

MIDDLE ENGLISH *SHĒ*

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It is almost generally accepted that the ME form *shĕ*, which appears first in the East Midland dialect, continues the OE forms *hēō/seō* (later *sīō*) (Mossé 1952). It is assumed that the sequence /io/ changed into /jo/, probably under Scandinavian influence, thus creating proper conditions for the palatalization of /s/, i.e., /s/ changed into /š/. Some scholars (Vaček 1964) propose the following development: [hj-] (cp. *zhō*) > [ç-] > [š-]. Such explanations, although possible from a strictly phonetic point of view, have one serious drawback (apart, of course, from the interpretation of <io> in *sīō*), namely, at that time there was no palatalization, and the initial /s/ in French borrowings, like *sugar*, became /š/ much later. Similarly, the sequence of changes [hj-] > [ç-] > [š-] was not a regular change in Middle English. Moreover, it remains to be answered why /io/ changed into /jo/, but /iu/, e.g., *Tuesday*, did not become /ju/ at the same time. Disregarding minor differences (cf. Stevick 1969), all these theories have one thing in common: according to them the /š/ in *shĕ* is due to a phonetic process. We would like to show that it is the result of a phonemic process (Zabrocki 1960: 183 - 184). In Old English there were two distinct forms: *hē* and *hēō*, no matter how one interprets the digraph <ēō>. In Middle English these two forms fused, yielding at least in the Northern and East Midland area *hē* and **hē*. In other dialects (except Middle Kentish) where <ēō> represented either a rounded vowel or a back spread vowel (Reszkiewicz 1971) forms with initial /š/ do not appear. Northern and especially East Midland forms with initial /š/ were introduced in order to preserve a distinction in a vital place of the language system, i.e., the distinction between the masculine and the feminine pronouns. One of them had to be changed; the masculine pronoun *hē* had a long tradition, and therefore it was the feminine form **hē* that underwent the process of differentiation. All the possibilities that could lead to a differentiation of the pair: *hē*/**hē* will be considered.

The dropping of the initial consonant.

This change could have been prevented by the morphological plane; the *h*-less forms appeared only in the weakly stressed position, e.g., *a* "he" and *a*, *it* "it".

Moreover, this change was not possible because of the existence of *ē* (from OE *eā*) "water". Since the phonemic status of ME *ē* and *ē* is not quite clear (Dobson 1957), the difference between these two will be disregarded.

The change of the vowel.

The change could have been blocked by the existence of such forms as *hē*, *wē*, *yē* and also *thee* (*tē*), *mē* with final /e:/, which formed a sort of pattern in the pronoun-system (but Nth *schō* and EM *zhō*). Apart from the pressure of the system there were also forms like *hei* (from OE *hēah*) "high", *hew* (from OE *hēow*) "hew", *howe* (from OE *hoga*) "thought", *hawe* (from OE *hāwen*) "dark grey", and the diphthong /oj/ appeared almost exclusively in words of foreign origin.

The change of the consonant.

At the end of the 12th century the consonant system of the EM dialect was perhaps as follows: /p b t d k g ʧ ʤ f θ s ʃ x m n l r w j/ (Fisiak 1968).

Here the possibilities were limited by the existence of the following forms:

<i>pēcok</i> , <i>pē-henne</i> "peacock, pea-hen"	(<OE <i>pāwa</i> , <i>pēa</i>)
<i>bē(n)</i> "to be"	(<OE <i>beon</i>)
<i>tē(n)</i> "to draw"	(<OE <i>tēon</i>)
<i>tē</i> "you". Encl. of <i>thee</i> . Obj. case	(<OE <i>þē</i>)
<i>dē</i> "die"	(<OFr <i>dé</i>)
<i>dē-th</i> "he does"	(<OE <i>dēþ</i>)
<i>fē</i> "cattle, money"	(<OE <i>feoh</i>)
<i>thee</i> "you". Obj. case	(<OE <i>þē</i>)
<i>sē</i> "that, the"	(<OE <i>sē</i>)
<i>sea</i> "sea"	(<OE <i>sēa</i>)
<i>hē</i> "he"	(<OE <i>hē</i>)
<i>mē</i> "me"	(<OE <i>mē</i>)
<i>ne</i> "not"	(<OE <i>ne</i>)
<i>wē</i> "we"	(<OE <i>wē</i>)
<i>yē</i> "you". Pl.	(<OE <i>gē</i>)

Thus the following empty places with initial /k g ʧ ʤ f θ s ʃ x m n l r w j/ remained. Out of these /k g/ appeared rarely before front vowels in native words; /ʧ ʤ/ had low frequency. The possibilities of the change of the initial consonant were then limited to /ʃ l r/ /cp. also *le* "lo!"/.

/ʃ/ was chosen because it required the least articulatory effort (Zabrocki 1960), and it is less complex in terms of distinctive features (Chomsky and Halle 1968) than /l r/. The phonetic similarity to the /s/ of *sō* could have played some role,

too, but the change was not a simple phonetic change, i.e., neither the palatalization of /s/ nor the sequence [h]- > [ç] > [s-]. Such changes do not fall under regular pattern of the changes in the Early Middle English period. The /ʃ/ in *shē* appeared as the result of a phonemic process which took place because communication was endangered in a very important part of the language system.

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