms which best illustrate *e*-Lowering, the Middle English continuations of items with original diphthongs, short [eo] and long [e:ɔ], the latter shortened and both subsequently monophthongized to [e], as well as several words with the original monophthong [e], are usually adduced to exem-

plify the change. Because a vast majority of words containing the context for the lowering do not survive, the list of items subject to the regular development [ar] > [ɑ:] is quite short (30 instances). Enclosed in parentheses are the dates of the first *ar*-spellings:

- (1) a. *beorcan* 'bark' (15 c.), *beorg* 'barrow' (16 c.), *beorma* 'barm' (15 c.), *ceorfan* 'carve' (15 c.), *ceorran* 'char(e)' (= 'turn'; 13 c.), *Dēoraby* 'Derby/Darby, derby' (16 c.), *deorc* 'dark' (13 c.), *dweorg* 'dwarf' (14 c.), *feor(r)* 'far' (13 c.), *\*feortan* 'fart' (14 c.), *he(o)rcnian* 'harken/hearken' (14 c.), *heorr* 'har' (14 c.; now obs. or dial.), *heort* (< *heorot*) 'hart' (15 c.), *heorte* 'heart' (14 c.), *he(o)rp* 'hearth' (15 c.), *smeortan* 'smart' (15 c.), *steorfan* 'starve' (16 c.), *steorra* 'star' (15 c.), *steort* n. 'start' (= 'tail'; 16 c.), *teoru* 'tar' (14 c.)
- b. *clerc* (< Latin) 'clerk' (12/13 c.), *erce-* (< Greek) 'arch-' (12 c.), *herzian* 'harrow/harry' (14 c.), *merce* 'march' (= 'wild celery', arch.; 16 c.), *mersc* 'marsh' (15 c.), *scerpan* v. 'sharp' (13 c.), *serc* 'sark' (14 c.)
- c. *c(i)err* n. 'char(e)' (= 'turn'; 13 c.), *zierman* 'yarm' (14 c., now dial.), *m(i)erran* 'mar' (13 c.), *tierwian* v. (> ME *terren*) 'tar' (15 c.)

A cursory inspection of the entries above shows that when not followed by a homorganic cluster with initial [r], short [e] (< [e(o)]) underwent *e*-Lowering, and regularly survives in current English as long [ɑ:], a change adequately reflected in writing, except in a number of proper names and place names (e.g., *Berkeley*, *Derby*, *Kerr*, etc.),<sup>2</sup> the noun *clerk*, and a few ambiguous forms like *hearken*, *heart*, *hearth*, whose spellings preserve both the original mid and the new low vowel. All these instances show the rivalry of the new *ar*- and old *er*-spellings, the latter generally displaced by the former only at the turn of the 17th century.

As regards chronology, in agreement with Dobson's assumption some of the earliest forms with *ar*-spellings found in texts from the 12-13th centuries, like *arch* and *dark*, may represent reflexes of the variant forms OE *ærce*, *dearc*, respectively, while the verb *scharp* (13 c.), rendering OE *scerpan* 'sharp(en)', probably took its <ar> from the adjective *sharp* (< OE *scearp*).<sup>3</sup> But the authors of the standard handbooks of historical phonology would have certainly interpreted the early *ar*-/*ær*-forms of the verb *ceorran* 'char(e)', the related noun *cerr* 'char(e)', and the verb *merran* 'mar' adduced below as continuations not of items with <er> but of their by-forms with <ær> (see Luick 1940: 479; Jordan 1925 [1974], etc.):

<sup>2</sup> The initial sequence *beorc* 'birch' in the place name *Berkeley* (now ['bɑ:kli]), shows the restoration of the mid vowel in the simplex *birch* (< *bierce*; see items listed as 1b).

<sup>3</sup> Note, however, *er*-forms (*sherpe*, *shirpe*) of the verb which survive dialectally in the 19th century.

- (2) a. c. 1205 Lay. 21266 (v.) ... & gon him to *charren*; 29495 *And charde azein sone eft into Rome*; 6844 (n.) *Makeden him bridde chærre king*; c. 1220 Bestiary 643 (n.) ... *he makeþ þer-to char*; c. 1250 Gen. & Ex. 2390 (v.) *Or ic of werlde chare*; c. 1300 Cursor M. 21992 (n.) ... *He sal find þan nan efter-char*.
- b. c. 1205 Lay. 1903 *Vfele he hine mærde* ... (but cf. 22345 ... *and merden Irisc folc*); c. 1230 Hali. Meid. 43 ... *þu marres ti meidenhad* (but ... *merrest þin meiphad* in MS. Bodley); a. 1300 Cursor M. 17988 ... *and myche marred of my mayn*.

