METATHETIC AND NON-METATHETIC FORM SELECTION IN MIDDLE ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

Metathesis, a specific phonological development consisting in an alteration within the sequence of sounds in a word was usually materialised in the development of English as a shift of a prevocalic consonant to a postvocalic position or vice versa. The change affected various classes of words: nouns (OE brid > bird), adjectives (OE beorht > briht "bright", or verbs (OE irman > rinnan "run", etc.) This type of change, especially frequent in Northumbrian Old English, soon spread to other areas of England, showing a pattern typical of lexical diffusion. The paper concentrates on the metathesis of the liquid [r] and the adjacent vowel in the early periods of English. While only a very limited number of words with Old English metathesis survive into Modern English, those with Middle English metathesis have proved to be much more stable, retaining the metathetic form until Present-day English. The evidence of the available corpora, especially the OED, confirms the hypothesis of the change being rather abrupt than gradual.

1. Metathesis

On the level of phonology, metathesis consists in an alteration within the sequence of sounds which seems to be a reflection of “performance errors” (cf. Crystal 1980). In other words, it is a transposition of sounds and/or letters in a word (OCEL). Sometimes classified as belonging to the category of the slips of the tongue, metathesis is found to be a type of sound change especially common in child language. Erroneous metathetic sequences of sounds also develop in adult language, but their rise is governed by principles different from those responsible for errors in the language of children (cf. Drachman 1978).

Hogg (1977) distinguishes three kinds of metathesis, of which two can be traced in English. The first is labelled as “sporadic” (e.g. [sp] > [ps]; wasp : wapse) and as such is not rule-governed, the other, “regular”, is best represented by the transposition of [r] and a vowel. In Germanic, metatheses, including
r-metathesis, belong to the earliest processes and are present in each language belonging to that family. The transposition of a postvocalic r-sound to the prevocalic position is also attested in other Indo-European languages, including Slavic (cf. Proto-Slavic *orsti > Russ. rosti ‘grow’; Keyser 1975).

In English, the process is represented by the two basic modifications: (1) change of positions by a vowel and an adjacent consonant and (2) a mutual replacement of two items in a consonant cluster. In the former, prevocalic [r] moves to the position after the following vowel, especially when that vowel stands before [n] or [s], and, at a later date, before [d] in Late Northumbrian (cf. PGe *rinnan > WS *rrnan ‘run’, PGe *brunna- > OE burna ‘bourn’, ONhbr bird/WS brid ‘bird’, etc.). Alternatively, the liquid [r] after a vowel is moved before that vowel, the latter change being frequent in late Old Northumbrian when the vowel stands directly before the cluster [xt], as exemplified by ONhbr wryhta from wyrhta (cf. WGe *wurhtjo- ‘wright’).

The other type of metathesis is a purely consonantal development in which items in a cluster exchange their positions. This again can be exemplified by two kinds of shift. The first affects the group [s] + a stop (cf. WS ðæstan [sk] > ðætan [ks] ‘ask’ or æstp > æstp, but also æsts > æstsp ‘wasp’), while the other is responsible for a change of places of a fricative ([f, θ, s]) plus the liquid [l]. Much more rare is the exchange of the elements in the clusters [sm, gn, kn, ns].

The present brief study will be only concerned with the former type, i.e. the metathesis of [r] and an adjacent vowel. Its aim is to adduce evidence when and how r-metathesis spread in Middle English. Another goal is to determine whether r-metathesis deserves to be assigned the status of a full-fledged phonological rule. Modern phonology postulates a systematic operation of a phonological change in a specified period of time. Sooner or later such a change affects all words containing an appropriate context.

2. Mechanisms of metathesis in English

The transposition of [r] and the vowel is by far the most frequent type of metathetic change in English. The effects of r-metathesis are found in the earliest Anglo-Saxon literature, throughout Medieval English, and also in the New English period. Like certain other consonantal changes, including assimilation, r-metathesis in Old English shows a number of distinct stages. According to Stanley (1952/53), the principle of rule ordering relevant to various phonological changes requires that metathesis in the earliest period of the history of English should be assigned to as many as four chronological stages, the first and the last in Anglian, the second (highly controversial) apparently in all dialects, and the third confined to West Saxon. Whether the details of such division are correct or not, Stanley’s complicated scheme shows that metathesis cannot be treated as a change uniform chronologically and geographically.

