The origin of Middle English *shē* — an alternative hypothesis

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1. Introduction: The question of the origin of the East Midland third person singular feminine pronoun *shē*, ModE *she*, constitutes one of the most controversial topics in the field of Middle English morphology. Numerous hypotheses have been put forward to explain the emergence of this particular form in the Middle English period, yet none of them has gained general acceptance. Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to offer a critique of the existing explanations for the development of ME *shē* and to present a new interpretation of the process, which is consistent both with the available data and with general tendencies of language change.

2. The problem: In the classical variety of Old English, as spoken in the kingdom of Wessex at about 1000 A.D., the system of third person personal pronouns looked as presented in Table 1:

TABLE 1: Late West Saxon personal pronouns — third person

	singular			plural
	masculine	*neuter*	*feminine*	
n.	hē	hit	hēo	hī
a.	hine	hit	hī	hī
g.	his	his	hire	hira
d.	him	him	hire	him

(Quirk -- Wrenn 1957[2]: §63)

Its most striking feature was the presence of the initial [h] sound in all forms of this paradigm, which placed the responsibility for maintaining intrasystemic contrasts solely onto the vocalic nuclei of the respective pronouns. Logically it

follows that any reorganisation of the vowel repository of the language would have grave consequences for the whole third person pronominal system.

Such a reorganisation took place in the second half of the eleventh century at the latest[1] and involved the monophthongisation of all Old English diphthongs. As far as the pronominal system under discussion is concerned, the change of OE *ēo* [e:o][2] into EME [ø:], later [e:] was of utmost importance, as it produced complete homophony of the feminine and masculine personal pronouns, at least in the nominative.

This homophony could not threaten the integrity of the masculine pronoun, as it was sufficiently characterised by distinctive forms in oblique cases (*hine, his, him*). On the other hand, the paradigm of the feminine pronoun in Early Middle English did not contain a single form which would not be duplicated in paradigms of the remaining pronouns.[3] Consequently, the third person singular feminine paradigm underwent radical restructuring. In particular, a number of alternative forms for the nominative appeared, giving rise to the following system:

TABLE 2: Middle English personal pronouns — third person feminine

	North	*East Midlands*	*South, West Midlands*
n.	schō	schē	hē
d.	hir(e)	hir(e)	hir(e)
g.	hir(e)	hir(e)	hir(e)

(Fisiak 1968: 86)[4]

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[1] This should most probably be treated as a *terminus ante quem* for the monophthongisation, as there is some evidence pointing towards a much earlier dating, maybe even before 1000, cf. Hogg (1992: §5.214).

[2] This phonetic interpretation of the OE diphthong seems wholly justified bearing in mind its subsequent history, in particular the *Akzentumsprung*, cf. Lass 1988.

[3] Consequently, n. *hē* = n.m., a. *hī* = n.a.p, g.d. *hire* = g.p. *hira* (where the final vowel of both *hire* and *hira* must have been reduced to [ə] by that time).

[4] This is a rather simplified picture; numerous variant forms are not included for the sake of clarity.

South-western dialects of Middle English, regularly more conservative in their morphology, continued monophthongised Old English forms. Other varieties of Middle English exhibited innovations in this respect, introducing [ʃ]-initial forms, *schō* and *shē*.

Of these two *schō* can be easily derived from the Old English feminine demonstrative pronoun *sēo*[5] in the following fashion[6]:

(1) *seo* [se:o]

(2) shift from a falling to a rising diphthong, i.e., to *seō* [seo:]

(3) the change of the unstressed element of the diphthong into a semivowel, i.e., to *sjō* [sjo:], and

(4) palatalisation of the [sj] cluster into a palatal fricative, i.e., to [ʃo:], spelt *schō* or *shō*.

All three changes involved in the derivation are widely attested in the history of English and are natural from a typological point of view.

An equally possible alternative derives *schō* directly from *hēo*, albeit via a slightly more complicated route. Stages (1) - (3) are parallel to the *sēo*-based explanation but then what happens is

(4') palatalisation of the [hj] cluster into a palatal fricative, i.e., to [ço:], spelt *ʒhō*, and

(4") reinterpretation of [ç] as belonging to the phoneme /ʃ/ and the subsequent reanalysis of [ço:] as / ʃo:/, hence [ʃo:].

Even though (4') and (4") require a more complicated mechanism, it is still perfectly natural[7], and, at the same time, accounts for the existence of intermediate <ʒ-> spellings. All in all, the origin of Northern *schō* can be viewed as relatively unproblematic.

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[5] The replacement of a personal by a demonstrative pronoun is not unknown in Germanic languages, cf. Pinto (1986: 182).

[6] As proposed by, e.g., Sweet (1891) or Mossé (1952).

[7] Cf. Stevick (1964).

The case of East Midland *shē,* however, is not so easy. Any successful interpretation must satisfy at least the following three criteria:

(A) phonetic and phonological plausibility,

(B) faithful treatment of the linguistic material analysed, and

(C) "razorability", i.e., surviving a test with Ockham's razor.