Whether the above words with the sequence <ar> are continuations of the regular *er*-forms or occasional *ær*-variants is impossible to determine especially when one considers that different spellings often render lowered or unlowered vowels in the same text. The belief that the early *ar*-forms like those cited above must represent original *ær*-variants merely reflects the dogma that *e*-Lowering could not occur in 12-13th centuries or earlier. But an explanation assuming the survival of a by-form, not of a principal form, can hardly be offered to explain the spellings of (3a) the noun *clerc* 'clerk' and (3b) the adjective *feorr* 'far', both lacking *ær*-variants produced by mutation in Old English. Especially characteristic is the early occurrence of a form of OE *clerc* 'clerk' with <æ> in the Peterborough Chronicle and the plural *clærckes* side by side with the spelling *mærkes* (< OE *mearc merc* 'mark') in Layamon (early 13th century); cf.:

- (3) a. 1131 Pet. Chron. an. 1127 *He wæs on his clærch hade biscop* ..., c. 1205 Lay. 10203 ... *þer ouer ærchebiscopes þat clærscipe to rihten*; 10904 ... *næs nan clærk ne cniht* ..., 15750 ... *wes a wis clærch* ... 29855 *Bishopes and clærckes and preostes mid godes mærkes*, 30490 *An clark þe com from Spaine* ...
- b. c. 1250 Gen. & Ex. 2616 (adj.) ... *ic go fear out*; a. 1300 Cursor M. (Cott.) 506 (adv.) *How farr es in to hell pitte*; 4820 (adj.) *We are o farr cuntre* ...; 17288 (adv.) *Marie ... loked farre & neghe*.

A significant number of early *ar*-forms are found in the Cursor Mundi, a text whose evidence supports the hypothesis of the early operation of *e*-Lowering in the North.<sup>4</sup> Although the scribe(s) who copied the poem also employed forms with <er>, that sequence can hardly be regarded as containing a mid vowel, unless it is assumed that *er*- and *ar*-spellings of the same word in the same text

<sup>4</sup> Following Luick (1940: 169) and Sievers (1951: 94), Campbell (1959: 57) considers the Northumbrian glosses *farr* 'far' (Durham Ritual), *farran* 'from far' (Lindisfarne Gospels) scribal errors, but *farme* 'farm' (= meal'; Lindisfarne Gospels) a form with a vowel grade different from that of WS *feorm*. Still, these spellings may as well reflect a sporadic incipient lowering of [e] before [r].

have different phonological values. Because advanced spelling is not normally used to represent conservative pronunciation, the graphemic sequence <ar> can only correspond to the phonological sequence [ar]. On the other hand, since conservative spelling often lags behind advanced pronunciation, forms like *ferr* and *merr* (cf. Cursor M. 2253, 8269) may contain the sequence [ar] or at least [ær]; cf.:

- (4) *Now we haue vs sped sa ferr*  
*Vr wil may he noght vs merr.* (Cursor M. 2253-4)

A more explicit example is the rhyme in a couplet from Barbour's Bruce (1375, Scots); cf.:

- (5) *he suld ger*  
*Bath the sleuthhund and the ledar* Barbour's Bruce VII.20 ...

Here, the rhyme between the agent noun *ledar* 'leader', a form typical of Scots, and the verb *ger* 'gar' (Scand. arch. 'cause'), indicates the low articulation of the vowel in the verb frequently used in Scots and in Northern English. Although the spelling of the verb is not modified there is no doubt that its vowel became lowered to [a].

The above data show that, although confined to very few items, *e*-Lowering occasionally operated at least as early as the 13th century, affecting words different from those adduced by Wyld (1936) and considered incorrect examples by Dobson (see 1 above). The hypothesis of an early initiation of the process is further confirmed by the presence of numerous *ar*-forms in the texts from the 14th century, such as *dwarw* 'dwarf' (c. 1325), *farting*, *harre* 'har' (c. 1386 Chaucer's CT; now obs.), *hart* 'heart' (1375 Barbour Bruce 1.28: *That hardy wes off hart and hond*), also *harwed* 'harrowed' (c. 1386 Chaucer's CT), and *sark*. The *OED* registers no Old English *æ*-forms of *hearken*, although *hærcneden* (PT Pl.), found in Layamon (c. 1205; 19968), need not have been a continuation of an Old English *æ*-form, as Dobson would claim, but another early instance of *e*-Lowering.

Even more revealing are the fates of 9 words containing vowels whose current reflex is not low [a:] but central mid [ɜ:] (< [er]; the dates of the last surviving *ar*-forms are put in parentheses); cf.:

- (6) a. *berstan* 'burst' (15 c.), *cerfelle* (< Lat.) 'chervil' (16 c.), *cerse* 'cress' (16 c.), *ciercian* 'chirk' (note also *cearcian* 'chark'), *fercian* 'firk/ferk' (15 c.)
- b. *beorc* 'birch' (also *bierce* below), *ceorm* (also *cierm cirm*) 'chirm' (16 c.), *sweorfan* 'swerve/swarve' (15 c.; *ar*-forms now dial.), *teors* 'tarse' (15 c.)