Also, an explanation of the process as a mere changing of places by the liquid and the vowel, i.e.:

1) (a) VC > CV
   (b) CV > VC

has been found less than satisfactory. Still, as a change which can only be explained in terms of abruptness hypothesis (cf. McMahon 1994: 49), the above simple pattern of the change became readily accepted by the confessor of generative phonology. As a reaction to (1) an alternative theory holds that what is regarded as an abrupt process of metathesis involves in fact a gradual change, i.e. an insertion of a vowel before [r] followed by a deletion of the vowel after [r] (cf. Hogg 1977, Blevins and Garrett 1998), which can be schematically presented as the following simple rule:

2) (a) CCVC > CVCVC
    (b) CVCVC > CVCC

Evidence from English shows that such a complex process might have taken place. For instance, the change of the Old English past tense form worht- (cf. wyrctan ‘work’) to wroght involved vowel epenthesis, or insertion, followed by vowel deletion; cf.:

3) Input    worht-e
   Vowel epenthesis  woroht-e
   Vowel deletion   wroht-e
   Output   wroght-e

All the stages above are attested by Old and Middle English evidence, although the dates of citation do not always coincide with the chronological order in (3); cf.:

4) 971 Hælend ... þæt wundor worht (Blickl. Hom.: 19)
   950 ... seðe worohht from fruma woopen-monn & wifmonn 
       æworhtes hia (Lindisf. Gosp. Matt. xix: 4)
   1056-66 Haward me wroht (Inscr. on Dial. Kirkdale, Ch. Yks.)
   1455 Wroght bordcloth cum j. pari towalles de eadem
       (Lincoln Diocese Doc. 67 [A])

According to Lass (1978, cf. also Nakao 1986), derivation (3) requires the employment of yet another rule, a suprasegmental one, which would assign stress to the epenthetic vowel. This is in turn followed by a deletion of an un-
stressed vowel before [r]. Such processes are mainly found in Late Northumbrian, being rare in other dialects.

3. Sporadic and permanent metathesis of the sequence [rv]: The time dimension

The data embracing forms with and without metathesis in the available Old and Middle English corpora (OED, HC) create a very incoherent picture as regards the temporal and geographical distribution of the relevant forms. The critics of the rule-oriented theory rightly emphasise that metathesis is a process whose incidence is far from consistent. The evidence collected by the present author confirms such inconsistency in the selection of now the [rv], now the [vr] variant.

As regards words with the original cluster [rv], their metathesised forms contain these two elements in a reverse order. In the account below first come those items in which the original sequence [r] + Vowel survives in Modern English, although they temporarily develop forms with metathesis, i.e. Vowel + [r], in Old or Middle English. Because such metathetic forms are lost in later Middle English this metathesis will be called here sporadic metathesis (SM), but the sense of the term is different from that in Hogg (1977).

List (5) includes words with the original sequence [rv] surviving in Modern English, but it also contains instances of sporadic metathesis which failed to survive into the Modern period. The list which disregards geographical conditioning only presents the distribution in time of the non-metathesised forms and the dates concerning sporadic metathesis; cf.:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Non-metathesised</th>
<th>SM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>frost</td>
<td>700, 1300 &gt;</td>
<td>900-1000, 1150-1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>grass</td>
<td>700-1000, 1200 &gt;</td>
<td>850-1000, 1300-1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>run</td>
<td>700-750, 900, 1000, 1150-1200 &gt;</td>
<td>750-1000, 1100-1450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENE threat</td>
<td>900, 1200 &gt;</td>
<td>1200, 1350</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cress</td>
<td>950, 1150 &gt;</td>
<td>1000, 1350-1650</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frog</td>
<td>1000, 1250 &gt;</td>
<td>800 (?) uncertain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wren</td>
<td>1000, 1200 &gt;</td>
<td>700-750, 1000-1050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENE frast</td>
<td>OE (?), 1250 &gt;</td>
<td>900-1000, 1150-1400, 1550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fresh</td>
<td>ME fresch &lt; Rom. friscu-s&gt;</td>
<td>1200 &gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As said above, items in (5) are words in which the shift of a vowel from the position after [r] to the position in front of [r] proved ineffective in the long run. Interestingly, our evidence, limited as it is, shows that metathesis must have been a very early process in this category of words because the early occurrences of metathetic forms with [vr] registered in the available corpora are chronologically very early, sometimes even earlier than the original forms without metathesis. Item (6) lists such first occurrences of forms with and without metathesis:

6) c893 [Eurates] is mæst eallra ferscra wastera (K. Aelfred Oros. ii. iv §6)
   c1200 Ase himm birr? beon fressh þerto (Ormin: 6348)
   a1000 Næs hit lengra fyrst (Beowulf: 134)
   a1300 þe penis ... he broght, wit-vten fresst (Cursor M.: 19225)

Curiously, words showing sporadic metathesis appear very early. Although some of them show strong consolidation between 1250-1400, they fail to survive into Modern English. Perhaps their disappearance can be connected with a tendency to preserve only those words in which postvocalic [r] was followed by a dental consonant, i.e. [n, t, d, s] (cf. Alexander 1985, who claims that the survival of the postvocalic [r] is determined by the feature [+ coronal] of the consonant with which this [r] forms a cluster).

Other words with sporadic metathesis prevail in Early Middle English but their frequency decreases after 1400. A typical example is the case of ME frost whose metathesised form forst is found only sporadically after 1250, but is lost after 1400; cf.:

7) a700 Gelum, frost (Epinal Gloss.: 485)
   c900 ... & se winter ware grim & cald & fyristg (tr. Bæda's Hist. iii.xiv.[xix.] (1890): 217)
   a1000 Se hearda forst (Phoenix 58)
   a1000 Hwiæm hra scoc forst of feaxe (Riddles lxxxviii.: 8 (Gr.))
   a1123 Treow wæstmas wurdon þære nihte þurh forste swiðe for numene (O.E. Chron. an. 1100)
   c1175 Ic walde fein pinian and sitten on forste and oune aup et mine chinne (Lamb. Hom.: 35)
   a1250 ... And bringeth forstes starke an stronge (Owl & Night.: 524)
   a1300 Manna ... fel fra lift sa gret plente, Als a grideld frost to se (Cursor M.: 6520)

A very similar pattern is revealed in the phonological evolution of the noun grass and the verb run whose metathesised forms survive until the 15th century, i.e. somewhat later than those of frost.

As regards the earliest occurrences of sporadic metathesis, item (8) adduces several forms from Old English; cf.:
8) a800 In dese onbead dryhten mildheornnishe his and on naehth 

\[ \text{sebirht} \] (Vesp. Ps. xli.: 9) 

c1000 Deos wyrt ... þe man nastingum, & œðrum naman 

carse 

nemned (Sax. Leechd.: 116) 

c1000 Naes hit lengra 

\[ \text{fyrst} \] (Beowulf: 134) 

c858 IIII ovmun 

gers (Charter of Aethelberht in OE Texts: 438) 

c825 He seafach swe swe 

\[ \text{sisent to earnenne on wea} \] (Vesp. Ps. xviii.: 6)

Now, words in (5) will be confronted with another list where the metathesised forms with [V] + [r] replaced the original non-metathetic forms with [r] + [V]. Because words exhibiting the effects of such transposition are found in Modern English, the change under discussion is here termed "permanent metathesis" (PM); cf.:

9) 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-metathesised</th>
<th>PM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bird (OE brid &lt; PGmc *brid-)</td>
<td>800, 1000, 1100, 1200-1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cart (OE croa &lt; PGmc *krat-)</td>
<td>800, 1000-1050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>third (OE fredda &lt; PGmc *pridaz)</td>
<td>800, 950-1000, 1150-1500, 1550-1650, 1750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thirteen (OE brontene &lt; PGmc *pri-)</td>
<td>900, 1000, 1200-1450, 1550-1700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thirty (OE britig &lt; PGmc *pri-)</td>
<td>950-1050, 1150-1300, 1400-1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>burn (OE birran, -æ &lt; PGmc *bren-)</td>
<td>1150-1200, 1300-1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>burst (OE berstan &lt; PGmc *brestan)</td>
<td>1250-1600, 1800-1900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>divr (OE dre &lt; ON dra)</td>
<td>1300-1450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>curd (LME curd-)</td>
<td>1350-1450,1550-1700, 1850</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>burna (OE burna &lt; PGmc *bruna-æ)</td>
<td>1400</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Judging by the dates, the consolidation of the metathesised forms belongs to the period between 1200 and 1400, when they distinctly grew in number. From the 15th century onwards they spread at the expense of the original non-metathetic forms. It should not pass unnoticed that the metathesised and non-metathesised forms of bird, burn, burst coexisted in Early Middle English, while those of the numerals third, thirteen, thirty, and the noun curd, in Late Middle English. As regards the remaining three words, cart, dirty and bourn, their non-metathesised forms were abruptly replaced by forms with metathesis.

