

METATHETIC AND NON-METATHETIC FORM SELECTION IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Metathesis, a specific phonological development consisting in an alteration within the sequence of sounds in a word was usually materialised in the development of English as a shift of a prevocalic consonant to a postvocalic position or vice versa. The change affected various classes of words: nouns (OE *brid* > *bird*), adjectives (OE *beorht* > *briht* 'bright', or verbs (OE *irnan* > *rinnan* 'run', etc.) This type of change, especially frequent in Northumbrian Old English, soon spread to other areas of England, showing a pattern typical of lexical diffusion. The paper concentrates on the metathesis of the liquid [r] and the adjacent vowel in the early periods of English. While only a very limited number of words with Old English metathesis survive into Modern English, those with Middle English metathesis have proved to be much more stable, retaining the metathetic form until Present-day English. The evidence of the available corpora, especially the OED, confirms the hypothesis of the change being rather abrupt than gradual.

1. Metathesis

On the level of phonology, metathesis consists in an alteration within the sequence of sounds which seems to be a reflection of "performance errors" (*cf.* Crystal 1980). In other words, it is a transposition of sounds and/or letters in a word (OCEL). Sometimes classified as belonging to the category of the slips of the tongue, metathesis is found to be a type of sound change especially common in child language. Erroneous metathetic sequences of sounds also develop in adult language, but their rise is governed by principles different from those responsible for errors in the language of children (*cf.* Drachman 1978).

Hogg (1977) distinguishes three kinds of metathesis, of which two can be traced in English. The first is labelled as "sporadic" (e.g. [sp] > [ps]; *wasp* : *wapse*) and as such is not rule-governed, the other, "regular", is best represented by the transposition of [r] and a vowel. In Germanic, metatheses, including

r-metathesis, belong to the earliest processes and are present in each language belonging to that family. The transposition of a postvocalic *r*-sound to the prevocalic position is also attested in other Indo-European languages, including Slavic (cf. Proto-Slavic *orsti > Russ. rosti 'grow'; Keyser 1975).

In English, the process is represented by the two basic modifications: (1) change of positions by a vowel and an adjacent consonant and (2) a mutual replacement of two items in a consonant cluster. In the former, prevocalic [r] moves to the position after the following vowel, especially when that vowel stands before [n] or [s], and, at a later date, before [d] in Late Northumbrian (cf. PGmc *rinnan > WS *irnan* 'run', PGmc *brunna- > OE *burna* 'bourn', ONhb *bird*/WS *brid* 'bird', etc.). Alternatively, the liquid [r] after a vowel is moved before that vowel, the latter change being frequent in late Old Northumbrian when the vowel stands directly before the cluster [xt], as exemplified by ONhb *wryhta* from *wyrhta* (cf. WGmc *wurhtjo- 'wright').

The other type of metathesis is a purely consonantal development in which items in a cluster exchange their positions. This again can be exemplified by two kinds of shift. The first affects the group [s] + a stop (cf. WS *āscian* [sk] > *āxian* [ks] 'ask' or *aesp* > *aeps*, but also *wæps* > *wæsp* 'wasp'), while the other is responsible for a change of places of a fricative ([f, θ, s]) plus the liquid [l]. Much more rare is the exchange of the elements in the clusters [sm, gn, kn, ns].

The present brief study will be only concerned with the former type, i.e. the metathesis of [r] and an adjacent vowel. Its aim is to adduce evidence when and how *r*-metathesis spread in Middle English. Another goal is to determine whether *r*-metathesis deserves to be assigned the status of a full-fledged phonological rule. Modern phonology postulates a systematic operation of a phonological change in a specified period of time. Sooner or later such a change affects all words containing an appropriate context.

2. Mechanisms of metathesis in English

The transposition of [r] and the vowel is by far the most frequent type of metathetic change in English. The effects of *r*-metathesis are found in the earliest Anglo-Saxon literature, throughout Medieval English, and also in the New English period. Like certain other consonantal changes, including assimilation, *r*-metathesis in Old English shows a number of distinct stages. According to Stanley (1952/53), the principle of rule ordering relevant to various phonological changes requires that metathesis in the earliest period of the history of English should be assigned to as many as four chronological stages, the first and the last in Anglian, the second (highly controversial) apparently in all dialects, and the third confined to West Saxon. Whether the details of such division are correct or not, Stanley's complicated scheme shows that metathesis cannot be treated as a change uniform chronologically and geographically.

