

## SOME MINOR VOWEL CHANGES

### **Come, love**

These words were spelled and pronounced with a short [ʊ] in Middle English, which continued into the Early Modern period. The common pronunciation for *love* was [lʊv], but a variant contained the long vowel [lūv]. Thus the word can rhyme with *move* and *approve* in poetry from this period:

Come live with me and be my love  
And we will all the pleasures prove.  
Marlowe,  
“The Passionate Shepherd to his Love” 1599

When John Donne responds with similar lines in “The Bait” in 1633, are Marlowe’s rhymes still available? What about Raleigh’s “Nymph’s Reply to the Shepherd” in 1600? (You can search online for these other poems.)

Similarly, we can find rhyme words for *come*, such as *room*, with a long [ū], in addition to the more common short vowel.

What’s notable about these words is that the spelling **never** matched the pronunciation. There is good evidence that in Middle English scribes changed the original <u> spelling (OE *lufu*, *cuman*) to <o> simply because there was too much potential confusion in writing out the sequence of minims (short i-strokes) when a <u> was followed by a <u> or by <m>. In other words the spellings *loue*, *come* are scribal conventions for the ease of reading. They have more to do with sight than sound.

What is the pronunciation of these words today? What about *c’mon*?

### **Call, Calf, Chalk, Calm: The Wanderings of Short a**

Short [a] in Early Modern English (henceforth EME) occurred in the same environments as in Middle English, but there are some important exceptions. Before a stop or a voiceless fricative it became [æ]: *at*, *back*, *lap*; *bath*, *glass*, *craft*, *ash*. (Thus they revert to their earlier OE values!)

But the changes are more various when the [a] is followed by [l]. Modern English is a good guide for the changes that came about in EME. Study the following list and generalize the conditions in the chart below:

all, alms, bald, ball, balk, calf, calm, chalk, half, hall, halt, palm, psalm, salmon, salve, salt, stall, walk

When [a] is followed by	the vowel is	Examples
final [l]		
[l] + dental		
[l] + nasal		
[l] + [f] or [v]		
[l] + [k]		

Can you think of dialectal variants of these pronunciations?

### Keats versus Yeats

Words with a long open [ē] in late Middle English underwent a series of changes during the Tudor Vowel Shift. In some words the vowel was shortened to a short [ɛ] and were thus “disqualified” for the Vowel Shift, which affected only long vowels. Other words with the long [ē] were raised once, and still others raised twice. Study the following list and put them in the chart where they belong:

bead, bread, break, breath, dead, deaf, great, head, heal, great, leaf, mead, peat, steak, steal, sweat, yea

The ME [ē]	Examples
became short before the TVS	
was raised to [ē]	
was raised to [ē], then again to [ī]	

Can you outline the historical circumstances behind the different pronunciations of proper names like Keats/Yeats or Reagan/Regan?

## ‘Sblood!

Middle English [ō] also underwent raising during the TVS to [ū]. Then subsequently the tense vowel became lax [ʊ] in some words; still others went lax and then unrounded to [ʌ].

There are many examples from poetry around 1600, for example, that show *good*, *food*, and *blood* rhyming on the same [u] sound. The laxing and unrounding became fixed pronunciations later. Match the following words to the right sequence in the table below:

blood, book, broom, cool, doom, flood, food, hook, hoop, look, mood, noon, pool, soon, stood, took, wood

ME [ō] was raised to [ū]	Examples
and stayed [u]	
and laxed to [ʊ]	
laxed to [ʊ] and unrounded to [ʌ]	

Where would you put your *own* pronunciation of *roof* and *root*?

## Dew, due, do, duty

The following group of words were borrowed from French, but they had two separate diphthongs in Middle English, [ɪʊ] and [ɛʊ]. By EME they were all pronounced [jʊ]. Today their pronunciations sometimes preserve the [j], sometimes not. Consider the following words in their current pronunciation and generalize where the palatalization has been retained:

beauty, blew, cue, dew, due, few, ewe, hue, lute, neuter, new, pew, suit, shrew, true, use, view

Can you generalize in what environments where [j] is retained and where it is not? (Think of broader categories of phonemes.)

## Vermin, varmint

The author of a *Critical Pronouncing Dictionary*, published in London in 1791, noted a recent change in the way the letter *e* was pronounced: “There is a remarkable exception to the common sound of this letter in the words *clerk*, *serjeant*, and a few others, where

we find the *e* pronounced like the *a* in *dark* and *margin*. But this exception was, I imagine, till within these [last] few years, the general rule of sounding this letter before *r*, followed by another consonant. Thirty years ago everyone pronounced the first syllable of *merchant* like the monosyllable *march*, and as it was anciently written *marchant*.”

The English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley was born just a year later, in 1792. The first stanza of his great poem “To a Skylark” (1820) is given below. Attempt a phonemic transcription of its rhyme words, and pick out the ones that pertain to the observation noted above. What do these rhymes reveal about Shelley’s own pronunciation?

Hail to thee, blithe Spirit!  
    Bird thou never wert,  
    That from heaven, or near it,  
    Pourest thy full heart  
In profuse strains of unpremeditated art.