4. Sporadic and permanent metathesis of the sequence [Vr]: The time dimension

The other group of words comprises those in which the original sequence [Vr] survives into Modern English, although some forms witness the transposition of these two segments. It should be noted that forms where [r] is preceded and followed by a vowel, i.e. with the sequence [VrV], are considered here as representing the sequence [Vr], not the reverse one. This list contains fewer instances than the parallel list (5) above; cf.:

10) 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-metathesised</th>
<th>PM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>first (OE fyrst &lt; PGmc *furist-æ)</td>
<td>950, 1200, 1300 &gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thirst (OE pursæt &lt; PGmc *purst-)</td>
<td>1000-1050, 1150-1250, 1350 &gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thorpe (OE prop &lt; PGmc *jurpam)</td>
<td>1100, 1300 &gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of these three words, only thorpe developed numerous metathetic forms very early in Old English, while the remaining two forms with the original sequence [Vr] show higher frequency only in Middle English. The behaviour of the other two words, first and thirst, is such as can be expected, that is their metathetic forms are recorded later than the original non-metathetic forms. As regards the archaic and dialectal verb warch, from OE wyrcan (< PGmc *werk- 'work') which survived into Early Modern English, it shows rare metathesised forms cooccurring with forms devoid of palatalisation in the Cursor Mundi; cf.:

11) a 1300 To wrik þare wik wil
to wyrk wondres
þi will to wirce

(1229) (2200) (25251)

The last group of words is that where the metathesised forms with [rV] displaced the original forms with [Vr] and have survived into Modern English. Here belong:

12) 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Non-metathesised</th>
<th>PM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>through (OE freæ &lt; PGmc *furæ)</td>
<td>700-1050, 1150-1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wright (OE wryhta &lt; PGmc *warhj-)</td>
<td>700, 850-1000, 1200-1250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wrought (pt; OE worhtæ &lt; PGmc *wurhtæ)</td>
<td>700, 800-1550</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bright (OE beorhtæ &lt; PGmc *berhtæ)</td>
<td>800-1000, 1150-1150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frith (OE fryhtæ &lt; PGmc *furhtæ)</td>
<td>850-950, 1100-1200, 1300-1500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thresh, -æ (OE pescæn &lt; PGmc *pekæ-)</td>
<td>900, 1200, 1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>through n. (OE þredæ &lt; PGmc *purhæ)</td>
<td>1000, 1200, 1300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thrill (OE pyrlæn &lt; PGmc *pyrhlæ)</td>
<td>1600-1750</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This list lacks the noun horse, whose Proto-Germanic form is uncertain, although the reconstructed Germanic root *hurs- is highly plausible. The noun is absent here simply because the corpus under investigation contains no instance of metathesised hros-. List (12) includes several high frequency items from medieval English which show a successful transposition of segments surviving until our times. Here belong, first of all, the adverb through, the noun wright with the related preterite wrought, and the adjective bright. It is to be noted that while metathetic and non-metathetic forms of through, thresh, thrill, wright, wrought cooccurred, especially in the 12-14th centuries, the remaining three words, i.e.
bright, fright and the noun through show complementary distribution in time, with metathetic forms abruptly succeeding forms without metathesis.

The above data confirm that metathesis cannot be dated with any precision. Traces of its operation are seen in the earliest Anglo-Saxon texts in one group of words, while words in another group are affected by that process in Late Middle English or even in Early Modern English. Nevertheless such a peculiar development can be regarded as an instantiation of lexical diffusion, with changes in various words scattered in time.