Also, an explanation of the process as a mere changing of places by the liquid and the vowel, i.e.:

- 1) (a) VC > CV
(b) CV > VC

has been found less than satisfactory. Still, as a change which can only be explained in terms of abruptness hypothesis (cf. McMahon 1994: 49), the above simple pattern of the change became readily accepted by the confessors of generative phonology. As a reaction to (1) an alternative theory holds that what is regarded as an abrupt process of metathesis involves in fact a gradual change, i.e. an insertion of a vowel before [r] followed by a deletion of the vowel after [r] (cf. Hogg 1977, Blevins and Garrett 1998), which can be schematically presented as the following simple rule:

- 2) (a) CCVC > CVCVC
(b) CVCVC > CVCC

Evidence from English shows that such a complex process might have taken place. For instance, the change of the Old English past tense form *worht-* (cf. *wyrcan* 'work') to *wrought* involved vowel epenthesis, or insertion, followed by vowel deletion; cf.:

- | | | |
|----|------------------|-----------|
| 3) | Input | worht-e |
| | Vowel epenthesis | woroht-e |
| | Vowel deletion | wroht-e |
| | Output | wrought-e |

All the stages above are attested by Old and Middle English evidence, although the dates of citation do not always coincide with the chronological order in (3); cf.:

- | | | | |
|----|---------|--|---------------------------------------|
| 4) | 971 | Hælend ... þæt wundor worhte | (<i>Blickl. Hom.</i> : 19) |
| | c950 | ... seðe worohte from fruma woepen-monn & wifmonn
zeworhte hia | (<i>Lindisf. Gosp. Matt.</i> xix: 4) |
| | 1056-66 | Haward me wrohte | (Inscr. on Dial. Kirkdale, Ch. Yks.) |
| | 1455 | Wrought bordcloth cum j. pari towalles de eadem | (Lincoln Diocese Doc. 67 [A]) |

According to Lass (1978, cf. also Nakao 1986), derivation (3) requires the employment of yet another rule, a suprasegmental one, which would assign stress to the epenthetic vowel. This is in turn followed by a deletion of an un-

stressed vowel before [r]. Such processes are mainly found in Late Northumbrian, being rare in other dialects.

3. Sporadic and permanent metathesis of the sequence [rV]: The time dimension

The data embracing forms with and without metathesis in the available Old and Middle English corpora (OED, HC) create a very incoherent picture as regards the temporal and geographical distribution of the relevant forms. The critics of the rule-oriented theory rightly emphasise that metathesis is a process whose incidence is far from consistent. The evidence collected by the present author confirms such inconsistency in the selection of now the [rV], now the [Vr] variant.

As regards words with the original cluster [rV], their metathesised forms contain these two elements in a reverse order. In the account below first come those items in which the original sequence [r] + Vowel survives in Modern English, although they temporarily develop forms with metathesis, i.e. Vowel + [r], in Old or Middle English. Because such metathetic forms are lost in later Middle English this metathesis will be called here sporadic metathesis (SM), but the sense of the term is different from that in Hogg (1977).

List (5) includes words with the original sequence [rV] surviving in Modern English, but it also contains instances of sporadic metathesis which failed to survive into the Modern period. The list which disregards geographical conditioning only presents the distribution in time of the non-metathesised forms and the dates concerning sporadic metathesis; cf.:

5)	Non-metathesised	SM
<i>frost(y)</i> (OE <i>frost</i> < PGmc * <i>frustaz</i>)	700, 1300 >	900-1000, 1150-1300
<i>grass</i> (OE <i>græs</i> < PGmc * <i>grasam</i>)	700-1000, 1200 >	850-1000, 1300-1500
<i>run</i> (OE A <i>rinnan</i> < PGmc * <i>rin-/ren-/run-</i>)	700-750, 900, 1000, 1150, 1200 >	750-1000, 1100-1450
ENE <i>threst</i> (OE <i>þræstan</i> < PGmc * <i>þraist-</i>)	900, 1200 >	1200, 1350
<i>cress</i> (OE <i>cressa</i> < PGmc * <i>kras-j-on</i>)	950, 1150 >	1000, 1350-1650
<i>frog</i> (OE <i>frosk</i> < PGmc * <i>froskaz</i>)	1000, 1250 >	800 (? uncertain)
<i>wren</i> (OE <i>wrenna</i> < ? PGmc * <i>wren-</i>)	1000, 1200 >	700-750, 1000-1050
ENE <i>frist</i> (OE <i>frist</i> < PGmc * <i>fri-</i>)	OE (?), 1250 >	900-1000, 1150-1400, 1550
<i>fresh</i> (ME <i>fresch</i> < Rom. * <i>friscu-s</i>)	1200 >	900, 1250-1350

As said above, items in (5) are words in which the shift of a vowel from the position after [r] to the position in front of [r] proved ineffective in the long run. Interestingly, our evidence, limited as it is, shows that metathesis must have been a very early process in this category of words because the early occurrences of metathetic forms with [Vr] registered in the available corpora are chronologically very early, sometimes even earlier than the original forms without metathesis. Item (6) lists such first occurrences of forms with and without metathesis:

- 6) c893 [Eufrates] is mæst eallra **ferscra wætera** (K. Aelfred *Oros.* ii. iv §6)
 c1200 A33 himm birr? beon **fressh þærto** (*Ormin.*: 6348)
 a1000 Næs hit lengra **fyrst** (*Beowulf.*: 134)
 a1300 þe penis ... he broght, wit-vten **frest** (*Cursor M.*: 19225)

Curiously, words showing sporadic metathesis appear very early. Although some of them show strong consolidation between 1250-1400, they fail to survive into Modern English. Perhaps their disappearance can be connected with a tendency to preserve only those words in which postvocalic [r] was followed by a dental consonant, i.e. [n, t, d, s] (cf. Alexander 1985, who claims that the survival of the postvocalic [r] is determined by the feature [+coronal] of the consonant with which this [r] forms a cluster).

Other words with sporadic metathesis prevail in Early Middle English but their frequency decreases after 1400. A typical example is the case of ME *frost* whose metathesised form *forst* is found only sporadically after 1250, but is lost after 1400; cf.:

- 7) a700 *Gelum, frost* (*Epinal Gloss.*: 485)
 c900 ... & se winter wære grim & cald & **fyrstig**
 (tr. Bæda's *Hist.* iii.xiv.[xix.] (1890): 217)
 a1000 Se hearda **forst** (*Phoenix* 58)
 a1000 Hwilum hara scoc **forst** of feaxe (*Riddles lxxxviii.*: 8 (Gr.))
 a1123 Treow wæstmas wurdon þære nihte þurh **forste** swiðe for
 numene (*O.E. Chron.* an. 1100)
 c1175 Ic walde fein pinian and sitten on **forste** and on snawe up et
 mine chinne (*Lamb. Hom.*: 35)
 a1250 ... And bringeth **forstes** starke an stronge
 (*Owl & Night.*: 524)
 a1300 Manna ... fel fra lift sa gret plente, Als a grideld **frost** to se
 (*Cursor M.*: 6520)

A very similar pattern is revealed in the phonological evolution of the noun *grass* and the verb *run* whose metathesised forms survive until the 15th century, i.e. somewhat later than those of *frost*.

As regards the earliest occurrences of sporadic metathesis, item (8) adduces several forms from Old English; cf.:

- 8) a800 In deze onbead dryhten mildheortnisse his and on naeht
zebirhte (*Vesp. Ps. xli.: 9*)
c1000 ðeos wyrht ... þe man nasturcium, & oðrum naman cære
nemneð (*Sax. Leechd.: 1.116*)
c1000 Næs hit lengra fyrst (*Beowulf: 134*)
c858 IIII oxnum gers (*Charter of Aethelberht in OE Texts: 438*)
c825 He zæfaeh swe swe zisent to eardenne on wez
(*Vesp. Ps. xviii.: 6*)

Now, words in (5) will be confronted with another list where the metathesised forms with [V] + [r] replaced the original non-metathetic forms with [r] + [V]. Because words exhibiting the effects of such transposition are found in Modern English, the change under discussion is here termed "permanent metathesis" (PM); *cf.*:

9)	Non-metathesised	PM
<i>bird</i> (OE <i>brid</i> < PGmc *brid-)	800, 1000, 1100, 1200-1500	1000, 1200 >
<i>cart</i> (OE <i>cræt</i> < PGmc *krat-)	800, 1000-1050	1200 >
<i>third</i> (OE <i>þrida</i> < PGmc *þridjaz)	800, 950-1000, 1150-1500, 1550-1650, 1750	950, 1200, 1400 >
<i>thirteen</i> (OE <i>þreotiene</i> < PGmc *þri-)	900, 1000, 1200-1450, 1550-1700	1400 >
<i>thirty</i> (OE <i>þritig</i> < PGmc *þri-)	950-1050, 1150-1300, 1400-1500	1400 >
<i>burn</i> (OE <i>birnan</i> , -æ- < PGmc *bren-)	1150-1200, 1300-1500	750, 950-1000, 1150 >
<i>burst</i> (OE <i>berstan</i> < PGmc *brestan)	1250-1600, 1800-1900	1000-1100, 1250 >
<i>dirt(y)</i> (ME <i>drit</i> < ON <i>drit</i>)	1300-1450	1400 >
<i>curd</i> (LME <i>crud</i> -)	1350-1450, 1550-1700, 1850	1400, 1500-1650 >
<i>b(o)urn</i> (OE <i>burna</i> < PGmc *brunna-z)	1400	800, 1000, 1250, 1450 >

Judging by the dates, the consolidation of the metathesised forms belongs to the period between 1200 and 1400, when they distinctly grew in number. From the 15th century onwards they spread at the expense of the original non-metathetic forms. It should not pass unnoticed that the metathesised and non-metathesised forms of *bird*, *burn*, *burst* coexisted in Early Middle English, while those of the numerals *third*, *thirteen*, *thirty*, and the noun *curd*, in Late Middle English. As regards the remaining three words, *cart*, *dirty* and *bourne*, their non-metathesised forms were abruptly replaced by forms with metathesis.