One case is easy to explain: *carsse* and *kerse* (16-17 centuries), with and without lowering, were replaced by the metathetic form *cress*. But the *MED* also lists the form *cærsan* (c. 1150, Hrl. H Apul. 92.49/2: *I so pum and nitrum & splex cærsan* and 104.72/1 *splex. cærse*). As regards the survival of OE *fers* as *verse* (Lat. *versus*), it is evidently due to the attraction of Latin or French forms. However, such an influence is hardly conceivable in case of *chervil* (Lat. *cærefolium*), which, apart from the standard form *cerfille*, developed an Old English variant form *cærfelle*, the latter probably surviving as *chareuille*, recorded c. 1265 (see Wr.-Wülcker). But, considering the extensive time-gap of three hundred years when such forms are not recorded, spellings like *charuel* *charuiel* found in the 16th century (1573 Tusser Husb. 97) seem to represent continuations of a lowered vowel rather than old forms reflecting those with OE *-ær*. As regards *ciercian*, which exhibits no lowered variants, this onomatopoeic word exhibited association with *chirrup* and *chirm*, which contributed to the preservation of a mid vowel.

Other irregular developments in the group above are more complicated. Although the simplex *beorc* was early displaced by *birch* (< OE *bierce*), which retains a mid vowel, the place name *Berkeley*, recorded as *Berclea* (824) and later as *Berchelai* (1086 Domesday Book), now pronounced [ˈbɜːkli], exhibits the effect of *e*-Lowering in both variants, *Berk-* (< OE *beorc*) and *Berch-* (< OE *bierce*).<sup>5</sup> However, many other compound place names show a contrary development and retain [er], now [ɜ:], although the corresponding simplex source forms sometimes contain a low vowel. Here belong *Berwick* (1167 *Berewick* < OE *bere* 'barley' + *wic*), *Birmingham* (1087 *Bermingeham* < OE *Beorma* + *-ingas* + *-ham*), *Burford* (A-S Chr. *Beorzfeord* < OE *beorz* 'barrow' + *ford*), *Dursley* (1087 *Dersileze* < *Deorsige* + *leoh*), *Merton* (967 *Mertone* < OE *mere* + *tun*), etc. A frequent restoration of *er*-forms in the domain of onomastics may be a reflection of local tendencies to retain the traditional form of a place name.

An early displacement must account for the failure of the rare Old English forms *ceorm* 'chirm' (cf. *cierm cirm*) and *fercian* 'firk/ferk' to yield *ar*-forms in Modern English. The two *ar*-forms of the verb *firk/ferk* in the *OED* are extracted from the early 15th century Alliterative Poem of Alexander (cf. 545 ... *and farkis furth a fute or tway*, and 766 *He ... Farkis to see Philip & fangis his leue*). These spellings should, however, be confronted with those of [e] either unlowered or restored in the same item; cf. 926 *Philip ... Ferkis furth a few folk*). Consequently, occasional *ar*-forms, even reinforced by the Old English *ær*-forms (cf. *færcodon* PT Pl., A-S Chronicle), could not inhibit the survival of the unlowered *ir-/er*-variants in Modern English dialects.

<sup>5</sup> A similar-looking segment *Berk-* in *Berkshire* is of Celtic origin (cf. *barro* 'hill').

The reason for the selection of the variant *swerve*, with [er], may have been functional. Originally a strong verb, OE *sweorfan* had the preterite *swearf*, ME *swarf*. As long as the verb remained strong, the co-occurrence of the infinitive *swarv(e)* (by *e*-Lowering, a form evidenced in Gil's *Logonomia Anglica* 1621; cf. Jones 1989: 247) and the preterite *swarf swarv(e)* produced ambiguity which led to the restoration of the earlier *er*-form in standard speech, while dialects attached *-ed* to forms containing <*ar*>. Seemingly attractive, this interpretation requires a thorough investigation of the relationship between the forms of the present and the preterite in Late Middle and Early New English. But it does not explain why an analogous development affected no other similarly structured Old English verbs, such as *ceorfan* 'carve' and *steorfan* 'starve', with *er*-spellings still surviving in the 17th century.<sup>6</sup> As regards the verb *burst*, which in the 15-16th centuries developed the form *barst* in both present (ME *berste*) and preterite (OE *bærst* > *barst*), no functional factors could interfere since *er-* and *ar-* were soon replaced by *ur*-forms surviving into Modern English which, as must be emphasised, correspond in their phonological development to *er-* not to *ar*-forms.

#### 5. *e*-Lowering before homorganic clusters with initial [r]

Because short stressed vowels before voiced homorganic clusters, including those with initial [r], were lengthened in the 9-10th centuries, one of the effects of that change was the rise of the long sequence [e:rC] which prevented *e*-Lowering. However, texts from the late 13th, and especially the 14th century, offer ample evidence of short [e] before homorganic clusters with initial [r], i.e. in sequences where a long vowel was to be expected. This clearly indicates that after Pre-Cluster Shortening (PCS), a Middle English change which undid the effects of Homorganic Lengthening (HL), accented [e] before nonprevocalic [r] must have become exposed to *e*-Lowering (*e*-L). As a consequence, the following developments affected native words like *bern* 'barn', *leornian* 'learn', *eorthe* 'earth', *herd* 'herd', and *yerd* 'yard':

Input	<i>bern</i>	<i>leorn(-ian)</i>	<i>eorth(-e)</i>	<i>herd</i>	<i>yerd</i>
(Segment loss)	–	lern-e	erth	–	–)
HL	bērn	lērn	ērth	hērd	yērd
PCS	bern	lern	erth	herd	yerd
<i>e</i> -L	barn	*larn	*arth	*hard	yard
Output	<i>barn</i> [ɑ:]	<i>learn</i> [ɜ:]	<i>earth</i> [ɜ:]	<i>herd</i> [ɜ:]	<i>yard</i> [ɑ:]

<sup>6</sup> While OE *deorfan* 'derve' (obs.), last recorded in the 14th century, did not develop *ar*-forms, OE *hweorfan* 'wherve' (obs.), whose earliest lowered forms belong to the 15th century, survives as *wherve* in the 17th but as *wharve* in the 19th century.

