MIDDLE ENGLISH ŠHÉ

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It is almost generally accepted that the ME form Šhē, which appears first in the East Midland dialect, continues the OE forms Šëo/Šëo (later Šëo) (Mossé 1952). It is assumed that the sequence /jo/ changed into /jo/, probably under Scandinavian influence, thus creating proper conditions for the palatalization of /s/, i.e., /s/ changed into /š/. Some scholars (Vachek 1964) propose the following development: [hj] (cp. Šhō) > [ŋ] > [š]. Such explanations, although possible from a strictly phonetic point of view, have one serious drawback (apart, of course, from the interpretation of /jo/ in Šëo), 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] > [ŋ] > [š] was not a regular change in Middle English. Moreover, it remains to be answered why /jo/ changed into /jo/, but /ju/, e.g., Šuesday, did not become /šu/ at the same time. Disregarding minor differences (cf. Stevick 1969), all these theories have one thing in common: according to them the /š/ in Šhē 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: Šhē and Šëo, no matter how one interprets the digraph Šëo. In Middle English these two forms fused, yielding at least in the Northern and East Midland area Šhē and *Šhē. In other dialects (except Middle Kentish) where Šëo 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 Šhē had a long tradition, and therefore it was the feminine form *Šhē that underwent the process of differentiation. All the possibilities that could lead to a differentiation of the pair: Šhē/*Šhē 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 ê (from OE
ex) "water". Since the phonemic status of ME ë and ê 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
bê, mê, yê and also the (ê), mê with final /e/, which formed a sort of pattern
in the pronoun system (but Nê echÔ and EM yê). Apart from the pressure
of the system there were also forms like ké (from OE ëhê) "high", këw (from
OE hekw) "hew", hëwe (from OE hogn) "thought", hëwe (from OE hêven)
"dark grey", and the diphthong /oê/ 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 j f š s m n l r j/ (Fisik 1968).

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

cëok, cê-hëne "peacock, pea-hen"  (âOE pâwa, pea)
bê(n) "to be"  (âOE bôn)
tê(n) "to draw"  (âOE bôn)
të "you". Encl. of thee. Obj. case  (âOE ë)
dê "die"  (âOFr dê)
dê-th "he does"  (âOE dêp)
dë "cattle, money"  (âOE dëh)
thee "you". Obj. case  (âOE ëd)
së "that, the"  (âOE ëh)
sea "sea"  (âOE së)
hê "he"  (âOE hê)
mê "me"  (âOE më)
ne "not"  (âOE ne)
we "we"  (âOE wê)
yê "you". Pl.  (âOE ë)

Thus the following empty places with initial /kg j l r/ remained. Out of these
/g/ appeared rarely before front vowels in native words; /l r/ had low
frequency. The possibilities of the change of the initial consonant were then
limited to /l r/ c.p. also le "lo"/.

/j/ was chosen because it required the least articulatory effort (Zabrokci 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 stë could have played some role,

too, but the change was not a simple phonetic change, i.e., neither the palatal-
ization of /j/ nor the sequence [hi:] > [ë] > [ë-]. Such changes do not fall
under regular pattern of the changes in the Early Middle English period.
The /j/ in shë 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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