4. Sporadic and permanent metathesis of the sequence [Vr]: The time dimension

The other group of words comprises those in which the original sequence [Vr] survives into Modern English, although some forms witness the transposition of these two segments. It should be noted that forms where [r] is preceded and followed by a vowel, i.e. with the sequence [VrV], are considered here as representing the sequence [Vr], not the reverse one. This list contains fewer instances than the parallel list (5) above; *cf.*:

10)	Non-metathesised	SM
<i>first</i> (OE <i>fyr(e)st</i> < PGmc *furist-az)	950, 1200, 1300 >	1300-1500
<i>thirst</i> (OE <i>þurst</i> < PGmc *þurstu-)	1000-1050, 1150-1250, 1350 >	1200-1600
<i>thorp</i> (OE <i>þrop</i> < PGmc *þurpam)	1100, 1300 >	600-700, 1000, 1200, 1350-1500

Of these three words, only *thorp* developed numerous metathetic forms very early in Old English, while the remaining two forms with the original sequence [Vr] show higher frequency only in Middle English. The behaviour of the other two words, *first* and *thirst*, is such as can be expected, that is their metathetic forms are recorded later than the original non-metathetic forms. As regards the archaic and dialectal verb *wurch*, from OE *wyrca* (< PGmc *werk-) 'work' which survived into Early Modern English, it shows rare metathesised forms cooccurring with forms devoid of palatalisation in the *Cursor Mundi*; *cf.*:

11)	a 1300	To wrik þare wik wil	(1229)
		To wyrk wondres	(2200)
		þi will to wirc	(25251)

The last group of words is that where the metathesised forms with [rV] displaced the original forms with [Vr] and have survived into Modern English. Here belong:

12)	Non-metathesised	PM
<i>through</i> (OE <i>þurh</i> < PGmc *þurx)	700-1050, 1150-1500	1300 >
<i>wright</i> (OE <i>wryhta</i> < PGmc *wurhtjo-)	700, 850-1000, 1200-1250	950-1050, 1200-1300, 1400 >
<i>wrought</i> (pt; OE <i>worht</i> < PGmc *wurxt-)	700, 800-1550	950-1000, 1200 >
<i>bright</i> (OE <i>beorht</i> < PGmc *berxtaz)	800-1000, 1100-1150	950, 1150 >
<i>fright</i> (OE <i>fryhto</i> < PGmc *furht-)	800-1000	1250-1350, 1450 >
<i>thresh</i> , -a- (OE <i>þerscan</i> < PGmc *þersk-)	800-950, 1100-1200, 1300-1350	1000, 1100, 1200 >
<i>through</i> n. (OE <i>þruh</i> < PGmc *þurh-)	900, 1200, 1300	700, 900-1000, 1300 >
<i>thrill</i> (OE <i>þyrlian</i> < PGmc *þyrhil)	1000, 1200, 1300-1500, 1600-1750	1250 >

This list lacks the noun *horse*, whose Proto-Germanic form is uncertain, although the reconstructed Germanic root *hurs- is highly plausible. The noun is absent here simply because the corpus under investigation contains no instance of metathesised *hros*-. List (12) includes several high frequency items from medieval English which show a successful transposition of segments surviving until our times. Here belong, first of all, the adverb *through*, the noun *wright* with the related preterite *wrought*, and the adjective *bright*. It is to be noted that while metathetic and non-metathetic forms of *through*, *thresh*, *thrill*, *wright*, *wrought* cooccurred, especially in the 12-14th centuries, the remaining three words, i.e.

bright, fright and the noun *through* show complementary distribution in time, with metathetic forms abruptly succeeding forms without metathesis.

The above data confirm that metathesis cannot be dated with any precision. Traces of its operation are seen in the earliest Anglo-Saxon texts in one group of words, while words in another group are affected by that process in Late Middle English or even in Early Modern English. Nevertheless such a peculiar development can be regarded as an instantiation of lexical diffusion, with changes in various words scattered in time.

5. r-Metathesis: Space dimension

The present section discusses the distribution of the change in space. It is generally believed that metathesis was originally a phenomenon confined to Anglian, especially Northumbrian. Our evidence confirms this but several interesting observations can be made with reference to the question which type of metathesis, permanent or sporadic, belongs to Anglian.

