OPEN SYLLABLE LENGTHENING BEFORE /t/ AND /k/ IN THE LANGUAGE OF *CURSOR MUNDI* – THE EVIDENCE FROM RHYME VOWELS

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ABSTRACT

Since Open Syllable Lengthening was a Middle English change, there is nothing particularly surprising in the fact that the results of its operation are visible in *Cursor Mundi*, itself a Middle English text. This paper argues, however, that it may have been possible for certain vowels to "opt out" of the process, provided they found themselves immediately before an alveolar or a velar fortis stop. That those vowels were Middle English /e/ and /a/, follows from the evidence offered by the rhymes.

0. Introduction

When compared with other well-known Middle English poems, *Cursor Mundi* seems to have been somewhat neglected by historical linguists, especially when it comes to the phonological aspects of its language. As a product of the time so abundant in various sound changes, the poem constitutes a rich source of scientific material for this type of research. That is why the present paper analyses the language of *Cursor Mundi* with respect to the course and the outcome of the Middle English Open Syllable Lengthening (henceforth MEOSL), bringing into focus the development of vowels immediately preceding an alveolar or a velar voiceless plosive, for, as a preliminary study has shown, the behaviour of vocalic nuclei in this environment did not fully comply with the standard descriptions.

With a view to gathering the necessary data, the British Museum Cotton Vespasian A. iii manuscript of the poem has been used, the choice of the corpus (nearly 30 000 lines) being motivated by a relatively low number of gaps in the text. During the investigation, particular attention has been devoted to rhyme vowels as to those that provide the most reliable information. It is the rhymes and the spelling that have been used as the criteria for establishing vowel length.

1. The Cotton MS. spelling conventions

The spelling in the Cotton Vespasian MS. of *Cursor Mundi*, irregular as it is, exhibits certain characteristic features, four of which have been especially important in the process of analysing the material and determining vowel quantity. One of those features is a typically Northern practice of using digraphs <ei> and <ai> for Middle English /e:/ and /a:/, respectively (see Kniezsa 1983: 45), where the second element of the digraph serves as a length indicator. Another two popular devices for designating vowel length used by the scribe are the doubling of a vocalic allograph, as in *saand* 'messenger' (OE *sand*) or *faand* 'to test' (OE *fandian*), and the use of the weak word-final <e> with the reference to the preceding open syllable nucleus (Mossé 1952 [1991]: 12). The shortness of a stressed vocalic segment is, in turn, commonly marked with the application of yet another scribal tool, namely a doubled consonantal grapheme placed immediately after a vowel the quantity of which it signifies.

Nevertheless, *Cursor Mundi* is a Middle English poem and as such it shows considerable confusion as far as orthography is concerned. Many lexical items appear in parallel forms, e.g., *gete/gette* (ON, *cf.* OI *geta*) or *tald/taald* (OE *tolde*, pret. of *tellan*), even though both variants represent exactly the same lexeme. In addition, geminates, if sporadically, occupy positions in which etymological reasons exclude the shortness of the preceding vowel (*cf. fotte* (OE *fōt*)). Finally, some vocalic elements, such as the one in *yeitt* (A *gēt*), seem to be double-marked for length, since the digraph <ei>, by convention corresponding to ME /e:/, occurs side by side with double <t> which, in turn, constitutes a clear sign of the nucleus being short. That is why spelling alone has been treated as a useful but by no means infallible base for interpretation.

The first part of the current paper deals with the background information concerning the poem under study. The second part, in turn, is devoted to the analysis of the collected material, followed by concluding remarks.

2. *Cursor Mundi*: General information

It seems generally accepted by language historians, that the original of *Cursor Mundi* came into existence towards the end of the 13th century, somewhere in the northern dialectal territory. However, while Hupe (1893: 187) points to North Lincolnshire as the place where the poem was composed, Murray (1868), Morris (1874-78) and Strandberg (1919) locate it in the area of Durham. Strandberg's argument for that district is based on the fact that the rhymes of the *Cursor Mundi* do not correspond to those of the North Lincolnshire writer, Robert Mannyng of Brunne (1919: xiv). Middle English Dictionary (MED) and Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English (LALME) do not seem to say anything of the provenance of the original. LALME, however, gives the West Riding of Yorkshire as the place of the origin of the Cotton Vespasian A. iii MS., which has served as the study sample.

