

## On the alleged existence of a vowel /y:/ in early Modern English

FAUSTO CERCIGNANI

*Università degli Studi di Milano*

(Received 8 May 2020; revised 14 March 2021)

Many scholars have held that in late Middle English, in the London dialects from which Standard English grew there existed a vowel /y:/ developed from various native sources and/or used as a substitute for Old French or Anglo-Norman /y/. The aim of this article is to accurately review the relevant evidence adduced by E. J. Dobson and other scholars in favour of a variation between early Modern English /y:/ and /iu/ with a view to offering conclusions based on a direct presentation of the original sources. It will be shown that even the early writers on orthography and pronunciation who correctly describe a sound [y] (as they knew it from French, Scottish and Northern English, as well as from other languages) cannot be adduced as evidence for the existence of a vowel /y:/ in early Modern English.

**Keywords:** vowel /y:/, early Modern English, historical phonology

### 1 Introduction

Ever since Alexander J. Ellis accepted the statements of the early writers on orthography and pronunciation as attesting a pronunciation [y:] for the reflex of late Middle English (IME) /iu/ in early Modern English (eME) (1869: 163–84) there have been various attempts to corroborate or reject this hypothesis. In his fundamental work on the English pronunciation of the period, E. J. Dobson (1968: I, *passim*; II, 699–713) postulates a variation between [y:] and [iu] and summarizes the theories of his predecessors, discussing the conclusions of both the advocates (Alexander J. Ellis 1869; Karl Luick 1921–40; Wilhelm Viëtor 1906; Henry Cecil Wyld 1927, 1936; and others) and the opponents of the [y:]-theory (Otto Jespersen 1907, 1928; R. E. Zachrisson 1912, 1927; Eilert Ekwall 1922; and others). Except in special cases to be addressed briefly in the text or in the footnotes, the views of these scholars will not be discussed in detail, because they have been exhaustively treated by Dobson.<sup>1</sup>

After the publication of Dobson's work, the question has been taken up again in various reviews by Eilert Ekwall (1958), Randolph Quirk & W. M. Smith (1958), Bror Danielsson (1959), William Matthews (1959) and Helge Kökeritz (1961) among others. General works on the history of English normally mention only /iu/ even when they refer to Luick or Dobson, but Roger Lass (1999: 98–9) provides a short review of some early

<sup>1</sup> For Wyld's theory that ME /iu/ and /eu/ passed from [iu] through [iy] back to [iu] (1927: 193–5 and 1936: 242–4) see Dobson (1968: II, 700). For an elaboration of Wyld's theory see Luick (1921: 132–81 and 1921–40: 573–9).

authorities (see section 3.4, below). If appropriate, the views of these scholars will be discussed in what follows when dealing with specific sources or issues.

Dobson admits that ‘the dominant view’ is that in early Modern English the reflex of late Middle English /iu/ was [iu] (1968: II, 700). Yet it must be emphasized that the opponents of the [y:]-theory have either dismissed it as dubious without discussing the available evidence or have concentrated on the details of a particular description without considering the context in which it occurs.

In this study the available evidence for what may be regarded as educated Southern English pronunciation in early Modern English will be reanalysed with a view to offering a new, detailed interpretation of the original sources. As will be shown in what follows, Dobson’s conclusions should be rejected, though not on the basis of the arguments (or non-arguments) advanced by his opponents, but because a close examination of the evidence offered by the early writers on orthography and pronunciation provides no reliable evidence for the existence of a vowel /y:/ in early Modern English. Even the early authorities who correctly describe a sound [y] (as they knew it from French, Scottish and Northern English, as well as from other languages) cannot be adduced as evidence for the existence of a vowel /y:/ in early Modern English.

