

7.3 Qualitative changes in ME

7.3.1 Short vowels: DIZZY-BUSY, FURY-BURY, MERRY-MIRTH

This section addresses the major qualitative shifts of the short vowels from Old to Middle English, summarised in Figure 7.4.

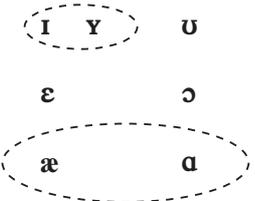
Late Old English	Late Middle English	Examples ⁴
 i y u ε ɔ æ a	i u ε ɔ æ/a	OE [synn] ME [sɪn] 'sin' OE [θæt] ME [θat] 'that'

Figure 7.4 Short vowel changes from late OE to late ME

Three of the stressed short vowels, [ɛ], [ʊ] and [ɔ], remained relatively stable in most environments: OE *lettan* – ME *let(en)* 'hinder, let', OE *botm* – ME *bot(te)m* 'bottom', OE *full* – ME *ful* 'full'. The hedge 'in most environments' is because coda [-ŋg], or single or covered nasal codas, had the effect of raising the nuclear mid vowels, so LOE <-eng> and <-ong> were raised to <-ing> and <-ung>. Thus we find early fourteenth-century rhymes such as OE *genge*, ON *gengi* 'troop', ME *gyng*, rhyming with *coming*, *kyng*, EModE *weng(e)* < ON *vængr* 'wing' rhyming with gerunds in *-ing*.⁵ Only the front vowel raising is attested reliably in the orthography because of the ambiguity of <o> and <u> spellings before <n>, so OE (*on*)*gemang* ~ *gemong* 'among' appears in ME spelling with <-ong>, rarely <-ung>, but the [-uŋg] value can be inferred from its later pronunciation: *among* rhymes with *lung*, OE *lungen*, not with *strong* < OE *strang* ~ *strong*.

The most notable example of the raising of the front mid vowel is the adjective and noun *English*, for which there are no <ing-> spellings in OE, but in LAEME's thirteenth-century database we find twenty-two tokens of *Inglis(s)*. Other items in this set are ON *vængr* > ME *wenge* ~ *winge* 'wing', ON *flengja* > ME *flengen* ~ *flingen* 'fling', AN **vencir*, OFr *guenci(e)r* > ME *wincen* 'wince', OFr *enque* > ME *enke* ~ *ink* 'ink'. The raising of <-en(C)> > <in(C)> started in early ME, continued into EModE (late ME *lenger* > EModE *linger*), and is mirrored by the PIN-PEN merger throughout the American South, in southern California, central Ohio, Kansas and elsewhere in the US. ☐

⁴ The examples cover only vowels which underwent some qualitative changes from OE to ME.

⁵ For more examples of rhymes showing raising before nasals see Ikegami (1984: 330–1).