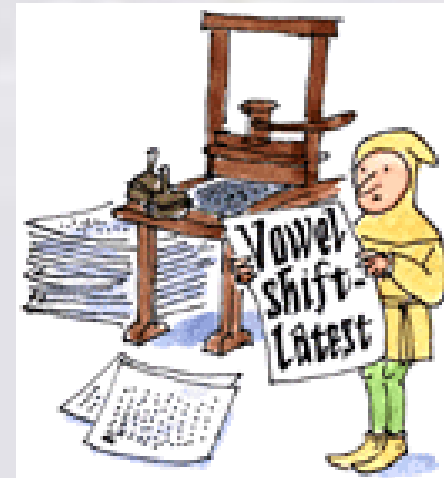# Algeo Ch. 7: Society, Spellings, Sounds





Part 2—The Great Vowel Shift
Algeo 144-147

# Why is the GVS significant?

- Term coined by Otto Jespersen (1905)
- "Most salient of all phonological developments in the history of English"—Algeo
- The most important reason why modern English spelling and pronunciation are out of sync
- The last major systematic phonological change that determines the sound system of Modern English

# When did this happen?

- Most of the vowel changes took place between 1400-1450…we think…

- Spelling indicates the changes mostly took place BEFORE the introduction of the printing press standardized spelling, so before the 1470s…but

- Based on rhyme and spelling evidence, some words were still changing in Shakespeare's day, in Andrew Marvell's time, and even in the late 1700s.

- Some linguists (e.g. William Labov) argue that it's still taking place in America as the "Northern Cities shift."

# Why did this happen?

- So complicated by dialectal variation that it will be difficult to ever explain more than a general theory

- May show effects of migration from country to city after Black Death

- Certainly affected by Chancery Standard's preference for Southeastern dialects

- May show people trying to sound more "prestigious" by speaking like Londoners and courtiers
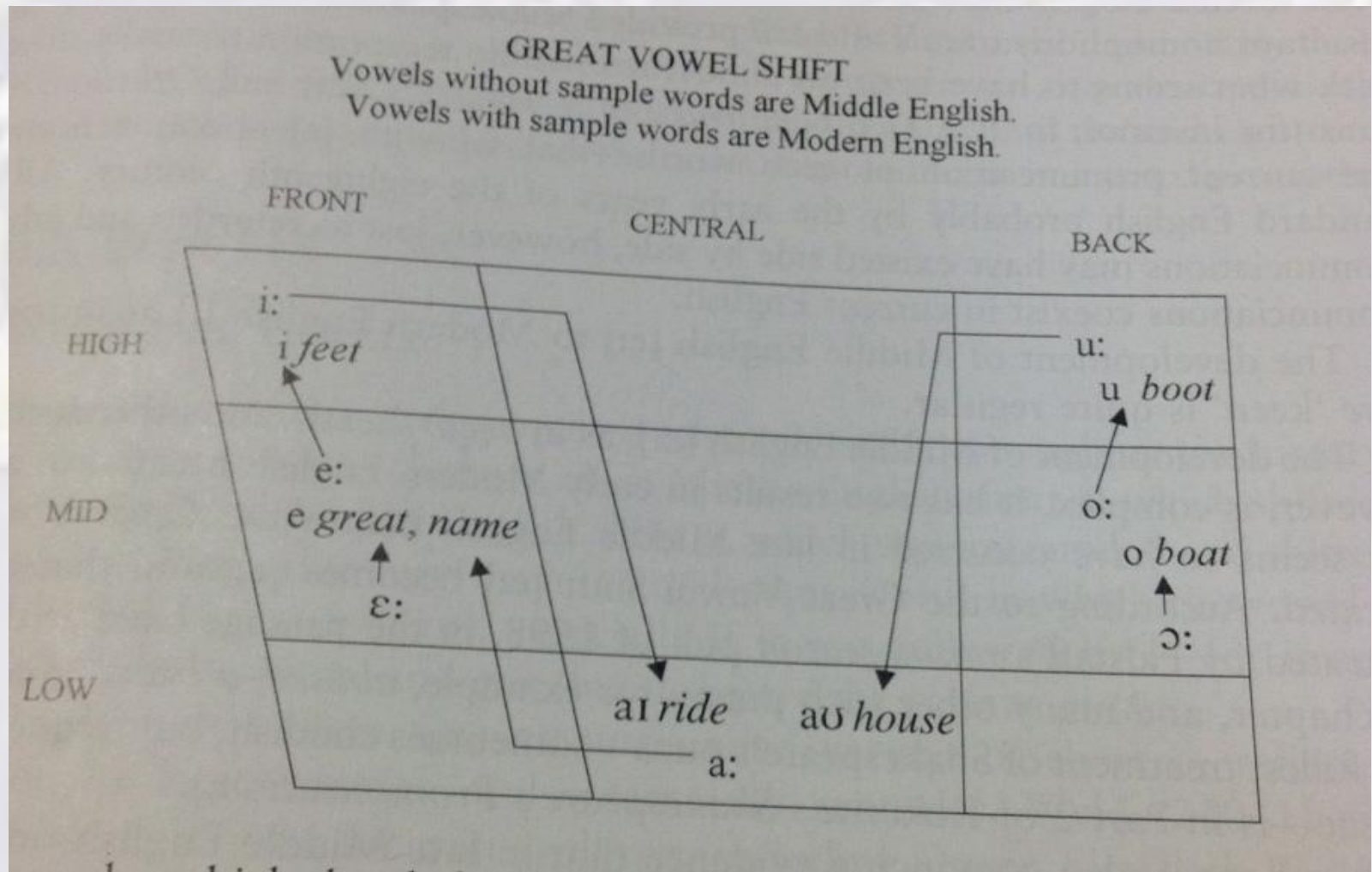
- We don't really know!