5. r-Metathesis: Space dimension

The present section discusses the distribution of the change in space. It is generally believed that metathesis was originally a phenomenon confined to Anglo-Saxon, especially Northumbrian. Our evidence confirms this but several interesting observations can be made with reference to the question which type of metathesis, permanent or sporadic, belongs to Anglian.

The data in the OED corpus from the earliest Mercian texts, the Early Glosses, i.e. Epinal (l. 7th c.), Erfurt (9th c.) and Corpus (e. 8th c.), and the Vespasian Psalter contain 28 items with the sequences [Vr] and [rV], of which 12 (c. 35%) show metathesis. But the 11 cases out of the total number of 12 are instances of sporadic metathesis (throp, yrn, werna), the only form representing permanent metathesis being the noun burne; cf.:

13) a800 Latex, burne (Corpus Gloss. (O.E. Texts): 1185)

An analogous sample from a Northumbrian text, the Lindisfarne Gospels (l. 10th c.), contains 24 items with the relevant [rV/Vr] sequences, of which 8 items (33%) show metathesis. The verb irnum ‘run’ (4 instances) represents sporadic metathesis, while the remaining three words represent cases of permanent metathesis (third 2, breth 1, wriht 1); cf. the following examples:

14) c950 ziif on da ðeirda wacan þæc-cymeð (Luke xii.: 38)
ælic ða æftæra ... & de ðeirda [Rush. pride]
Brethnise from mónnum ne onfoc ic. (Matt. xxii.: 26)
(Wundrande þæt lar & maeto þæs wrihtes sunu vel smődes sunu)
(John v.: 40)
(Mark, Intro.: 3)

The evidence of metathesis in Old English goes back to the earliest examples, from the works of King Alfred. The OED corpus data contain 30 instances of forms with the [rV/Vr] sequence, of which 17, i.e. more than 50%, show forms with metathesis, prevailingly those of the verb irnum ‘run’ and its variants. However, this dialect fails to reveal items showing permanent metathesis. Such evidence is also missing in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, where a sample of 9 items contains only 1 in-

stance of metathesis (sporadic), nor is it found in the West Saxon Blickling Homilies (6 items, no metathetic forms). Only Late West Saxon (Aelfric) supplies a modest number of forms with metathesis (4 instances of permanent metathesis among 19 words containing the [rV/Vr] sequence); cf.:

15) c1000 þæ þeirdon his word & ðesawon þone munt birnan (Deut. v.: 23)
His [Herod’s] lichampa barn wibutan mid langsumere hætan
(Hom. in Sweet Ags. Read.: 92)
Latex, burna (Voc. Suppl. in Wr.-Wülcker: 177)
And write þa on þinum prescole (Deut. vi.: 9)

The evidence of Kentish Old English is not discussed here for lack of more substantial text samples. Suffice to say that the small sample from the Kentish Glosses containing 4 instances of the [rV/Vr] sequences contains only one form with sporadic metathesis (the verb irnum). In sum, as regards Old English, metathesis is considered a substantial part of the process of phonological change in the Northumbrian, where cases of permanent metathesis are more prominent (4 instances) than in Mercian (1 instance) in comparable samples.

The Middle English data abound in cases of metathesis. Because the North of England is considered the area where metathesis was most prominent, it comes as some surprise that the Cursor Mundi (c. 1300), a text representative of that region, contains proportionally the same percentage of cases of metathesis as Chaucer’s works (see below). But characteristically, the sample under discussion from the Cursor Mundi (52 [rV/Vr] items) contains only cases of permanent metathesis (13 in all):

16) [Delilah] þat birde [v.r. bride, bryde, bryyd] was biddeade bald (7131)
Qua-sum on suilk a bird [Jesus] wald thinc [Gött. brid] (9811)
He ... cuppel did his cartes all (6220)
A gold ringle þat brihtly schane (3320)
þis angel þat sa bright[e] cæn (8295)
þat castel brightnes ... Ou er al. þat curt on leght and brede (9933)
Joseph þat was ful o pite Did theresche on in þat conte (Cott.: 4744)
þe fester thrilð his body thurg (1824)
Of his ded al þe sorful ord Sal thril þin hert thorul a suord (17738)
þis drithin ... in his witte ... all purueid His were, als dos þe sotill wright (325)
þis wright þat I spek of here ... wroght bath erth and heuen (331)
A schipphe be-houses þe to dight, þi self sal be maister wright (1666)
First þan wroght he angel kind (362)
The sample below (17) of one of the most important East Midland texts, the *Ormulum*, written in North Lincolnshire (NEM) contains 14 spellings with metathesis (in the total of 27 [rV/Vr] forms), 9 of which are cases of permanent metathesis:

17) þatt ilke chaff þatt helle fir shall þærnenn (1529)
     Halþ3 Gast is halþ3 fir, þatt þærneþ þi þatt herre (10452)
     Alls iff þæs karrte wærenn of weless fowwre (48)
     Hit swifte briehte shineþþ (2138)
     þa preßhesst tu þin corn wiþþ fleþþ (1500)
     þa winndwesst tu þin þroßhenn corn (1530)
     þatt all þatt shaffe þat wass wrohhht Wass lif inn: himm þe wrihthe (18780)
     Godd ... þatt alle shaffe wrohhte (2256)
     Íc haþ hemm wrohht tiss boc (Ded.: 153)

That metathesis was not merely confined to northern East Midland is confirmed by the high percentage of its occurrence in the *Trinity College Homilies* (12th c., Huntingdonshire; South-East Midland), where among 12 instances of forms with [rV/Vr] one can identify as many as 8 forms with metathesis, 5 of them being cases of permanent metathesis (*burn 2x, bright 2x, wright 1x*).

Finally, the language of Chaucer, who lived in 14th century London, the capital city situated in the very south of East Midland, contains relatively numerous metathesised forms. In the total of 45 forms with the sequences [rV/Vr] one can identify 3 forms with sporadic and as many as 11 forms with permanent metathesis; *cf.*:

18) They passeden sorwfully the *threshfold* *(Boeth. i. pr. i. 3 Camb. MS)*

Phetn wolde lede Algate hys Fader *Carte* *(H. Fame: 943)*
... fiþr sekyrlyr his face schon so *bryhte* *(L.G.W.: 163)*
Phæbus deyed haddde hire tresses ... l-lyk to þe strems of his *borned* hete *(Doctor’s T.: 38)*

A *carte* ful of donge ther shalt thou see *(Nonnes Pr. T.: 200)*
He wolde *theshe* [v. r. throse, þresshe] and... *(Prol.: 536)*
And as sche wolde ouer þe *présheworlede* gon *(Clérk’s T.: 232 (Landsd.))*

But right anon a thousand peple in *thraste* To saue the knyght *(Doctor’s T.: 260)*

He thurgh the thikkeste of the throng gan *threste* *(Kant. T.: 1754)*
Ful many an hethen *wroghtestow* ful wo *(Monk’s T.: 403)*
The altitude of the Mone, or of *brehte* sterres *(Astrol. ii. §2)*

The above data show clearly that in Middle English metathesis was not confined to one geographical area, but is evidenced over all territory of England. The rather high proportion of metathesised forms in the non-Northern areas makes it clear that metathesis ceased to be a local phenomenon.

6. Final statements

As regards metathesis in medieval English, the following general remarks can be made with reference to its occurrence:

(1) The distribution pattern of metathesis in time and space makes it possible to postulate that the spread of that change agrees with the principle of lexical diffusion. Evidently, not all words were subject to its operation.
because numerous items like *thrift* (ON thrift) failed to develop metathetic forms. On the other hand, metathesis in certain common words (e.g. *horse*) is extremely poorly documented.

(2) The hypothesis of the gradual character of the change is not confirmed by the present data. The alleged intermediate forms with [r] flanked by vowels, like OE *fyrihtu* ‘fright’, are extremely rare and testify to a very sporadic character of vowel insertion in words belonging to our corpus.

(3) Cases of sporadic metathesis distinctly prevail over cases of permanent metathesis in Old English. With time the situation changes and forms with metathesis become permanently established in Middle English and later.

(4) As regards dialectal distribution, metathesis, which originally may have been a northern phonological rule, became a common process all over the country in Middle English.

