

Lengthening and Shortening of Vowels

Two sound changes with opposite effects took place during the Middle English period: lengthening and shortening. As the names imply, one made certain short vowels from Old English long and the other made certain long vowels short. Our textbook discusses the changes, which are summarized here using examples from the Babel passage.

Lengthening

1. When short [a], [ɛ], or [ɔ] appears in an open syllable (the vowel followed by a single consonant followed by a vowel), the vowel is lengthened. The three examples below from the Babel passage all concern short [a]:

| | |
|---------|---------|
| OE nama | ME nāme |
| macien | māke |
| same | sāme |

2. Before certain consonant sequences; here *nd* and *ld*:

| | |
|----------------|------------|
| OE funden | ME founden |
| felda | feeld |
| scenden | scheende |
| but not | lond |

Shortening

3. In syllables ended by two or more consonants (not including *ld*, *nd*, or others that trigger lengthening):

| | |
|----------|-------------|
| OE ðōhte | ME thouȝtis |
|----------|-------------|

The example of *children* is interesting. The *-i-* started off as short, but was lengthened to a long vowel in ME *child*. If the *-i-* in *children* was ever lengthened, it underwent a re-shortening because the *-r-* added another consonant to the mix.

4. In the unstressed syllables of both words and phrases:

| | |
|-------|--------|
| OE ðā | ME the |
| ūs | us |
| bēon | ben |
| ān | a, an |

5. In a syllable followed by two unstressed syllables; the Babel text does not have any instances of it, but an example *sutherne* vs. *south*.

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Fill in the Blanks with the numbers 1 through 5 to indicate the conditions that led to the length of the vowel in the *initial syllable* below. The Middle English form given includes the vowel length:

| | | | |
|------------|--|---------------|--|
| today | | āker “acre” | |
| tāle | | kīnd | |
| wimmen | | levedi “lady” | |
| hōld | | ēven | |
| abōūt | | ōpen | |
| hōūnd | | slept | |
| wilderness | | utmōst | |
| godspelle | | softe | |

The following list of words all had long vowels in Middle English. Write out a related word that today shows the related short vowel. For example, with *dear* one might match *darling*; for *five*, there is *fifty*, *fifteen*, *fifth*. Next to each word also indicate the condition (above) that accounts for the difference:

- bleed _____
- goose _____
- nose _____
- clean _____
- sheep _____
- steal _____
- moon _____
- house _____
- feel _____