# The Medieval Dinosaurs Explain It All

# The Mechanism of the GVS

- The front long vowels each moved up a notch, except for /ī/, which formed a dipthong.

- Likewise the back long vowels moved up, except for /ū/, which formed another dipthong.

- From spelling evidence, the high vowels may have moved first; this is called the "pull theory" of the GVS (as opposed to the "push" theory that thinks the low vowels started it all). (The French call these the *"chaìne de traction" and the "chaìne de propulsion.)*

- Note that the change affects only long, stressed vowels. The "y" in Middle English "my" was affected because it has primary stress, and we say /maɪ/; the "y" in a word like "only" was not affected (the primary stress is on the first syllable and -ly lacks stress, so we say /lī/, making the -ly of "only" rime with "see").

GREAT VOWEL SHIFT
Vowels without sample words are Middle English.
Vowels with sample words are Modern English.

**The GVS is about long vowels moving UP**

# How did the GVS work?

| Articulation Position | | Middle English | Modern English |
|---|---|---|---|
| **FRONT VOWELS** | HIGH | [i:] *fin* | → [aɪ] *fine* |
| | MID | [e:] *gret* | → [i:] *greet* |
| | LOW | [ɛ: ] *gret* | → [e:] *great* |
| **CENTRAL VOWELS** | LOW | [a:] *name, April* | → [ɛ:] → [e:] *name, April* |
| **BACK VOWELS** | HIGH | [u:] *hus, shoure* | → [aʊ:] *house, shower* |
| | MID | [o:] *wod, none* | → [u:] *wood, noon* |
| | LOW | [ɔ:] *hom* | → [o:] *home* |

# Exceptions?

- [ɛ:] ("open e," as it is called in most discussions) did not complete the expected shift from [ɛ:] to [ē] to [ī] (contrast Mod. Eng. "break" and "beak"). There are a dozen or so words (e.g. *steak, Reagan, bear*) that didn't go through the GVS. Nobody knows why.

- The effects of the shift were not entirely uniform, and differences in degree of vowel shifting can sometimes be detected in regional dialects both in written and spoken English. In Northern English the long back vowels remained unaffected, the long front vowels having undergone an earlier shift. You'll still hear [ku:]for "cow" in the North of England, for example, and a Scots cab driver may charge you [fiːv pʊndz] for a £5 fare.

# More exceptions

- Shortening of long vowels at various stages produced further complications. [ɛ:] is again a good example, shortening commonly before consonants such as *d* and *th*, thus: *dead, head, threat, wealth* etc. (This is known as the *bred-bread merger*.)