Temporal location of the poem appears to arouse no fewer controversies than its geographical location. Several sources agree on the turn of the 13th century as the time when the work was compiled. Here Hupe (1893: 186) goes even further, suggesting the period between 1255 and 1280. As a justification of his claim, he gives two important events, namely: the expulsion of the Jews (1290) and the issue of a new silver coin called *a groat* or *a great penny*, of which there is no mention in the text. MED, on the other hand, proposes, even if with certain reservations, years 1325 as the time of composition of the original and 1400 as the date of the two MSS[1] it used as the source material.

2.1. Cotton Vespasian A. iii MS.: Date, provenance and scribes

Cursor Mundi, as stated by Hupe (1893: 62), has been preserved in ten manuscripts of various provenance, four of which, namely: British Museum Cotton Vespasian A. iii (C), Bodleian MS. Fairfax (F), Göttingen University Library MS. Theol. 107 (G) and Trinity College Cambridge MS. R. 3. 8. (T), have been critically edited and thoroughly analysed by Richard Morris between 1874 and 1878.

The Cotton Vespasian MS. "[...] is a folio-volume, vellum, which contains the completest version of the *Cursor Mundi* on 138 leaves, closely written in double columns, each of about 45 lines, in 3 different hands of the first half of the 14th century, and, in some passages, in a fourth hand of a later time. On 23 other leaves there are several 'Additions'" (Hupe 1893: 63). The first and second hands appear twice in successive order, with the third hand covering ll. 20065-21172. After l. 24383 the additions begin.

Written in the dialect of the West Riding of Yorkshire (LALME), the Cotton MS. exhibits three handwritings of evidently the same period but of different styles: the first hand belongs to the 14th century while the remaining two point to the 15th century. Hupe (1893: 125), however, accounts for the obvious discrepancy between the hands by assigning the first one to "an old man, who was very careful in transcribing an older copy to the letter, and only sometimes betrayed his old age, and the dialect which he then spoke". What is also known of the scribes is that, most probably, they were inhabitants of the same district. That it was North Lancashire, as Hupe (1893: 127) suggests, is supported by the language of insertions used where the manuscript was wanting.

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[1] British Museum MS. Cotton Vespasian A. iii and Göttingen University Library MS. Theol. 107.

3. The data (analysis)

The present section lists only those instances of the phonetic environment in question (existent in the Cotton MS. of *Cursor Mundi*), in which the stressed vocalic element was "MEOSL sensitive". The examples, numbered for later reference, have been arranged into subsections, the criterion for the classification being the consonant following the rhyme vowel. Loanwords of French origin have been largely disregarded for the lack of certainty as to the quantity of the accented nucleus.

3.1. MEOSL before /t/

3.1.1. ME /i/

1) How sal we o þis waters **weit** (OE *witan*)
    Quedir þai be fulli fallen **yeit** (A *gēt*)   *CM*: ll. 1875-1876

2) And al bot for an appul **bitt** (OE *bite*)
    þat godd for-bedd and þai it **ete** (pret. of OE *etan*) *CM*: ll. 28700-28701

What can be inferred from the rhymes under (1) and (2) is that the development of ME /i/ complied with the tendencies specific to the northern dialectal area (see Fisiak 1968: 28). That the vowel was lengthened and simultaneously lowered follows not only from the etymology, showing that each of the rhyming lexemes had a different vowel in OE, but also from the orthography, as illustrated by (1). The grapheme <i> in *bitt* must be an archaic spelling of /e:/, for the word-initial /e/ of *ete* (see Campbell 1959: 314) was historically long beyond a doubt.

3.1.2. ME /a/

3) His sun his wisdom es, þat **wat** (*OE wāt*)
    All thinges þat haldes **stat** (AF *state*)   *CM*: ll. 313-314

4) Sperd it was þe **yate** (Merc. *geatu*)
    ... In he did him **late** (OE *lǣtan*)   *CM*: ll. 15894, 15896

5) Ar he seluen it wald **yate** (ON *játta*)
    For-þi þan com he all to **late** (OE *late*)   *CM*: ll. 26950-26951

6) To men and wemmen bath i **wate** (pret. of OE *gewītan*)
    þat oft i helde my lightly **late** (ON, cp. OI *lād, lǣd*)
                                                        CM: ll. 28086-28087

On the basis of the data presented in (3)-(6), it is possible to assume that also the quantity of an open-syllable ME /a/ altered in keeping with the rules of the

process. Even though spelling is of no help in the interpretation of the examples given in 3.1.3., the etymology alone is enough to conclude that the vowel was lengthened.