The data in the OED corpus from the earliest Mercian texts, the *Early Glossaries*, i.e. *Epinal* (1. 7th c.), *Erfurt* (9th c.) and *Corpus* (e. 8th c.), and the *Vespasian Psalter* contain 28 items with the sequences [Vr] and [rV], of which 12 (c. 35%) show metathesis. But the 11 cases out of the total number of 12 are instances of sporadic metathesis (*throp, yrn, werna*), the only form representing permanent metathesis being the noun *burne*; cf.:

13) a800 *Latex, burne* (*Corpus Gloss.* (O.E. Texts): 1185)

An analogous sample from a Northumbrian text, the *Lindisfarne Gospels* (1. 10th c.), contains 24 items with the relevant [rV/Vr] sequences, of which 8 items (33%) show metathesis. The verb *iorn* 'run' (4 instances) represents sporadic metathesis, while the remaining three words represent cases of permanent metathesis (*third* 2, *breht* 1, *wriht* 1); cf. the following examples:

14) c950 zif on ða ðirdda wacan ze-cymeð (Luke xii.: 38)
 zelic ða æftera ... & ðe ðirda [Rush. **pridde**] (Matt. xxii.: 26)
Brehtnise from monnum ne onfoe ic. (John v.: 40)
 Wundrande þæt lar & mæhto ðæs **wrihtes** sunu *vel* smiðes sunu
 (Mark, Introd.: 3)

The evidence of metathesis in West Saxon comes, first of all, from the works of King Alfred. The OED corpus data contain 30 instances of forms with the [rV/Vr] sequence, of which 17, i.e. more than 50%, show forms with metathesis, prevailingly those of the verb *irman* 'run' and its variants. However, this dialect fails to reveal items showing permanent metathesis. Such evidence is also missing in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, where a sample of 9 items contains only 1 in-

stance of metathesis (sporadic), nor is it found in the West Saxon *Blickling Homilies* (6 items, no metathetic forms). Only Late West Saxon (Aelfric) supplies a modest number of forms with metathesis (4 instances of permanent metathesis among 19 words containing the [rV/Vr] sequence); cf.:

15) c1000 ze zehirdon his word & zesawon þone munt **birnan**
 (Deut. v.: 23)
 His [Herod's] lichama **barn** wiðutan mid langsumere hætan
 (Hom. in Sweet *Ags. Read.*: 92)
Latex, burna (*Voc. Suppl.* in Wr.-Wülcker: 177)
 And write þa on þinum **prescolde** (Deut. vi.: 9)

The evidence of Kentish Old English is not discussed here for lack of more substantial text samples. Suffice to say that the small sample from the *Kentish Glosses* containing 4 instances of the [rV/Vr] sequences contains only one form with sporadic metathesis (the verb *irman*). In sum, as regards Old English, metathesis is considered a substantial part of the process of phonological change in Northumbrian, where cases of permanent metathesis are more prominent (4 instances) than in Mercian (1 instance) in comparable samples.

The Middle English data abound in cases of metathesis. Because the North of England is considered the area where metathesis was most prominent, it comes as some surprise that the *Cursor Mundi* (c. 1300), a text representative of that region, contains proportionally the same percentage of cases of metathesis as Chaucer's works (see below). But characteristically, the sample under discussion from the *Cursor Mundi* (52 [rV/Vr] items) contains only cases of permanent metathesis (13 in all):

16) [Delilah] þæt **birde** [v.r. bride, bryde, bruyd] was biddande bald (7131)
 Qua-sum on suilk a **bird** [Jesus] wald thinc [Gött. brid] (9811)
 He ... cuppel did his **cartes** all (6220)
 A gold ringe þæt **brihtly** schane (3320)
 þis angel þæt sa **bright[e]** scan (8295)
 þæt castel **brightnes** ... Ouer al. þæt curt on lenght and brede (9933)
 Ioseph þæt was ful o pite Did **thresche** on in þæt contre (Cott.: 4744)
 þe fester **thrild** his bodi thurgh (1824)
 Of his ded als þe sorful ord Sal **thril** þin hert thoru als a suord (17738)
 þis drithin ... in his witte ... all purueid His werc, als dos þe sotill **wright**
 (325)
 þis **wright** þæt I spek of here ... wroght bath erth and heuen (331)
 A schippe be-houes þe to dight, þi self sal be maister **wright** (1666)
 First þan **wroght** he angel kind (362)

The sample below (17) of one of the most important East Midland texts, the *Ormulum*, written in North Lincolnshire (NEM) contains 14 spellings with metathesis (in the total of 27 [rV/Vr] forms), 9 of which are cases of permanent metathesis:

