

A BRIEF REJOINDER TO WRIGHT (1997)¹

HANS PLATZER

University of Vienna

0. Wright (1997: §1) continues the discussion concerning “the supposed homophonic clash between the reflexes of OE *scītan* ‘to shit’ and OE *scyttan* ‘to shut’”. While she agrees “that taboo is not a sufficiently powerful motive for ceasing to write <shit> and starting to write <shut>” (Wright 1997: §1.1c), she presents new spelling evidence that leads her to “conclude that one possible interpretation is that SHIT/SHUT never merged in spoken London English” (Wright 1997: §1.1c). In the following I shall subject some of the arguments that lead her to this conclusion to closer scrutiny. Her conclusion is ultimately based on spellings from the *Bridge House Accounts* (1479-1535). Wright (1997: §2 table 1) records the following five vowel spellings in SHUT over a span of 56 years (see below).

		<i>	<y>	<u>	<e>	<o>	
W. B. ²	1479-1481	3					
J.P.	1482-1487	5		1			
J.N.	1488-1501	12			1	1	
W.S.	1502-1521	3			14	5	
J.H.	1522-1535	6	3		5		
TOTAL		29	3	1	20	6	59
		(49%)	(5%)	(2%)	(34%)	(10%)	

¹ This rejoinder gives me the opportunity of adding some emendations. Three references should have appeared in Platzer (1996), viz. Lass (1987) and Samuels (1987a, b). I am very grateful to Roger Lass for pointing these out to me and for a discussion of my previous paper. The general points I make in Platzer (1996) are not altered by the arguments in Lass (1987) and Samuels (1987a, b), however, readers should disregard footnote 3 in Platzer (1996: 71). I am grateful to Laura Wright for providing the pre-publication manuscript of her article without which this immediate response would not have been possible. My thanks also go to Corinna Weiss for reading the first draft of this rejoinder.

² The following five scribes were responsible for the respective spellings: William Bouchier, John Pees,

1. On this basis Wright claims

that a temporary graphic merger ... doesn't have to indicate a temporary phonemic merger: It is possible that there was always a distinction between SHIT and SHUT, and that this was not maintained in writing, anymore than <lead> visually indicates a distinction between [li:d] and [led] today ... (Wright 1997: §3).

By analogy, therefore, she considers it possible that the <i> spellings listed above do not encode [ɪ] pronunciations which create a merger with SHIT but that <i> rather corresponds to either of the pronunciations [ʊ, ɛ, ə] (cf. Wright 1997: §3). Considering, however, that “[t]he normal repr[esentation] of OE *scyttan* is *shit(te)*” and that this is “the prevailing form down to XVI” (ODEE [1991]: s.v. *shut*), it would be counterintuitive indeed to assume that the “prevailing” spelling should not represent at least a reasonably close reflexion of the pronunciation at a time when spelling was far from standardized and naive spellings a far cry from the social stigmata they are now. And indeed Wright does not seem to deny the likelihood of a merger in areas other than London. It is just for London that she assumes the merger not to have taken place.³ However, her own evidence for London exactly mirrors that given by the ODEE. Her London <i> spellings are by far in the majority with 49% of all occurrences⁴ (see table above). Why then should the London <i> spellings not reflect [ɪ], when we assume that they do outside London?

2. The fact that five different vowel graphs are used for SHUT, viz. <i, y, u, e, o>, leads Wright to the conclusion that either

- the clerks all came from different parts of the country;
- the vowel in question changed position several times, ranging from front – back, high – mid;
- or that the vowel in question did not have a single settled graphic representation (for example [ʊ, ɛ, ə] and any one of <i>, <y>, <o>, <u> or <e> would do the job equally well (Wright 1997: §3).

Wright (1997: fn. 7) discards the first possibility on the basis that the “argument is circular” and that one should rather accept the spelling variation for what it is, viz. as “evidence of how several professional Londoners wrote the reflex

John Normavyle, Walter Smyth, John Halmer (Wright 1997: §3). However, Wright (1997: fn.6; orig. italics) adds that “[t]his does not mean that these individuals *certainly* wrote the relevant years’ accounts, as they could have delegated”.

³ “I conclude that one possible interpretation is that SHIT/SHUT never merged in spoken London English.” (Wright 1997: §1).