Although Jespersen (1949: 6.46) explains the survival of [e] in *earth* and *learn* as due to factors of analogy ("... we have words in which both the long and the short vowel were found: in these the long vowel protected the quality of the /e/ through preventive analogy"), his statement leaves unexplained the problem why *e*-Lowering in *barn* and *yard* was not inhibited by forms like *beern*, *yeerd*, both with a long vowel. The above sequence of developments merely shows that the effects of *e*-Lowering are far from consistent. Thus, spellings in Middle English words with the sequence [erC], where [C] was voiced, are expected to fall into three types, containing respectively (1) a long vowel, symbolized by a digraph, usually a geminated vowel letter, (2) a short mid vowel, spelt <e>, and (3) a short low vowel, spelt <a>. Whereas types (1) and (3) are rather unambiguous indicators of either a long or a lowered vowel (cf. spellings like <leerne> and <larn>), *er*-spellings in type (2), such as <lerne>, can represent any of the three pronunciations.

The account which follows is based on an examination of words with original short [e(o)] before a homorganic cluster and, in addition, the noun *fēorþung* 'farthing', with an original long vowel in an analogous context, all these words surviving at least until the 19th century. First come words which retain the reflex of a mid vowel, i.e. [ɜ:]. Examples adduced represent types (1) and (3), i.e. forms with a long vowel and with a lowered vowel. A full list of quotations is adduced in the Appendix.

As regards words with the low variant ultimately rejected in the standard speech (13 items: *churl*, *earl*; *churn*, *dern*, *earnest*, *learn*, *quern*, *stern*, *yearn*, *yern*; *herd*, *verd*; *earth*), the evidence of the Middle English manuscripts and the first printed texts is highly unsatisfactory, considering a scanty amount of forms unambiguously showing the phonological value of vowels potentially subject to the operation of *e*-Lowering. But if the validity of Orm's (c. 1200) convention is not contested, his spellings of *eorþe* 'earth' (8073) and *leornenn* 'learn' (9309) must be interpreted as containing long vowels in stressed syllables. From the early 14th century also come spellings like *eerl*, *eerles*, *eerlys* 'earl(s)' (13. Coeur de Lion) which imply long [e:], symbolized by the geminate. A long vowel is also evident in, for example, *cheerliſsh* 'churlish' and *deerne* 'dern' (both c. 1386, Chaucer), *eernesful* 'earnestful' (1430; A.B.C. Aristotle in Babees Bk.), *leerne* 'learn' (c. 1449; Pecock), and *queerne* (1380-88, Wyclif). But numerous *ea*-spellings from the 16th century, like *chearne* 'churn', etc. (1584, 1593), must be approached with extreme caution since they may represent a sequence short vowel-plus-*r*, as in *yearn*, or *learn*, with the spelling <ea> standardized in that period. The subsequent lengthening of vowels in such words was connected with the loss of nonprevocalic [r] in Southern English.

Although in the above words the lowered variant has failed to survive in Standard English, there is evidence of historical *ar*-forms, some of them re-

corded quite early. While the earliest *ar*-spelling in the above set, *larna* 'learn', is found in the Andreas (a. 900), analogous Middle English forms are missing in the *OED*.<sup>7</sup> But an *æ*-form of OE *eorl* (c. 1175 *ærlen* Pl. 'earls', Cott. Hom. 231), and several *a*-forms of OE *zeornan* 'yearn', such as *zarne* and *zarnful* 'yearnful' (c. 1375, 1500), *gharn* (1375, Barbour), *zarnyng(e)* 'yearning' (1375, a. 1450), *yarnand* (1522), *zarnyt* PT (1425), and several others, the last from 1573 (*zarnis*), testify to the popularity of the low variant in Early English. Likewise the archaic adverb *yern(e)* 'yern', which reflects OE *zeorn*, is found spelt with <ar> in the Cursor Mundi (a. 1300 *zarn*) and in the Wyntoun Chronicle (c. 1425 *zarne*), while *arnest* 'earnest' is a spelling from the Promptorium Parvulorum (c. 1440).

Several *ar*-forms of other words surviving in the Early New English period include *charle* 'churl' (1440-1581), *charne* 'churn' (1580-1599), *quarn* 'quern' (17th c.), as well as *yarthe* 'earth' (c. 1558), *arthern* 'earthen' (1564) or *yarthling* 'earthling' (1688). All these forms confirm that spellings reflecting the lowered vowel were in occasional use for quite a time.