- ***oo*** was shortened from [ū] to [ʊ] in many cases before *k, d* and less commonly *t*; thus *book, foot, good* etc. If you've ever listenened to a Liverpool dialect (think early Beatles movies), you may hear evidence of this change not happening.

- Some cases occurred before the change of [ʊ] to [ə]: *blood, flood*. Similar, yet older shortenings occurred for some instances of ***ou***: *country, could*.

# Why is spelling out of sync?
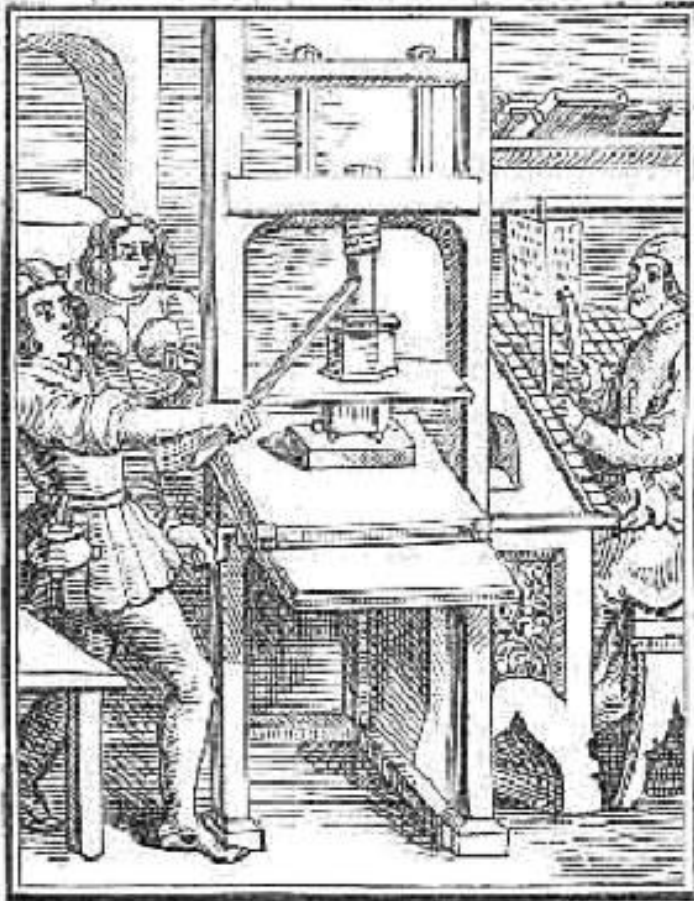


ne season/ and waneth & dyscreaseth another season/ And that compn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so moche that in my dayes happened that certayn marchaūtes were in a ship in tampse for to haue sayled ouer the see into zelande/ and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte forlond, and wente to lande for to refresse them And one of theym named sheffelde a mercer cam in to an howhs and axed for mete, and specyally he axyd after egges And the goode wyf answerde, that she coude speke no frens she . And the marchaūt was angry. for he also coude speke no frensse. but wolde haue hadde egges/ and she vnderstode hym not/ And thenne at laste a nother sayd that he wolde haue eyren/ then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstod hym wel/ Loo what sholde a man in thyse dayes now wryte. egges or eyren/ certaynly it is harde to playse euery man/ by