## 2 Premise

In early Modern English there is no reliable evidence for a distinction between the reflexes of early Middle English /iu/ and /eu/. By late Middle English the two diphthongs had certainly coalesced to /iu/, which was also the reflex of Old French (OF) and Anglo-Norman (AN) /y/, as in *due*, *duke*, etc. Dobson (1968: II, 712, fn.1) follows Luick’s assumption that ME /eu/ merged with /iu/ at about 1300 owing to the raising influence of the second element on the first (1921–40: 413–14, 431). This is quite reasonable, but it should be added that the change was probably favoured by the coexistence of variants going back to Old English (OE), as exemplified by such words as *hue* (OE *hēow*, *hīow*), *new* (OE *nīwe*, *nēowe*), *true* (OE *trēowe*, *trīwe*), *yew* (OE *īw*, *ēow*), etc. The great number of words with Middle English (ME) /iu/ from OF /y/ may also have contributed to the disappearance of ME /eu/.

On the other hand, ME /eu/ preserved its identity into the early Modern English period, and the early writers on orthography and pronunciation normally distinguish between IME /iu/ and IME /eu/, the latter of which occurs in words with eME /ɛ:/ like *dew* (OE *dēaw*), *few* (OE *fēawe*), *hew* (OE *hēawan*), *sew* (eME *ē < ě*, OE *seowian*), *shrew* (OE *scrēawa*), etc. To these must be added words adopted from or through French, such as *beauty* (OF *beauté*), *feature* (OF *feture*, *faiture*), *neuter* (L *neuter*), etc., all with IME /eu/. Thus, for example, John Hart uses the digraph *iu* for IME /iu/ (1569: 58<sup>r</sup>.23)<sup>2</sup> and the digraph *eu* for /eu/ (1569: 53<sup>v</sup>.8); Robert Robinson transcribes IME /iu/ with the

<sup>2</sup> References of this type include date, page number and line number. The superscript ‘r’ after the page number refers to the ‘recto’ (right or front) side of the page, whereas the superscript ‘v’ refers to the ‘verso’ (left or back) side of the page.

Table 1. *Dobson's reconstruction*

	1300	1650	1750	1800
dew, shrew	/ɛu/	/ɛu/		
		↓		
new, chew	/ɛu/	↓		
	↓	↓		
due, rude	/iu/	/iu/	/(j)u:/	/(j)u:/
(due, rude)	/y:/	/y:/	/y:/	

equivalent of *iw* (c. 1617: 30.9) and IME /ɛu/ with that of *ew* (c. 1617: 33.16); and Alexander Gil has *v* for IME /iu/ (1621: 13.9; see below) but *ëu* for IME /ɛu/ (1621: 15.12).

This is the evidence for what may be regarded as educated Southern English pronunciation.<sup>3</sup> By the end of the sixteenth century, however, in other types of speech the reflex of IME /ɛu/ had certainly merged with that of /iu/. Thus, for example, *deaw* (a common spelling of *dew*) occurs for the word *due* in Richard III, 3.7.120 (Folio) and in *The Second Part of Henry IV*, 4.5.37 (Quarto). Moreover, spellings like *shue* 'sue' (OF *suir*) in *Love's Labour's Lost*, 3.1.206 (Quarto), *shure* 'sure' (OF *s[e]ur*) in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 3.1.60 (Quarto), etc. (see Cercignani 1981: 203) show the change /sj/ > /ʃ/, which presupposes the diphonemization of /iu/ to /j/ plus /u:/. The fact that in present Standard English words like *sue*, *suit*, etc. retain /s/ shows that the monophonemization of /sj/ to /ʃ/ was not generally accepted.

Dobson's reconstruction of the historical development of the relevant phonemes (including the alleged /y:/) in Standard English may be summarized, with some approximation, in table 1.<sup>4</sup>

### 3 The evidence of the early authorities for the alleged vowel /y:/

The picture outlined above serves as an introduction to the issue to be discussed below, namely the alleged existence of a vowel /y:/ in early Modern English. The whole question has been extensively presented by E. J. Dobson in a long section entitled 'The development of ME [y:], ME *iu*, and ME *ɛu*' (1968: II, 699–713). Dobson writes that his use of the notation 'ME [y:]' throughout his book is in deference to the view held by many scholars that 'there was in late ME, in the London dialect from which StE grew, a sound [y:] developed in SW (Saxon) dialects from various native sources and/

<sup>3</sup> On the concept of an early Modern English standard see Dobson (1955).