The analysis of the *OED* corpus reveals 3 items, 2 with the cluster [rd] (OE *heord* '(shep)herd', *reord(e)* 'rerd') and 1 with [rn] (OE *stierne* 'stern'), which lack even occasional *ar*-forms. However, apart from numerous standard *er*-spellings, a long vowel is evident in *steernesſe* 'sternness' (1382, Wyclif; a. 1500 Medulla Gram.), *sterne* 'stern' (c. 1410 Hoccleve), and *heerde* (c. 1440 Promp. Parv., 1491 Caxton), *heerd* (1484 Caxton, 1526 Tindale). Characteristically, even the Cursor Mundi (a. 1300), a Northern text with a number of lowered forms, contains the spelling *heirdes* 'shepherds' with an implicit long vowel. Such a vowel also seems to have occurred in Chaucer (c. 1386 C. T. Prol. 603 *hierde*, but also "regular" *herde*). However, the above data ought to be confronted with the evidence of the homophonous forms like *herde* PT/PP 'heard' (OE *hēran* 'hear') which exhibit *e*-Lowering not only in Northern (a. 1300 Cursor Mun. 2849 ... *þis cri sco hard*, 1609 Skene Reg. Maj. Table 62 *He quha first accuses, is first hard*) but also in non-Northern Middle and Early New English (c. 1440 Gesta Rom. lix. 243 Harl. *He harde a voyse ...*, 1450-1530 Myrr. Our Ladye 188 *Though ye deserve not to be harde ...*). Whether this difference is conditioned by functional factors (avoidance of homophonous words) is an assertion hard to prove or disprove.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Dialectal *larn* survives in the 19th century as a colloquialism; cf. 1833 Marryatt, Peter Simple 9 *You must larn to chaw baccy*.

<sup>8</sup> The following *ar*-forms of the verb *hīerd(e)* *hērd(e)* (PT/PP of *hēran*) are cited in the *OED*: (cf. c. 1200 Orm *þe Fader heorrd ...*) a. 1300 Cursor M. ... *þis cri sco hard*, c. 1440 Gesta Rom. lix. 243 (Harl.) *He harde a voyse ...*, 1450-1530 Myrr, our Ladye 188 *Though ye deserve not to be harde ...*, 1562 Winzet Four Scoir Thre Quest. Wks. 1888 I.91 ... *of all acceptit and hard ...*, etc. In addition, Kökeritz (1953: 250) adduces the rhyme *heard* : *regard* from Shakespeare, where <ea> must correspond to long [a:].

The Middle and Early New English forms of OE *reord* require a separate treatment because the noun has for a long time been and is now confined to Scottish English. The only notable instance of a non-Scottish form comes from Kent (Ayenb. of Inwyt 211 *rearde*), where it need not denote a long vowel. A geminated <e> occurs in Kelly's Scottish Proverbs of 1721 (*reerd*), while most words in the Scottish dialect contain the diacritic <i> which indicates length of the preceding vowel, as in *reird(e)* (c. 1480 Henryson, 1508 Dunbar, 1819 Hogg, etc.).

In sum, the relatively numerous forms of Anglo-Saxon words with [er] preserved or restored before homorganic clusters contradict, at least partly, the theory of a general lowering of stressed [e] before a nonprevocalic [e] in all varieties of English irrespective of context. But a vast majority of such forms are matched by those with a lowered variant which testifies to the rivalry of the two pronunciations.

The last small group of words to be discussed includes 8 items which, although with [e] before a homorganic cluster, emerge with a low vowel in Modern English. Only 3 nouns, OE *cerlic* 'charlock' (c. 1440 Promp. Parv. 62 *carlock*, 1598 Gerard Herbal *charlock*), *fēorþung* 'farthing' (1524 Test. Ebor. *farddyng*, 1562 Heywood *farthing*) and *sweord* 'sword' (c. 1485 Digby Myst. *Sward*) fail to exhibit spellings corresponding to long vowels. Although the last word is often spelt *swearde(s)* in the 16-17th centuries, the digraph <ea> probably corresponds to a short vowel.

The spellings of the remaining 5 words show a characteristic chronological pattern where digraphs corresponding to long vowels, like <ee, ie>, are displaced by *ar*-spellings, the most frequent ones being the "intermediate" forms with <er>. Thus, the continuations of OE *bern* 'barn' (1382 Wyclif *beerne*, 1386 Chaucer *beernys*, c. 1475 Wright's Voc. *beyrne*) are displaced by forms like *barne* (1523 Fitzherb. Husb.), and those of OE *dernan* v., *derne* adj. 'darn/dern' (c. 1386 Chaucer *deerne*) by *darne* (1584 S. Acts Jas.; but cf. c. 1200 Orm 9236: *All uncuth & all dærne*, which apparently contains a long vowel). Further, *yeird* (< a. 1300 Cursor M.), *zeerde* (1382 Wyclif) and *yeerde* (1433 Rolls of Parlt. iv. 451) went out of use after *yard* (c. 1425 Engl. Conq. Irel. *yardes* Pl.) became a standard spelling. Analogously, *heerdis* Pl. (< OE *heordan*), so spelt a. 1366 in Chaucer's Rom. Rose acquires a new spelling around 1375 (Barbour's Bruce *hardiss* Pl.), etc. At the turn of the 15th century forms like *deerling* were displaced by spellings with lowering, such as *darling* (a. 1400 Chester Plays).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The *er*-spelling recorded in 1562 (J. Heywood Prov. & Epigr. (1867) 65 *It is better to be an old mans derling, than a yong mans werlyng*) must have corresponded to [ar] since *werlyng*, associated with *war* (< *werre*), evidently contained a low vowel.