- 17) þatt illke chaff þatt helle fir shall **bærnenn** (1529)
 Haliz Gast is haliz fir, þatt **bærneþþ** i þatt herrte (10452)
 Alls iff þe33 **karrte** wærenn of wheless fowwre (48)
 Hit swiþe **brihhte** shineþþ (2138)
 þa **presshesst** tu þin corn wiþþ fle33 (1500)
 þa winndwesst tu þin **þrosshenn** corn (1530)
 þatt all þatt shaffte þat wass **wrohht** Wass lif inn himm þe wrihhte (18780)
 Godd ... þatt alle shaffte **wrohhte** (2256)
 Ic hafe hemm **wrohht** tiss boc (Ded.: 153)

That metathesis was not merely confined to northern East Midland is confirmed by the high percentage of its occurrence in the *Trinity College Homilies* (12th c., Huntingdonshire; South-East Midland), where among 12 instances of forms with [rV/Vr] one can identify as many as 8 forms with metathesis, 5 of them being cases of permanent metathesis (*burn* 2x, *bright* 2x, *wright* 1x). Finally, the language of Chaucer, who lived in 14th century London, the capital city situated in the very south of East Midland, contains relatively numerous metathesised forms. In the total of 45 forms with the sequences [rV/Vr] one can identify 3 forms with sporadic and as many as 11 forms with permanent metathesis; cf.:

- 18) They passeden sorwfully the **thresshfold**
 (Boeth. i. pr. i. 3 Camb. MS)
 Pheton wolde lede Algate hys Fader **Carte** (H. Fame: 943)
 ... ffor sekyrly his face schon so **bryhte** (L.G.W.: 163)
 Phebus deyed hadde hire tresses ... I-lyk to þe stremes of his **borned** hete
 (Doctor's T.: 38)
 A **carte** ful of donge ther shalt thou see (Nonnes Pr. T.: 200)
 He wolde **thresshe** [v. rr. throshhe, þressche] and... (Prol.: 536)
 And as sche wolde ouer þe **presshewolde** gon
 (Clerk's T.: 232 (Landsd.))
 But right anon a thousand peple in **thraсте** To saue the knyght
 (Doctor's T.: 260)
 He thurgh the thikkeste of the throng gan **threste** (Knt. s T.: 1754)
 Ful many an hethen **wroghtestow** ful wo (Monk's T.: 403)
 The altitude of the Mone, or of **brihte** sterres (Astrol. ii. §2)

The West and the Southwest are here represented by two text samples, (a) Langland's *Piers the Plowman* (14th c., but surviving in 15th c. MSS; West Midland) and (b) the writings of Robert of Gloucester (1297). Metathesised forms in both texts amount to around 30% in Langland (7 cases of permanent and 5 cases of sporadic metathesis in the total of 34 items), while in Robert of Gloucester the proportion is higher (11 metathetic forms, including 5 instances of permanent metathesis) in 24 forms potentially subject to metathesis; cf.:

- 19) (a) He beot so þe Boyes he **barst** neih heore Ribbes
 (A. vii.: 165)
 He þrompelde atte **þrexwolde** [v.rr. þresshewold, þreschfold,
 throshfold] and þreuh to þe grounde (A. v.: 201)
 He thumbled at þe **þreshefold** (C. vii.: 408)
 A belle of brasse Or of **briste** syluer (B. Prol.: 168)
 Some time I sowe and some tyme i **thresche** (B. v.: 553)
 In **presshyng**e, in þecchyng, in thwytyng of pynnes
 (C. ix.: 199)
 Sholde no wryzt **worche** (C. xx.: 137)
 (b) þe suerde hii nome ... & **barste** mony a sselde (437)
 Atte laste þoru stronge dundes hys suerd **berst** atuo (460)
 Hii **barnde** hous & other god, & defouled louerd & hine
 (511)
 ... Of mules, of **cartes**, and of hors mydde alle gode (189)

As regards Kentish, here represented by Dan Michael's *Ayenbite of Inwit* (1340), the rather modest sample of 9 items contains 2 forms with permanent and 1 with sporadic metathesis:

- 20) Hi zyeþ **bristliche** ... and al. aboute ham (150)
 Grat nyed þet þe man zyzy **bryte** ane his left half (156)

The above data show clearly that in Middle English metathesis was not confined to one geographical area, but is evidenced over all territory of England. The rather high proportion of metathesised forms in the non-Northern areas makes it clear that metathesis ceased to be a local phenomenon.

6. Final statements

As regards metathesis in medieval English, the following general remarks can be made with reference to its occurrence:

- (1) The distribution pattern of metathesis in time and space makes it possible to postulate that the spread of that change agrees with the principle of lexical diffusion. Evidently, not all words were subject to its operation

because numerous items like *thrift* (ON *thrift*) failed to develop metathetic forms. On the other hand, metathesis in certain common words (e.g. *horse*) is extremely poorly documented.

