

In addition to using the same letter to mark different vowels, the OE scribes sometimes used different vowel-letters in the same word; for example, in early WS ‘giver’ occurs with equal frequency as both <gifa> (x44) and <gyfa> (x45). The vowel-letters are used in both stressed and unstressed position. The letter <e>, for example, stands for [ɛ] and [eː], and it is also the commonly used letter representing any unstressed vowel in late OE. <e> is also used as a diacritic marking the palatal quality of the preceding consonant, producing the impression that the vowel was diphthongised, for example *giēdan* ‘yield’, *scēieran* ‘shear’. Figure 6.3 shows the most frequent correspondences between the vowel-letters and the simple vocalic nuclei posited for late OE.

Letter	SHORT		LONG	
	Value	Example	Value	Example
<i>	ɪ	<i>binn</i> ‘bin’	i	<i>rīdan</i> ‘to ride’
<y>	ʏ	<i>fyllan</i> ‘to fill’	y	<i>fȳr</i> ‘fire’
<e>	ɛ ə	<i>settan</i> ‘to set’ <i>dǣlere</i> ‘dealer’	e	<i>swēte</i> ‘sweet’
<æ>	æ	<i>þæt</i> ‘that’	æ	<i>mǣl</i> ‘meal’
<a>	ɑ	<i>bannan</i> ‘to ban’	ɒ	<i>bāt</i> ‘boat’
<o>	ɔ	<i>(ge)boren</i> ‘born’	o	<i>dōn</i> ‘to do’
<u>	ʊ	<i>drunken</i> ‘drunk’	u	<i>hūs</i> ‘house’

Figure 6.3 Letter-sound correspondences in OE

Unlike PDE, where single vowel-letters can be silent, it is generally held that all single vowel-letters in OE represent syllable peaks: *swēte* ‘sweet’ is a disyllabic word, and *dǣlere* ‘dealer’ has three syllables. The horizontal line separating the <i> and <y> rows is dashed both because they were often graphic variants, as in <gifa> ~ <gyfa>, and because of the later merger of short [ʏ] and [ɪ] and long [yː] and [iː] in large areas of ME (see 7.3.1).

The dashed line separating [æ] and [ɑ] is justified by their ambiguous phonemic status. At least originally, they were in complementary distribution: they were both reflexes of West Germanic /a/, which was raised to /æ/ in OE unless it was followed by a nasal, /w/, or a back