Although the number of items of native origin subject to *e*-Lowering which survive with lowered or restored mid vowels is relatively small, the adduced data allow to formulate certain generalizations (see section 6 below).

## 6. Concluding remarks

Until the 14th century all modifications of sound were as a rule recorded in writing but the practice of adapting spelling to changed pronunciation was abandoned by English scribes and editors after Caxton introduced print in the late 15th century. Curiously, *e*-Lowering seems to be the only phonological development of the period relatively consistently rendered in spelling, which can hardly be due to chance. The reason for such an exceptional treatment may have been its perception as an accepted old change belonging to Early, not Late, Middle English. It should be duly emphasised that the much more complex and important Great Vowel Shift changes which apparently co-occurred with *e*-Lowering were not recorded in spelling after the 15th century. Consequently, one must assume that the modified *ær*- and *ar*-spellings must have represented changes which had taken place much earlier, thus reflecting an early pre-14/15th century scribal tradition. This crucial observation and the evidence adduced in the present study can help formulate several tentative conclusions as regards various linguistic aspects of the change:

- (1) Chronology. The *ær*- and *ar*-spellings evidenced in Early Middle English and even in Old English testify to an early date of the initiation of *e*-Lowering. Only some of such new spellings can be attributed to the Old English *ea*-variants matching the more standard *eo*-forms.
- (2) Regional and social dialects. In accordance with the findings of most scholars, the evidence presented above unambiguously points to the North of England as the homeland of *e*-Lowering, from where the change spread southwards. No evidence invalidates the widely accepted hypothesis that *ar*-variants first appeared in the speech of the lower classes and were then transmitted to upper class speakers.
- (3) Pre-*r* lowering. That English vowels, short and long, have from the earliest times exhibited a tendency to lower their articulation before [r], is a fact beyond dispute. Occasionally evidenced by Old and Middle English spellings, such lowered vowels survive as late as Modern English. The low articulation was natural to those speakers who very reluctantly abandoned pronunciations like ['sa:tn] for *certain*, or [sa:v] for *serve*, etc.
- (4) Mid-vowel restoration (preservation). Evidently, the restoration of a mid vowel is typically a feature of loanwords from French and Latin, which re-adjusted their pronunciation to original spellings. But the evidence of words of Old English origin whose structure attracted *e*-Lowering shows that cer-



tain words either seem to have remained unaffected by the change or restored their original mid vowel. The latter group includes words with (a) [e] exposed to Late Old English Homorganic Lengthening, as in OE *eorl* 'earl', *cweorn* 'quern', etc.; (b) short [e(o)] alternating with the diphthong [ie] and/or [i], whether followed or not by a voiced homorganic cluster with initial [r], as in OE *beorc bierce* 'birch', *ceorm cierm* 'chirm', etc; (c) compounded place names, like *Berwick*, *Birmingham*, etc. Last but not least, functional factors may have had their share in the retention of the mid vowel in words like *berstan* 'burst' or *sweorfan* 'swerve'.

Finally, let me express the hope that, although tentative, the above statements may shed some light on one of the long neglected phonological problems. An examination of data from other corpora, ready or in preparation, may supply answers to questions which yet remain unsolved.

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## APPENDIX

Words with [e] before a homorganic cluster with initial [r]

(a) surviving as Modern English [er > ɜ:]:

*cheorl* 'churl': c. 1200 Orm *cherl*, c. 1386 Chaucer Frankl. T. 787... *cheerliss* *wrecchednesse* ... (modified in various MSS as *cherlyssh*, etc.) // a. 1225 Lay. Brut 11205 ... & *prallede þæ cærles* (but 12254 *cheorles*), a. 1440 Cov. Myst. 139 *The olde charle had ryght gret corage*, 14. Pistill of Susan 341(1) ... *þat rewful charle began for to rore*, c. 1440 Prompt. Parv. 72 *Cherelle or charle*, 1581 J. Studley Seneca's Hercules (Ætæus 198 *The covetous charle* ...

*eorl* 'earl': 13.. Coer de L. 689 ... *Eerles and lordes of renoun*, 1304 *Thus, thorwgh tresoun of the Eerl Joys* ..., 3757 *To hys eerlys* ..., 3759 *eerl*, 3888 *eerls* // c. 1175 Cott. Hom. 231 *Mid ærlen and aldren* ...