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APPENDIX

Selected pairs of forms with or without metathesis coexisting in the same text or author

(1) Sporadic metathesis rV (> Vr ) > rV (fresh, grass, run)

Robert of Gloucester
1297 Engelond ys ful ynu ... Of salt fysch and eche fresch, and fayre ryueres þer to (1724; 1)
An honndred knystes, pur fersse & sound (1724; Rolls, 397)
þe terus ronne doun (Rolls, 800)
He arnde Vpe a lute hul (Rolls, 6202); Wepinde hii armed horn, þe teres orne adoun (Rolls, 8371)

Battle Abbey Custumals (1887)
c1300 Et vocatur ista arrura *grasacra. (60)
Praeter Garsacram operandam. (66)

Ags. Ps. (Thorpe)
c1000 Ie on wisne we3 worda þinra reðne rynne (cxviii. 32); Swa meoluc ... zrunnen (cxviii. 70)
Swa swa si3ant yrnð on his we3 (xviii. 6); His word yrne wundrum sniome (cxviii. 4)

O.E. Chron. (Laud. MS.)
a1122 Swa swa ðet weter rynned to ... Norðburh (an. 656)
Sume uryon in to cyrcyan. (an. 1083)

Orm
c1200 An bucc ran þær awes (1364)
He ... let itt eornenn forþwiþþ (1336); Ure wukedæþ Bi twellfe timess erneþþ (13183)

Layamon
c1205 His scipen runden swide (1349)
Hamun arnde upward (9296); Summe heo gunnen urnen (24696)
Moni þusenden þrasten ut of telden (23372); þer after comen þrasten þritto þusen(d) anan (26633)
He com him baften and imong al. þan þrunge þersten him in þan ruge (30853)

In E.E.P. (1862)
a1300 Is fetu sul ren of blode (4)
As bestis þat wer wode aþe opir to erne her and þare (9)
Be-hold ... how þe stremis erniþ of is sweet blode (20)

King Horn
c1300 Faste after horn he renne (O, 1319)
Efter horn he ernde (L, 1239)

King Alisaunder
13... They rannen throughout the contray (W, 565); Quyk away he is ronne (W, 896)
Ac a kniist þer cometh arnyng (Laud MS, 2098)

In Wright Lyric P.
a1310 Whose ryht redeth ronne to Johon (v. 26)
Out of thin huerte orn the flod (xviii 58)

Prose Psalter
a1325 3yf þou sest a þef, þou ran wyþ hym (xlix. 19)
Ichaue vrenn þe wai of þy comaundementz (cxviii. 32)

Langland Piers Plowman
1377 Wilde bestes ... renenge with-out croperes (B xv. 453)
Water ... ernynge out of mennes eyen (B xix. 376)

Sir Fearambras
c1380 þan runne þai away & saide alas (2438)
Quiklich in-to a tour he orn (3893)

Trevisa Higden (Rolls)
a1400 ... and took hem wyþ swyte renynge (iv. 167)
þe brook ... eorneth in to þe valey of Iosephat (I. 115)

Promptorium Parvulorum
a1440 Renyn, or lepyn, curro (429/2), Ronnon, as mylke, coagulatus (436/2)
Ernyn, as horse, cursito (142/2)

(2) Permanent metathesis rV > Vr

Ags. Gosp.
c1000 Twa turtlan oððe twe3en culfran briddas (Luke ii. 24) [Hatton briddes]
birdas [Lindisf. & Rushw.]
Cursor Mundi
a1300 [Anticrist] ȝat ilk warlau bridd (22381)
Qua-sum on suilk a bird walid thing (9811)
Vs telles of adam þis story Of sones he had ful pretty (Fairf. 1216)
... thriitt (Cott.)