A number of hypotheses regarding the origin of *shē* have been proposed so far, and the following sections will be devoted to a critical, and necessarily brief, assessment of their applicability in view of the above three criteria.

3. The *Shetland* theory: Put forward by Smith (1925), it attributes the origin of *shē* to a process analogical with the emergence of *Shetland* from (ON) *Hjaltland*. On the basis of a number of place-names exhibiting the [hj-] > [ʃ-] change, this theory assumes the following line of development: OE [he:o] > [hje:] > [çe:] > [ʃe:] (Smith 1925: 440, slightly modified).[8]

The *Shetland* theory fails on two counts. As far as the criterion (A) is concerned, there is no explanation for the emergence of the [j]-glide between [h] and [e:]. Apart from a few place-names, this change as a spontaneous process is not evidenced in any Middle English word which in Old English began with an initial [he:] sequence. Moreover, the place-name evidence itself (which constitutes criterion (B)) is too scanty, and its interpretation as belonging to the language of Scandinavian settlers in the North of England is much more natural (Ruud 1926)[9],[10].

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[8] Similar sentiments as far as phonetics of the change are expressed by Stevick (1964: 384) and Awedyk (1974) (cf. also Britton 1991). The new element in their approach is that both formulate the explanation for the choice of the [ç-] variants in systemic terms as a push towards the preservation of the gender contrast in the third person singular, rejecting the third person plural homophony as a relevant factor in the process. However, the assumption that initial /h/ could have been realised allophonically as [ç] before a front vowel (or at least that in some contexts /h/ was) does not link with what is known about OE consonantal allophony in general, cf. Hogg (1992: §2.60), Fisiak (1968: §2.57, pp. 61-62).

[9] As the [hj-] > [ʃ] change is common in Norwegian dialects of the period, cf. Ruud (1926: 202-203).

[10] This theory reappeared in a revamped shape in 1955, when Dieth suggested that Scandinavisation of OE pronouns by Scandinavian settlers in Northumbria and East Anglia (who turned [se:o, he:o] into [sjo:, hjo:]) and then English reinterpretation of Scandinavised forms ([sjo:, hjo:] as [ʃo:, ço:])

4. The *sandhi* theory: This approach, first put forward by Lindkvist (1921)[11], seeks the origin of *she* in Old English Northumbrian inverted word-order phrases of the type **was hiō*, i.e., with the alveolar fricative in direct contact with the initial palatal fricative of *hiō* across a word boundary.[12] As Pinto (1986: 181) correctly points out the lack of evidence supporting the existence of such constructions and developments in Old or Middle English forces one to reject this hypothesis.

5. The enclitic theory: Suggested most forcefully by Markey (1972), this approach suggests the existence of a double paradigm for third person singular personal pronouns, proclitic and enclitic, analogical to that found in other Germanic languages, notably Frisian. Consequently, ME *shē*, *schō* would continue enclitic OE **se* conflated with proclitic [hje:, hjo:], chosen as a more preferable alternative to *hē*.

This hypothesis, however, contains a number of weaknesses. One of them is the complete lack of attestations for the enclitic pronouns in Old English. Middle English evidence is also missing, even though Markey quotes Heuser (1900) as identifying reflexes of enclitic pronouns in a number of Middle English manuscripts. However, a closer look at some of the texts quoted by Heuser reveals that his interpretations are dubious to say the least. Finally, the existence of the [hje:] form is left unexplained.

6. Phonetic interpretations: All in all, it seems patently obvious that current theories attempting to explain the origin of *shē* have their weakest point in the phonetic development from the assumed OE proto-form. The standard derivation from *hēo* (as endorsed, e.g., by Mossé (1952: 56)) is as follows:

(1) *hēo* [he:o]

(2) shift from a falling to a rising diphthong, i.e., to *heō* [heo:]

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could be held responsible for the new *schō*, *shē* forms. This theory assumes a route of transmission so convoluted and improbable that it most certainly fails the criterion (C).

[11] Cf. also Ruud (1926).

[12] With the vowel extended analogically from *hē* in the Middle English period.

(3) the change of the unstressed element of the diphthong into a semivowel, i.e., to *hjo* [hjo:]

(4) palatalisation of the [hj] cluster into a palatal fricative, i.e., to [ço:], spelt *ȝhō*

(5) reinterpretation of [ç] as belonging to the phoneme /ʃ/ and the subsequent reanalysis of [ço:] as /ʃo:/, hence [ʃo:], and

(6) analogical introduction of [e:] from the third person singular masculine pronoun *hē*, i.e. the emergence of [ʃe:].

Without recourse to analogy in (6), there is no possible way of obtaining [e:] as the root vowel of the pronoun in a natural fashion. Analogy, however, can hardly explain (i) dialectal limitations of the *shē* spread in (Early) Middle English, and (ii) lack of *schō* in East Midland texts[13], even though [o:] variants *must* have preceded [e:] ones in that area as well.