- (2) The hypothesis of the gradual character of the change is not confirmed by the present data. The alleged intermediate forms with [r] flanked by vowels, like OE *fyrihtu* 'fright', are extremely rare and testify to a very sporadic character of vowel insertion in words belonging to our corpus.
- (3) Cases of sporadic metathesis distinctly prevail over cases of permanent metathesis in Old English. With time the situation changes and forms with metathesis become permanently established in Middle English and later.
- (4) As regards dialectal distribution, metathesis, which originally may have been a northern phonological rule, became a common process all over the country in Middle English.

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APPENDIX

Selected pairs of forms with or without metathesis coexisting in the same text or author

(1) Sporadic metathesis rV (> Vr) > rV (*fresh, grass, run*)

Robert of Gloucester

1297 Engelsond ys ful ynou ... Of salt fysch and eche **fresch**, and fayre ryueres þer to (1724; 1)

An hondred knyghtes, þur **fersse** & sound (1724; Rolls, 397)

þe terus **ronne** doun (Rolls, 800)

He **arnde** Vpe a lute hul (Rolls, 6202); Wepinde hii armed horn, þe teres **orne** adoun (Rolls, 8371)

Battle Abbey Customals (1887)

c1300 *Et vocatur ista arrura *grasacra.* (60)

Praeter **Garsacram** operandam. (66)

Ags. Ps. (Thorpe)

c1000 Ic on wisne wez worda þinra reðne **rinne** (cxviii. 32); Swa meoluc ... **zerunnen** (cxviii. 70)

Swa swa zizant **yrnð** on his wez (xviii. 6); His word **yrne** wundrum sniome (cxlvi. 4)

O.E.Chron. (Laud. MS.)

a1122 Swa swa þæt wæter **renneð** to ... Norðburh (an. 656)

Sume **urnon** in to cyrcean. (an. 1083)

Orm

c1200 An bucc **rann** þær awez (1364)

He ... let itt **eornenn** forþwiþþ (1336); Ure wukeda33 Bi twellfe timess **erneþþ** (13183)

Layamon

c1205 His scipen **runden** swiðe (1349)

Hamun **arnde** upwarð (9296); Summe heo gunnen **urnen** (24696)

Moni þusen den **prasten** ut of telden (23372); þer after comen **prasten** þritto þusen(d) anan (26633)

He com him baften and imong al. þan þrunge þærsten him in þan ruge (30853)

In *E.E.P.* (1862)

a1300 Is fete sul **ren** of blode (4)

As bestis þat wer wode a-3e opir to **erne** her and þare (9)

Be-hold ... how þe stremis **erniþ** of is swet blode (20)

King Horn

c1300 Faste after horn he **rende** (O, 1319)

Efter horn he **ernde** (L, 1239)

King Alisaunder

13.. They **rannen** thoroughout the contray (W, 565); Quyk away he is **ronne** (W, 896)

Ac a kni3th þer cometh **arnyng** (Laud MS, 2098)

In Wright *Lyric P.*

a1310 Whose ryht redeth **ronne** to Johon (v. 26)

Out of thin huerte **orn** the flod (xviii 58)

Prose Psalter

a1325 3yf þou sest a þef, þou **ran** wyþ hym (xlix. 19)

Ichauē **vrnen** þe wai of þy comaundementz (cxviii. 32)

Langland *Piers Plowman*

1377 Wilde bestes ... **rennenge** with-out croperes (B xv. 453)

Water ... **ernynge** out of mennes eyen (B xix. 376)

Sir Ferumbras

c1380 þan **runne** þai away & saide alas (2438)

Quiklich in-to a tour he **orn** (3893)

Trevisa *Higden* (Rolls)

a1400 ... and took hem wiþ swifte **rennyng** (iv. 167)

þe brook ... **eorneth** in to þe valey of Iosephat (I. 115)

Promptorium Parvulorum

c1440 **Rennyn**, or lepyn, *curro* (429/2), **Ronnon**, as mylke, *coagulatus* (436/2)

Ernyn, as horse, *cursito* (142/2)

(2) Permanent metathesis rV > Vr

Ags. Gosp.

c1000 Twa turtlan oððe twezen culfran **briddas** (Luke ii. 24) [Hatton briddes] **birdas** [Lindisf. & Rushw.]

Cursor Mundi

- a1300 [Anticrist] þat ilk warlau **bridd** (22381)
 Qua-sum on suilk a **bird** wald thinc (9811)
 Vs telles of adam þis story Of sones he had ful þretty (Fairf. 1216)
 ... **thritti** (Cott.)