<sup>4</sup> For /ɛu/ > /iu/ see Dobson (1968 II, 711); for /ɛu/ > /iu/ see Dobson (1968 II: 798). But Julia Schlüter (2017: §5.1.2) assumes that the latter merger 'was not completed until the 20th century'. For the appearance of the alleged /y:/ in the fourteenth century and its disappearance in the eighteenth century 'at the latest' see Dobson (1968: II, 712). For a discussion of the sources of the alleged ME /y:/ with regard also to dialectal usages and highly cultivated types of speech see Dobson (1968: II, 711–12, 713).

or used as a substitute for OF or AN [y] in Romance words'. Dobson's detailed discussion of the question shows that the existence of a vowel /y:/ in early Modern English is accepted by the author as much more than a mere hypothesis. True, Dobson frequently uses careful expressions which tend to suggest a tentative assumption, but he discusses the reflexes of ME /iu/ and /eu/ in the chapter dedicated to the vowels, thus giving priority to the alleged variant /y:/, whereas he treats the reflex of ME /ɛu/ in the chapter on diphthongs. Moreover, he concludes his review of the early Modern English sources with the statement that he prefers to accept the evidence of Hart, Gil, Wallis and Holder in favour of [y:] as a variant pronunciation in words exhibiting the reflex of IME /iu/ (1968: II, 711). This variant, if it existed at all, appears to have 'died out at the latest in the eighteenth century' (1968: II, 712).

Dobson's views on the reflex of IME /iu/ have always divided scholars. Randolph Quirk & W. M. Smith (1958: 230) observe that they account 'very satisfactorily for the evidence' and are 'convincingly economical'. But Helge Kökeritz does not agree. Without reviewing the available evidence, he states that 'ME [y:] is a meaningless innovation by Dobson which has no sanction in any handbook' (1961: 153, fn. 8). His theories on the vowel of Swedish *hus* 'house' as an appropriate value for the reflex of IME /iu/ as described by some writers on orthography and pronunciation has been rightly dismissed as untenable by his countryman Bror Danielsson (1963: 133).

Of course, the testimony of the early writers on orthography and pronunciation on the question under discussion is not always easy to interpret, especially when they offer comparisons with foreign sounds or when they give descriptions derived from other sources or from classical models. With regard to the alleged existence of a rounded high-front vowel /y:/, identifications with foreign /y(:)/ (including the Scottish and Northern English reflex of ME /o(:)/) must be ruled out because of the well-known substitution of Eng /iu ~ ju:/ for /y/ in, for example, words like Fr *duc*, *vu*, etc. The same applies, for similar reasons, to identifications with ancient Greek *v*, which was traditionally associated with Fr /y/,<sup>5</sup> and with Latin 'long *u*', which was traditionally pronounced with the reflex of IME /iu/.<sup>6</sup> Similarly, identifications of Fr /y/ with Eng /iu ~ ju:/ by French authors cannot be taken into account, since French speakers not infrequently substitute their /y/ for Eng /ju:/ even to this day.

Some writers on orthography and pronunciation provide descriptions of the sound [y], but this does not mean that they used it in English words. The sound was familiar to them because it was a typical vowel of the French language and of Scottish and Northern English. Moreover, it was associated in their minds with ancient Greek, which shares with French the characteristic of representing a 'simple sound' with a single letter: Fr *u* and Gr *v*.

<sup>5</sup> See Dobson on John Cheke (1968: I, 42.40–2) and on Thomas Smith (1968: I, 48.23; 52.1–3), where 'ME [y:]' always stands for the reflex of ME /iu/.

<sup>6</sup> See Dobson (1968: I, 51 and fn. 2).