*ciern* 'churn': [No *ee*-forms, but cf. a. 1500 Jhesu that arte jentylle 198 ... and put hit in the *cheyrne*] // c. 1475 Pict. Voc. In Wr.-Wülcker 793/21 *Hoc volatorium, a scharne*, 1580 Hollyband Treas. Fr. Tong. ... a *charning tub*, or *charne*, 1599 A. M. tr. Gabelhouer's Bk. Phusicke 267/2 *We may give it charne or Buttermilcke*. Note the ambiguous *ea*-forms in Early New English, cf. 1584 R. Scot Discov. Witcher i. v. 8 ... *ane butter, chearne* ... vb., 1593 G. Harvey New Letter C ij B *I may ... chearne him like a dish of butter* ..., etc.)

*cweorn* 'quern': Wyclif c. 1380 Sel Wks. II. 408 ... *grynding at a queerne*, 1382 Isa. Xlvii.2 ... a *grind ston, or queerne*, 1388 Num. Xi. 8 ... a *queerne stoon* // [?OE *cwearne*] 17 c. *quarn*

*derne* 'dern' (dial. 'darn'): c. 1200 Orm 396, 11446 *dærne*, c. 1386 Chaucer Miller's T. 111 ... *ful dærne as in this cas* // a. 1121 Pet. Chron. an. 1114 *dærne sprece*, 1584 Sc. Acts Jas. VI 305 (Jam.) ... and *darne partes and placeis thairof* (note also the ambiguous forms a. 1225 Leg. Kath. 573 ... in all mine *dearne runes*

*eornest* 'earnest': 1430 A.B.C Aristotle in Babees Bk. (1868) 11 ... *ne to excellent ne to eernesful neiþer* // c. 1440 Prompt. Parv. 14/2 *Arneste* or *erneste* ...

*æzeornan* 'yearn': (no *ee*-forms in Middle English) // c. 1375 Sc. Leg. Saints iii. (Andrew) 423 *I zarne þe Of corse to here <F255þe þriwete*, xl. (Ninian) 724 ... of *hevine zarnar* (= yearner), xvi. (Magdalen) 780 ... *scho sa zarnful wes* ... (= 'yearnful'), 1375 Barbour Bruce i. 158 *The kynnyk gharn I nocht to have* ..., iii 742 ... *to fullfill hys zarnyng*, 1425 Wyntoun Cron. V.ii 260 *Octoviane zarnyt hym to be His ayr*, c. 1440 Prompt. Parv. 536/2 *zarnyng* or *zernyng* ..., a. 1450 Ratis Ravings 975 *zarnyng*, 3790 ... *hart nocht zarnis*, 1500-20 Dunbar Poems lxxi, 19 *We zarne thy presens* ..., 1522 J. Vaus Rudim. Gram. Bb. ij (Jam.) ... *yarnand mode*, 1568 Lauder Godlie Tractate 627 *That death ze zairne* ..., 1573 Satir. Poems Reform x/ii. 750 *That zarnis for fude with sa greit zeill* (plus am-

biguous *ea*-forms in Early New English, cf. 1562 Cooper Answ. Priv. Masse 56 *Any Christian heart may rather yearn*)

*zeorn* 'yern(e)': (no *ee*-forms in Middle English) // a. 1300 Cursor M. 14638 (Gött.) ... *zarn haue i bene* (but 23588 Edinb. ... *now wit ras sa yerin*), c. 1425 Wyntoun Cron. v. vi. x 852 ... *þai wer full zarne*;

*leornian* 'learn': c. 1200 Orm 9309 *To leornenn lare att Sannt Johan*, c. 1449 Pecock Repr. i. xi. 58 ... *men and wommen ouzten leerne thei mowe leerne out of the Bible*, v. iii 496 ... *with leerned men* // a. 900 Andreas 483 *zif þu ... larna þinra este wyrþest*, 14 c. *larn* (dial.), 1833 Marryatt P. Simple (1863) 9 'You must larn to chaw baccy.'

*stierne* 'stern': 1382 Wyclif Ezek. xxxiv. 4 *Bot with steernesse ze comaundide to hem* ..., c. 1410 Hoccleve Mother of God 82 *Thogh that oure hertis steerne been & stoute*, a. 1500 Medulla Gram. *Austeritas steernesse or felnesse* // [No *ar*-forms, but cf. c. 1375 Sc. Leg. Saints xi. (Ninian) 167 *starn*, of *stern starn* 'star' dial.]

*heord* 'herd': (= 'shepherd') a. 1300 Cursor M. (Gött.) *Sua dos þe heirdes þat er gode*, c. 1386 Chaucer C. T. Prol. 603 *There nas bailiff ne hierde* [v.r. *herde*] ..., 1491 Caxton Vitas Patr. (W. de W. 1495) ii.227 b/2 *He founde a heerde or keper of Camels*; (= 'flock') c. 1440 Prompt. Parv. 236/2 *Heerde*, or *flok of beestys* ..., 1484 Caxton Fables of Æsop iii. vi *The wulf whiche is enemy of thy heerd*, 1526 Tindale Mrk v. 11 ... a *greate heerd of swyne fedinge* // [No *ar*-forms]