3.1.4. ME /e/

7) In þe north side it sal be **sette** (p.p. of OE *settan*)
    O me seruis sal he non **gette** (ON, cp. OI *geta*)   *CM*: ll. 459-460

8) Bot now it es þis appel **etten** (p.p. of OE *etan*)
    And sua mi forbot es **for-geten** (p.p. of A *forge(o)tan*)   *CM*: ll. 873-874

9) If þou me dere flesse ani **gete** (ON, cp. OI *geta*)
    Gladli wald. I þar-of **ete** (OE *etan*)   *CM*: ll. 3603-3604

10) "Ioseph", sco said, "fain wald i **ete** (OE *etan*)
    O þis frut if I moght **gete** (ON, cp. OI *geta*)   *CM*: ll. 11669-11670

11) þe four torels on hei er **sett** (p.p. of OE *settan*)
    þe castel wit fra saut es **gett** (ON, cp. p.p. of OI *geta*)
                                                        CM: ll. 10005-10006

12) þat darworthli þai **grett** (pret. of OE *grētan*)
    ... A celer in at **ete** (OE *etan*)   *CM*: ll. 15206, 15208

13) eft be samen **mete** (from OE *mētan*)
    ... clenli yee sal **for-gett** (A *forge(o)tan*)   *CM*: ll. 15554, 15556

14) quer þou it has **for-gett** (p.p. of A *forge(o)tan*)
    ... I moght wit-vten **lett** (n. from OE *lettan*)   *CM*: ll. 15806, 15808

15) "I blisce þe, lauerd, þou me has **gett** (*getenn*, ON, cp. p.p. of OI *geta*)
    And sauf vnder þi winges **sett**;" (p.p. of OE *settan*) *CM*: ll. 17637-17638

16) þe Iuus wit þair envie and **hete** (OE *hete*)
    Has slain þair aun godd sa **grete** (OE *grēat*)   *CM*: ll. 18527-18528

17) First to prai and siþen at **ete** (OE *etan*)
    For þat time had he hunger **grette** (OE *grēat*)   *CM*: ll. 19833-19834

18) Þai þat war fild wit enst and **hete** (OE *hete*)
    Þat iþenli þair hertes **ete** (pret. of OE *etan*)   *CM*: ll. 23279-23280

19) My suernes me has don **for-gette** (A *forge(o)tan*)
    And many sinnes left **vn-bett** (p.p. of OE *bētan*)   *CM*: ll. 28370-28371

20) On fasten dai þat þe es **sette** (p.p. of OE *settan*)
þe mete þat þou þi-self suld **ete** (OE *etan*)   *CM*: ll. 29054-29055

The linguistic fate of ME /e/ is not as straightforward as that of the vowels discussed earlier. The sample provides strong evidence in support of the claim that the development of the segment in question did not depart from the expected course. The fact that the rhyming nuclei of (12), (13), (16), (17) and (18) historically differ in length, supports the hypothesis that the short ones could have been lengthened in the process of MEOSL.

At the same time, however, some equally convincing material seems to speak in favour of a completely different story. In (7), (11), (14), (15), (19) and (20) one of the rhyming vowels finds itself in a position prone to MEOSL, while the other one is etymologically short (except for (19) in which the root vowel was, most probably, shortened), its quantity also highlighted by the spelling. Therefore, what comes to mind almost immediately is that the change may have failed to operate. Consequently, it becomes possible that, when in open syllables, the lengthening of ME /e/ was optional. The number of occurrences with a lengthened vowel constitutes less than a half of all the instances where ME /e/ precedes /t/, as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. The number of tokens for OE /e/ > ME /ɛ:/ and OE /e/ > ME /e/

OE /e/ > ME /ɛ:/	OE /e/ > ME /e/	Total
5 (45.(45)%)	6 (54.(54)%)	11 (100%)

All the remaining evidence – supplied by (8), (9) and (10) – is, unfortunately, of hardly any use. Based on self-rhymes, it is, by its nature, inconclusive.