Gesta Romanorum
c1440 A serpent-made his nest... and broȝt forthe his briddis there (i. vii .16)
[Mary] ȝat blissful bird of grace (i. vii.10077)
Orn
c1200 and brenn it all till asskess þær (1468)
þatt illike chaff þatt helle fir shall bærnenn (1529)

St. Brandan
c1300 This tapres brende longe y-nous (335)
Hou this tapres bernað thus (337)

Barbour
Bruce
1375 [He] brunt hous and tuk the pray (xiii. 737)
Of his mençe sum send he For till burne townys twa or thre (xv. 438)

Chaucer
c1385 Desyr That in his herte brende as any fer (L.G.W.: 1747)
c1386 I-lyk to þe stremes of his borned hethe (CT, Doctor’s T.: 38)

Lydgate
1430 This bufhe ryght anone Through myght ther of brusteth euyn a twain
(Chron. Troy i. vi)
1413 ... tylly the cordys borsten of the balaunc (Pylgr. Sowle v. xi (1483))
c1430 For him I brene as doth the glede (Chron. Troy i. v)
They have espied ... i-graven, in lettris of bourned gold, Maria (Min.
Poems (1840) 65)

Trevisa
Barth. de P. R.
1398 Quycke steluer cruddeth not by itself kyndly wythout brymstone (xvi.
vii. (1495) 555)
Mylke rennyth and curdyth ... and the wheye is departed therfro (xix.
xxvi. (1495) 906)

Metathetic and non-metathetic ...
(3) Sporadic metathesis $Vr > (rV) > Vr$

Cursor Mundi
a1300 Sampson, þi first wijf lerd þe witte (Cott. 7219)
Wid þe grete maistri þus he badd Till mari had hir iornai made, þan at
þe frist on him toght scho
(Gött. 12605)

Langland
1362 For lewede, for lerede, for laborers of propes [v.rr. ... porpes] (P.PI. A
ii. 47)
1377 þat she furste & formest ferme shulde bilieue (Piers Pl. B 116)
1399 þey ffolwith þe vois at þe frist note (Rich. Redeles iii. 56)
Orn
c1200 þatt mæs þe silekken wel þin þirst (14602)
All his hunngerr & his þrisst Shall ben þurh Drihtnle slecked (5688)

Promptorium Parvulum
Thyrste, or thyrste, sitis (491/2)
Tho(r)pe, thrope, lytylle towne (492/1)

Chaucer
c1381 The kok that orlge is of thorps lie (Parl. Foules 350, MS. Gg. 4.
27)
c1386 Citees, burghes, castels, hye toures, Thorpes ... (CT, Wife’s T. 15)
(4) Permanent metathesis Vr > rV

Lindisfarne Gospels
c950 Brehtnise from monnum ne onfoe ic (John v. 40)
God þeberhtmade hine on hine seolfn (John xiii. 32)
Ahne ðis is smið uel wyrihte, sunu Maries? (Mark vi. 3)
Wundrande þat lær & mæhto ðæs wirhte sunu ... (Mark, Introd. 3)
Ælfric
c1000 And dippana ysopan sceæft on þam blode, þe ys on þam þerholde
(Exod. xii. 22)
And write þa on þinum prescolde (Deut. vi. 9)
Cursor Mundi
a1300 Thomas ... soght þat estrin thede, And thirlid intil haiþen-hede (Cott. 21098)
þe fester thirlid his bodi thurgh (11824) ... þe sorful ord Sal thril þin
hert thoru als a suord (17738)
All þe cunthre thurght (Gött. 11070)
þe sune beme gas thru þe glas (Gött. 11229)

Hampole Psalter
a1340 þi wordis ere sharpe þat thirlis mennys thoȝhtis (xlv. 7)
þe fors of fire of luf ... þat makis his prayere to thrill heuen (iii. 4)

Trevisa
1398 Not thyrlyd nother hoolyd (Barth. De P.R. xvii. cxcvi. (1495) Xiv b/1)
1397 A grym strook of listnyng ... þrulled þe wal (Higden (Rolls) VII. 349)

O.E. Martyrol.
a900 þa þesomnodon þa sticceo hi in þa þruh, þurh þa þe þæt wæter fleow
(2 Sept.)

Robert of Gloucester
1297 & regneð þræti ser wel þor [v. rr. þorú, þurh, thorugh, þrough] alle
þinge (Rolls 681)

William of Palerne
c1350 Mi wicked eyisen ... lad myn hert þrous loking þis langour to drye
(459)
þourh sour help (4219)

Destruction of Troy
c1400 Mony shalke þurgh shot with þere sharpe gere (6780)
Thrurgh lemys of light (1129)

Caxton Sonnes of Aymon
c1489 He showed hym thurughe and throughes his body (i. 56)
He shoved his swerde thrughe & throughes his body (xiv. 346)