Gesta Romanorum

- c1440 A serpent-made his nest... and broçt forthe his briddis there (i. vii .16)
 [Mary] þat blisful bird of grace (i. vii.10077)

Orm

- c1200 and **brenn** it all till asskess þær (1468)
 þatt illke chaff þatt helle fir shall **bærnenn** (1529)

St. Brandan

- c1300 This tapres **brende** longe y~nou3 (335)
 Hou this tapres **berneth** thus (337)

Barbour *Bruce*

- 1375 [He] **brynt** hous and tuk the pray (xiii. 737)
 Of his mençe sum send he For till **burne** townys twa or thre (xv. 438)

Chaucer

- c1385 Desyr That in his herte **brende** as any fer (*L.G.W.*: 1747)
 c1386 I-lyk to þe stremes of his **borned** hete (*CT, Doctor's T.*: 38)

Lydgate

- 1430 This bufo ryght anone Through myght ther of **brusteth** euen a twain
 (*Chron. Troy* i. vi)
 1413 ... tyll the cordys **borsten** of the balaunce (*Pylgr. Sowle* v. xi (1483))
 c1430 For him I **brenne** as doth the glede (*Chron. Troy* i. v)
 They have espyed ... i-graven, in lettris of **bourned** gold, Maria (*Min. Poems* (1840) 65)

Trevisa *Barth. de P. R.*

- 1398 Quycke syluer **cruddeth** not by itself kyndly wythout brymstone (xvi. vii. (1495) 555)
 Mylke rennyth and **curdyth** ... and the wheye is departed therfro (xix. lxxvi. (1495) 906)

(3) Sporadic metathesis Vr > (rV) > Vr

Cursor Mundi

- a1300 Sampson, þi **first** wijf lerd þe witte (Cott. 7219)
 Wid þe grete maistris þus he badd Till mari had hir iornai made, þan at
 þe **frist** on him toght scho
 (Gött. 12605)

Langland

- 1362 For lewede, for lerede, for laborers of **propes** [v.rr. ... **þorpes**] (*P.PI.* A ii. 47)
 1377 þat she **furste** & formest ferme shulde bilieue (*Piers Pl.* B 116)
 1399 þey ffolwith þe vois at þe **ffrist** note (*Rich. Redeles* iii. 56)

Orm

- c1200 þatt ma33 þe slekken wel þin **þirrst** (14602)
 All his hunngerr & his **þrisst** Shall ben þurh Drihhtin slected (5688)

Promptorium Parvulorum

- c1440 **Thyrste**, or **thyrste**, *sitis* (491/2)

Tho(r)pe, **thrope**, lytylle towne (492/1)

Chaucer

- c1381 The kok that orloge is of **thorpis** lyte (*Parl. Foules* 350, MS. Gg. 4. 27)
 c1386 Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures, **Thropes** ... (*CT, Wife's T.* 15)

(4) Permanent metathesis Vr > rV

Lindisfarne Gospels

- c950 **Brehtnise** from monnum ne onfoe ic (John v. 40)
 God **zeberhtnade** hine on hine seolfne (John xiii. 32)

Ahne ðis is smið uel **wryhte**, sunu Maries? (Mark vi. 3)
 Wundrande þæt lar & mæhto ðæs **wrihtes** sunu ... (Mark, Introd. 3)

Ælfric

- c1000 And dippað ysopan scaft on þam blode, þe ys on þam **þerxholde**
 (*Exod.* xii. 22)
 And write þa on þinum **þrescolde** (*Deut.* vi. 9)

Cursor Mundi

- a1300 Thomas ... soght þat estrin thede, And **thirlid** intil haipen-hede (Cott. 21098)
 þe fester **thrild** his bodi thurgh (11824) ... þe sorful ord Sal **thril** þin
 hert thoru als a suord (17738)
 All þe cunthre **thurght** (Gött. 11070)
 þe sune beme gas **thru** þe glas (Gött. 11229)

Hampole Psalter

- a1340 þi wordis ere sharpe þat thirlis mennys thoghtis (xliv. 7)
 þe fors of fire of luf ... þat makis his prayere to thrill heuen (iii. 4)

Trevisa

- 1398 Not **thyrillyd** nother hoolyd (*Barth. De P.R.* xvii. cxcvi. (1495) Xiv b/1)
 1397 A grym strook of listnyngre ... **prulled** þe wal (*Higden* (Rolls) VII. 349)

O.E. Martyrol.

- a900 þa þesomnodon þa sticceo hi in þa **þruh**, **þurh** þa þe þæt wæter fleow
 (2 Sept.)

Robert of Gloucester

- 1297 & regnede þritti zer wel **þor** [v. rr. þoru, þurgh, thorough, **þrough**] alle
 þinge (Rolls 681)

William of Palerne

- c1350 Mi wicked eyizen ... lad myn hert þrouz loking þis langour to drye
 (459)
 þourh zour help (4219)

Destruction of Troy

- c1400 Mony shalke **purgh** shot with þere sharpe gere (6780)
Thurgh lemys of light (1129)

Caxton Sonnes of Aymon

- c1489 He shoued hym **thorughe** and thorughe his body (i. 56)
 He shoved his swerde **thrughe** & thrughe his body (xiv. 346)