3.2. MEOSL before /k/

3.2.1. ME /a/

21) O laȝar ded laid under **lam** (OE *lām*)
How iesus raised his **likam** (OE *līc-hama*)   *CM*: ll. 193-194

22) Ne forþerward ne yeitt o **bake** (OE *on bæce*)
Bot þar he stod als still os **stake** (OE *staca*)   *CM*: ll. 7525-7526

23) Formast sant maria **spak** (pret. of OE *sp(r)ecan*)
And hir greting be-gan to **mak** (OE *macian*)   *CM*: ll. 11025-11026

24) Ioseph þan son to iesu **spack** (pret. of OE *sp(r)ecan*)
"Qui dos þou men sli plaint to **mak**..." (OE *macian*)
CM: ll. 11995-11996

25) to seke iesum wit **wrake** (ON, cp. OI *wracu*)
... na praier for him **make** (OE *macian*)   *CM*: ll. 16176, 16178

26) [And oþer xij that for hym **spake** (pret. of OE *sp(r)ecan*)
when they sought Iesu with **wrake** (ON, cp. OI *wracu*)
CM: ll. 17295-17296

27) Þourge þe holy goost I **spake**, (pret. of OE *sp(r)ecan*)
And seide þe lomb wiþouten **sake**... (OE *sacu*)   *CM*: ll. 17909-17910

28) Quen he ne sagh þis murning **mak**, (OE *macian*)
Sumthing to þe i wiss he **spak** (pret. of OE *sp(r)ecan*)
CM: ll. 24218-24219

The question of what happened to ME /a/, when before /k/, is complicated and no unequivocal answer can be offered at this point. Of all the examples cited under 3.2.1., (22) and (25) are of no significance for the purpose of this paper for they are self-rhymes and, as such, provide no relevant information. In the case of four other examples, namely (23), (24), (27) and (28), a twofold interpretation is possible. Since in each of the above quotations the vocalic element to be lengthened rhymes with a phoneme the shortness of which follows from its etymology, it would be reasonable to conclude that in this phonetic environment vowels did not undergo extension. On the other hand, given that all the quoted Pret. Sg forms of OE *sp(r)ecan* could be analogous with the Pret. Pl, where the vowel was long, one cannot exclude the possibility of lengthening completely. Upon careful examination, the sample turns out to contain only two instances of ME /a/ followed by a velar fortis stop ((21), where the stress is shifted in poetry rhyme, and (26)), in which a historically short nucleus rhymes with an etymologically long one, a clear sign of the former having undergone lengthening as a result of the quantitative change.

3.2.2. ME /e/

29) And I began hir louing **spek** (OE *spǣc, spēc*)
A thusand yeir moght I noght **reke** (OE *recan*)
CM: ll. 20025-20026

30) To funden be, sa sal he **sterck** (from nongeminate form of OE *streccan*)
Ouer hogh to lepe his hals to **brek** (OE *brecan*)
CM: ll. 22201-22202

Unfortunately, the small size of the corpus and the fact that only one of the rhyming pairs provides conclusive evidence make it impossible to draw any tenable conclusions concerning the quantitative development of ME /e/ in the environment under investigation.

4. Conclusion

From the point of view of geographical distribution, the origins of the MEOSL can be traced back to the northern dialect continuum (Wełna 1978: 75). Thus, it is only natural for the language of the Cotton Vespasian A. iii MS. of *Cursor Mundi*, the northernmost of all the manuscripts edited by Morris (1874-78), to show the results of the change in question, also in the phonetic environment under study. As the analysis of the data has proved, in two out of the five examined cases, namely ME /i/ and /a/ preceding an alveolar voiceless stop, the process operated in accordance with the general principles.

The manuscript exhibits, however, one instance of apparent divergence from what may be considered the regular path of development. As illustrated by the figures from Table 1, ME /e/ followed by /t/ did not undergo lengthening everywhere. Moreover, the number of tokens in which the stressed nucleus resisted alteration exceeds, even if slightly, that of the lexemes whose vowels extended their quantity. Indeed, the differences between the percentages for particular phonemes are clear enough not to regard them as purely coincidental. Therefore, what follows from the data presented in section 3.1.4. is that the MEOSL of ME /e/, when before /t/, may not have been obligatory. One alternative explanation for this behaviour could be the shortening of an etymologically long root vowel in the Preterite, as in (19), still before the operation of the process in question. Yet another reason could be that the rhyme conditions might not have been so stringent thus allowing one and the same word (*cf.* OE *etan*) to rhyme with items the root nuclei of which were of different length.

As regards the quantitative status of ME open-syllable /a/ and /e/ followed by a velar voiceless plosive, no valid conclusions can be drawn due to the general ambiguity of the data. Nevertheless, the behaviour of stressed vocalic elements in open syllables, as shown by the language of the Cotton Vespasian A iii MS. of *Cursor Mundi*, seems to suggest that the standard accounts of the change may be oversimplified or, at least, overgeneralised. However, for any final claims to be made further research is required.

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