The derivation of *shē* from OE *sēo* has been recently proposed by Pinto (1986), who believes that the path of development was as simple as this:

(1) *sēo* [se:o]

(2) monophthongisation of the diphthong, i.e., the change to [sø:]

(3) the extension of the lip rounding from [ø:] to [s], giving rise to [ʃ], followed by unrounding of [ø:], i.e., [sø:] > [ʃø:] > [ʃe:].

This theory fails in one crucial respect, analogically to the *Shetland* theory. Namely, apart from putative [se:o] > [sø:] > [ʃe:], there is no evidence from any dialect of Middle English of other words with the initial [se:o] sequence in Old English undergoing the change (e.g., OE *sēon* "see"). Pinto herself is aware of this problem, claiming that need for paradigmatic unity would level out [ʃ-] forms (1986:

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[13] There is not a single case of *schō* or anything that could be phonetically interpreted as containing [o:] in the Final Continuations of the *Peterborough Chronicle*, which is the earliest East Midland text containing [e:]-type spellings.

186), yet the complete absence of ME forms of the *he schees type furnishes strong evidence *per absentiam* against this derivation.

7. An alternative derivation: So far it has been shown that no existing theory satisfies all three criteria listed in section 2 in explaining the origin of *shē*. Nevertheless, it is possible to offer a plausible derivation of the pronoun from an Old English form, even though, to the best of my knowledge, it has not been discussed before, and which can take as its starting point any of the two possible Old English inputs: either demonstrative feminine pronoun *seo* or third person personal feminine pronoun *hēo*:

(1) [se:o]

[he:o]

(2) As the first step in the monophthongisation process (which, *ex definitio*, must have been of assimilatory nature), the second element of the diphthong undergoes fronting to [ø]:

[se:o] > [se:ø]

[he:o] > [he:ø][14]

(3) The diphthong undergoes the shift from falling to rising:

[se:ø] > [seø:]

[he:ø] > [heø:][15]

(4) The first element of the diphthong undergoes reduction to a palatal semivowel:

[seø:] > [sjø:]

[heø:] > [hjø:]

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[14] This is the only possible direction of the assimilatory change, bearing in mind its ultimate result; had it been anticipatory rather than perseverant, the ultimate output would have been *[o:]. Moreover, it is more natural for the weakly stressed element of the diphthong to assimilate to the more prominent one and not the other way round. All in all, this stage constitutes a typical case of fronting adjustment.

[15] The existence of the *Akzentumsprung* as a much more widespread phenomenon than had been previously assumed cannot be denied after the publication of Giffhorn's study (1974).

(5) The exact relative chronology of subsequent changes is not relevant for the ultimate outcome; judging from the <ʒ-> spellings in Middle English manuscripts, most probably the next stage was the unrounding of the rounded vowel (at least in those dialects which lost rounded front vowels relatively early):

[sjø:] > [sje:]

[hjø:] > [hje:]

(6) The initial cluster undergoes palatalisation into a [+palatal] fricative:

[sje:] > [ʃe:]

[hje:] > [çe:], and

(6') if OE *hēo* is assumed to be the proto-form for ME *shē,* [ç] is reinterpreted as belonging to the phoneme /ʃ/ and [çe:] reanalysed as /ʃe:/, hence [ʃe:].

[çe:] > / ʃe:/ > [ʃe:]

The advantage of *sēo*-based derivation lies in its greater simplicity, while deriving ME *shē* from OE *hēo* avoids the possible criticism stemming from the relative lack of attestation of the demonstrative pronoun in the function of the personal pronoun in Old English.[16]

8. Conclusions: The main aim of this paper is to present a new theory of the origin of *shē* in the hope that it will be subject to a careful verification. Its immediate advantage, more visible with *hēo* as the starting point, is its faithful adherence to the three criteria listed in section 2: all stages of the derivation are phonetically and phonologically plausible; the theory is supported by existing and not conjectural Middle English forms; and the derivation does not require nor introduce unnecessarily complex stages.

At the same time, further research is still needed to strengthen or invalidate the individual stages of the derivation. In particular, the exact nature and extent of the

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[16] It must also be mentioned here that it is quite possible that *sēo* was lost in the East Midlands before first attestations of *shē*.

Akzentumsprung must be established (cf. Krygier forthcoming). It would also be interesting to be able to postulate a more precise date for the disappearance of EME reflexes of *sēo*, especially in the East Midland area, where *shē* appears earliest. A detailed study of the use of *sēo* as a personal pronoun would also be very helpful in determining which of the two possible candidates fits better the overall pattern.

At the same time, however, there is no denying the fact that this hypothesis offers the most plausible derivation thus far of the [e:]-forms in Middle English, based entirely on accepted phonetic processes of Old and Middle English, without recourse to analogy, foreign influence or wishful thinking. As such, it most certainly deserves close examination.

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