# Important Scholarly Resources

Helge Kökeritz, *Shakespeare's Pronunciation* ( 1953)
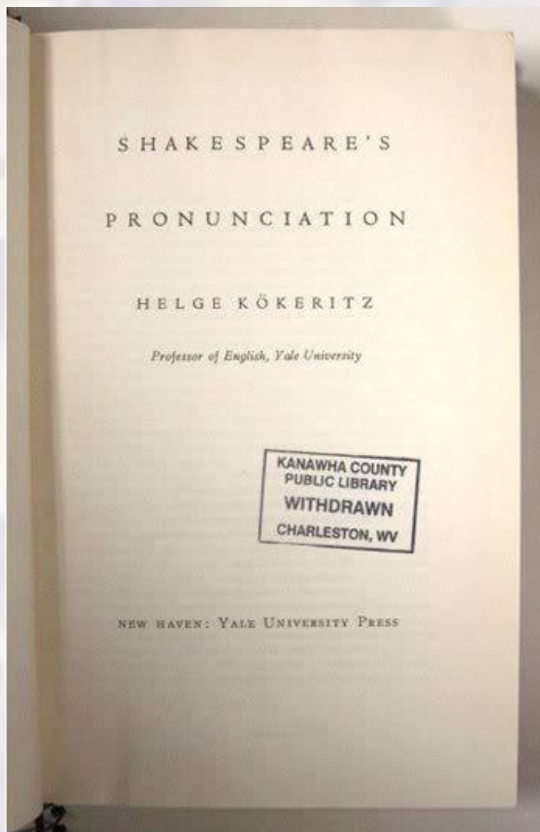
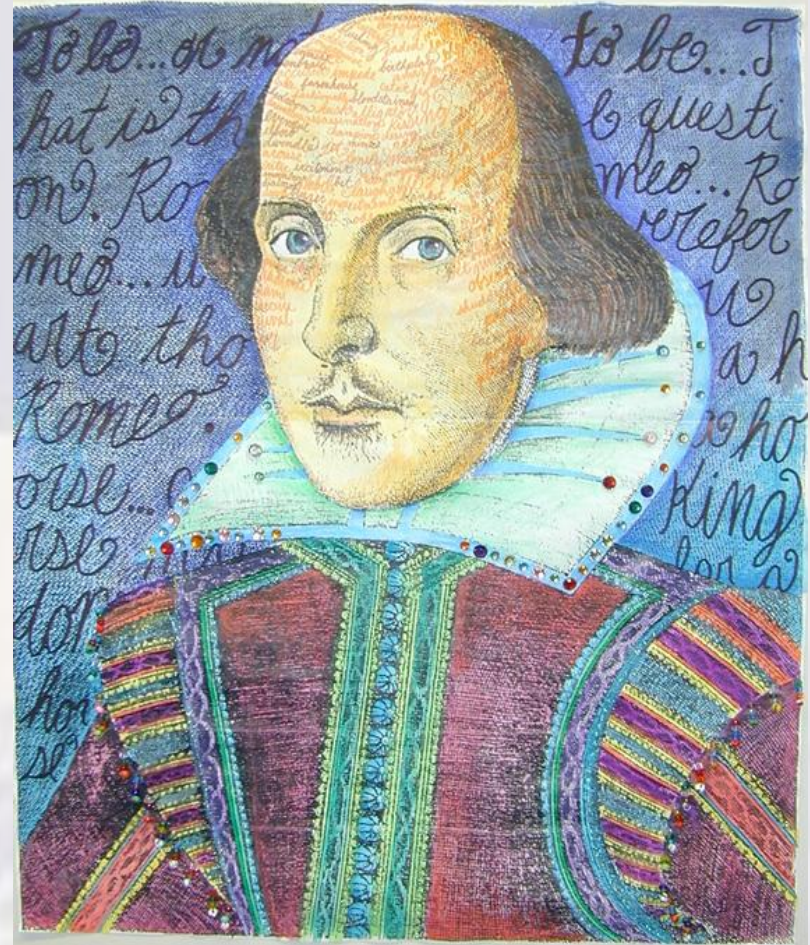E. J. Dobson, *English Pronunciation 1500-1700*, second edition (1968)

# More Important Recent Studies

- Roger Lass, "Phonology and morphology." In Roger Lass (ed.), *The Cambridge History of the English Language, vol. 3: 1476-1776*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 1999: 56-186. *Print.*

- N. F. Blake, *A Grammar of Shakespeare's Language*, 2002. Print.

- Alexander, Catherine. *Shakespeare and Language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge U P, 2004. Print.

- Seth Lerer's very good, brief summary, in *Journal of English Linguistics* 38.1 (2010): 94-99. Print. You can read it at

  http://eng.sagepub.com/cgi/reprint/38/1/94.pdf.

# Melissa Menzer's GVS site at Furman

- http://eweb.furman.edu/~mmenzer/gvs/

- It's interactive and excellent; check out especially the "see and hear" section.

# And the GVS has its own T-shirt!



http://shop.cafepress.com/great-vowel-shift