⁴ This percentage rises to 54% and the absolute majority if we add the <y> spellings on the basis that these “held the same value” (Wright 1997: §3).

of OE /y/, regardless of their ancestral origins”. I quite agree that it makes more sense to accept these London-based spellings on their own terms, which leaves us with possibilities two and three. The second one seems to include the option of a merger of SHIT/SHUT under [ɪ], as the vowel slot front, high appears to be included as one of the changing vowel positions. (I consider this point as the least likely, though.)

Her third possibility expressly excludes the option of a merger by only allowing the pronunciations [ʊ, ɛ, ə] for SHUT in London but not [ɪ]. If [ɪ] is excluded, however, I would like to examine more closely on which grounds any one of the other varieties is included. Two lines of argument are open: (i) [ʊ, ɛ, ə] are possible reflexes of OE /y/ by various canonized sound changes, viz. (a) /y/ > /u/ > /ʊ/, (b) /y/ > /e/, (c) /y/ > /u/ > /ʊ/ > /ə/ (> /ʌ/). (Each of these is associated with a specific dialect area, but due to – among other things – widespread migration, we may expect any of these pronunciations in London by c.1500 without necessarily emporting a dialectal tinge.) On these grounds however an [ɪ] pronunciation of SHUT must be logically accepted, too, because this is a possible reflex of a canonized sound change as well operating on OE /y/, viz. /y/ > /i/ > /ɪ/. (ii) The second line of argumentation specifically involves the reflexes of OE lexeme *scyttan* (and not OE phoneme /y/ in general as under (i)). The question here is: ‘What is our evidence that any of these canonized sound changes evoked under (i) actually operated on any of the records of SHUT up to Early Modern English?’ The evidence is again two-fold, viz. (iia) Early Modern English spelling evidence: Here again the basis is the same for each of the possible reflexes. We have spellings that suggest a correspondence between <u> ~ [ʊ], <i> ~ [ɪ], <e> ~ [ɛ] etc., so that if the correspondence between <i> ~ [ɪ] is considered as doubtful, we lose our basis for the other correspondences, too. (iib) Modern English (dialectal) pronunciations: the Modern pronunciations [ʃʊt], [ʃɛt], [ʃʌt] suggest that the corresponding sound changes given under (i) have indeed taken place and that we can take the Early Modern English spellings as additional evidence for this. Modern [ʃɪt] pronunciations for SHUT which would provide evidence that the canonized sound change OE /y/ > /i/ actually operated on SHUT are admittedly not as numerous as for the other varieties, but the SED (1968: 1061) does indeed record [ʃɪd,⁵ ʃɪt] for SHUT in three of ten⁶ Devonshire⁷ informers (i.e. 30%), or four re-

⁵ “... the occurrence of final [d] in SHUT is pres[umably] always accounted for by voicing before initial V. of an obj. EN/IT/HIM, which was often rec[orded] by the f[ield] w[orkers] ...” (SED 1968: 1060 n.1).

⁶ The total number of informers is eleven but informant #4 uses a lexeme other than SHUT. The relevant responses are: (1) ʃɛt; (2) ʃʌd, ʃʌt, ʃɛd [+ «ð-»]; (3) ʃɛt; (5) ʃɪd, ʃɪd [+ «ð-»]; (6) ʃʌd, ʃɪd [+ «d-»]; (7) ʃʌd, ʃɪd [+ «ð-»]; (8) ʃɛt, ʃɛt, ʃɪt; (9) ʃʌd; (10) ʃʏt; (11) ʃʏt, ʃʏt (SED 1968: 1061).

⁷ Devon is not normally regarded as the area where we would expect <i> reflexes of OE /y/, but according to Lass (1994: 54) “manuscript forms and place names show ... the [ME] east midlands type <i> [for OE /y(:)/] spreading westward into the south-west and west midlands”.

sponses of 18 (i.e. 22%). We therefore appear to possess exactly the same type of evidence for all the relevant spellings⁸ recorded by Wright so that it seems to me that we have no more (or as much of a) basis to doubt an [ɪ] pronunciation for SHUT in London than we have to doubt any of the other possible variants (except for the surviving one, of course).

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⁸ I ignore the six <o> spellings.