*reord(e)* 'rerd(e)': 1340 Ayenb. 211 *Lhord god yhyer mine bene and mine rearde*, c. 1480 Henryson Mor. Fab. v. 23 ... *he cryit with ane reird*, 1508 Dunbar Gold. Targe 241 *For reird it semyt that the raynbow brak*, 1721 Kelly Scot. Prov. 44 *A house with a Reek, and a Wife with a Reerd* ..., 1819 Hogg Jacobite Relics, Q. Anne vi *Then she ga'e a reirde* ... // [No *ar*-forms]

*eorþe* 'earth': c. 1200 Orm 8073 ... and he bigann *To rotenn bufenn eorþe*, c. 1450 Destr. Of Troy 8345 *He ... hurlit hym to hard yerthe* // a. 1500 Cov. Corp. Christi Pl. 38/79 *Apon the yarthe*, c. 1558 Becon Gov. Virtue Wks. 1564 I. 272 *Lyke an arthern potte* ..., 1688 Holme Armoury iii. xvii (Roxb.) 120/1 *The yarthing Hooke, or forke*... (also cf. *ea*-forms in Early New English: 1564 P. Moore Hope Health i. iii. 5 *The yearth is the loweste ... element*) [Note also a. 1225 (a 1200) Lay. Brut 6678 *Ne mihte he no longere libban on eærðe*]

(b) surviving as Modern English [ar > ɑ:], etc.

*cerlic* 'charlock': [No *ee*-forms] //a. 1440 Alphita 153/20 *kenekel uel carlokes*, c. 1440 Femina 29 *charlock*, c. 1440 Prompt. Parv. 62 *Carlok(e)*, *herbe, eruca*, a. 1450 Alphita (Anecd. Oxon.) 153 ... *anglice kenekel uel carlokes*, 1598 Gerard Herbal ii. ii §2.179 *Charlock* or *Chadlock*

*deorling* 'darling': 14-16th c. *deerling* // ?a. 1400 Chester Plays iii. 372 *And now farewell my darling deere* a. 1450 Yk. Pl. 187/79 ... *thy dere darlynges* ... a. 1500 (a. 1460) Towneley Pl. 44/138 ... *my darlyng*

*bern* 'barn': 1382 Wyclif Luke xii. 24 ... *to whiche is no celer nether beerne* ..., c. 1386 Chaucer Wife's T. 15 ... *Thropes, beernys, shipnes, dayrys* ..., c. 1475 in Wright's Voc. 274 *Orium, beyrne* // c. 1175 Bod. Hom. 74/26: ... *into þe wynsume bærne*, 1435 Doc. In Rec. B. Nottingham 2, 358 *For ye tawne dyke yat her barnes* ..., 1523 Fitzherb. Husb. §26 ... *more rowme in the barne* ..., Shakes. Temp. iv. 1. 111 *Barnes, and Garners, neuer empty* [Also cf. Orm 10487 *berrne*]

*dernan* v., *derne* adj. adv. 'darn' ('dern', obs.): c. 1200 Orm 9236 *All uncuþ & all dærne*, c. 1386 Chaucer Miller's T. 111 *Ye moste been ful deerne as in this cas* (but cf. 14 ... *derne love* ...) // 1205 Lay. 7694 ... *& heore grame dærnden* ..., 1584 S. Acts Jas. VI (1814) 305 (Jam) ... *and darne partes and placeis thairof*, 1600 J. Melvill Diary (1842) 318 *The enemies fled and darned*.

*zerd* 'yard': a. 1300 Cursor M. 5894 *þan tok aaron þis ilk yeird* ..., 1382 Wyclif Gen. xvii ... *of the ferthermore parti of zoure zeerde*, 1433 Rolls of Parlt. iv. 451 *Clothes ... holdyng xliiii yerdes in lenght, and yeerde brodeunwette*, c. 1450 Mirk's Festial 221 ... *þe zearde was grene as gresse* // c. 1425 Engl. Conq. Irel. 30 ... *of yardes and turues*, etc.

*heordan* Pl. 'hards' (also 'hurds'): ?a. 1366 Chaucer Rom. Rose 1233 ... *That not of hempe ne heerdis was* // 1375 Barbour Bruce xvii. 612 ... *And lynt and hardiss with brynstane*, 14.. Nom. In Wr.-Wülcker 696/9 *Hec stupa, a hardes*, a. 1825 Forby Voc. E. Anglia *Hards, coarse flax* [Also *u*-forms, e.g., 1398 Trevisa Barth. De P. R. viii. xliiii Tollem MS. ... *hurdes set þerto bep tende* ...]

*sweord* 'sword': [No *ee*-forms in Middle English] // c. 1485 Digby Myst. i. 540 ... *A sharpe Sward of Sorowe*. [Note *ea*-forms in Early New English: 1539 Bible (Great) Matt. xxvi. 52 ... *put vp thy swearde into hys sheath*, 1542 Udall Erasm. Apoph. (1877) 32 *Sweardes and kniues* ..., 1600 Breton Pasquil's Fooles-cappe xliiii ... *can finely weare his swearde*]

*feorþung* 'farthing': [No *ee*-forms in Middle English] // 1524 Test. Ebor. (Surtees) v. 181 ... *a farddyng loof*, 1562 J. Heywood Prov. & Epigr. (1867) 165 *She thinkth hir farthing good sylver*