### 3.1 *John Hart*

The spelling reformer John Hart offers a precise description of the monophthong [y]. In dealing with the ‘abuse’ of the vowel *u*, i.e. writing *u* for any other sound than [u] (his cardinal value; 1569: 30<sup>v</sup>), he writes:

the French and the Scottish [abuse the u] in the sounde of a Diphthong: which kéeping the vowels in their due sounds commeth of i, and u, (or verie neare it) is made and put together vnder one breath, confounding the soundes of i, and u, together: which you may perceyue in shaping thereof, if you take away the inner part of your tongue, from the vpper téeth or Gummes, then shall you sound the u, right, or in sounding the French and Scottish u, holding still your tongue to the vpper téeth or gums, and opening your lippes somewhat, you shall perceyue the right sounde of i. (1569: 32<sup>v</sup>)

Dobson (1968: I, 79–81) rightly rejects Jespersen’s arguments about Hart’s evidence (1907: 44–8),<sup>7</sup> but admits that the above description shows confusion between the native diphthong /iu/ and the foreign vowel /y(:)/ and writes that a possible explanation for this confusion ‘is that in English itself’ Hart ‘knew two variant pronunciations’, which he ‘failed properly to distinguish’ (1968: I, 81). But in his second volume Dobson admits another possibility: since Hart and other authorities ‘falsely identified English [iu] with foreign [y], they uncritically accepted descriptions of the articulation of the foreign sound as if they were also valid for English’ (1968: II, 711).

The fact, however, is that the above description is by no means confused. In describing Fr and Sc *u*, Hart calls the sound ‘a diphthong’ because it is formed by combining two articulations: that of [u] (‘the u, right’) and that of [i] (‘the right sounde of i’), but he specifies that the sound ‘is made and put together vnder one breath, confounding the soundes of i, and u, together’, a wording that clearly indicates a simultaneous articulation of the two vowels.<sup>8</sup> Hart speaks of two articulations because his criterion for distinguishing front and back vowels was not the position of the tongue, but the degree of mouth opening,<sup>9</sup> so that to him the distinctive feature of back vowels was lip-rounding and the point of articulation of [u] was primarily labial. As will be seen below (section 3.4), Wallis, Wilkins and Holder include [u] among the ‘labial’ vowels.

It is then clear that Hart’s peculiar use of the word ‘diphthong’ in this context cannot obscure the fact that the lines quoted above accurately describe the articulation of [y]. Moreover, Hart is clearly dealing with the ‘abuse’ of *u* in foreign languages and this implies that the sound [y] cannot be taken to be an English vowel. In other words, Hart is here describing ‘Fr and Sc *u*’, not the English reflex of IME /iu/.

Danielsson claims that the lines quoted above represent ‘an accurate description of [Hart’s] speech-habits’ when trying ‘to imitate French or Scottish’ (1963: 134–5; cf. 1959: 281–2). But the fact that Hart, like his contemporaries, normally substituted his

<sup>7</sup> Cf. also Jespersen (1928: 103): ‘The theory that ME and early ModE had the F[rench] sound /y/ in words like *duke*, etc. cannot be right.’

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Zachrisson (1927: 81, fn. 2).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Danielsson (1963: 39–40).

own /iu/ for the foreign sound does not imply that he was unable to correctly describe the articulation of [y]. After all, John Hart is generally recognized as being not only an important spelling reformer, but also the best sixteenth-century phonetician (cf. Dobson 1968: I, 88 and Danielsson 1959: 276).

In his transcriptions Hart invariably uses the digraph *iu* in words with IME /iu/, for example in *use* (OF *use*, L *ūsus*) and *sure* (AN *sur*) (1569: 48<sup>r</sup>.12; 60<sup>r</sup>.11). That he himself used a diphthong and not the sequence /ju:/ in words like *new* and *due* is shown by transcriptions like *δ'ius* 'the use' (1569: 58<sup>r</sup>.23 etc.) and *t'iuuz* 'to use' (1569: 48<sup>r</sup>.12). However, the digraph occurs also in transcriptions like *iung* 'young' (OE *iung*; 1569: 43<sup>v</sup>.7) and *iup* 'youth' (eME *yūþ* ~ *yūþ*, OE *iugup*; 1569: 58<sup>v</sup>.19, etc.), as well as in *iu* 'you' (ME *yū* ~ *yō*, OE *eōw*) and *iur* 'your' (1569: 47<sup>v</sup>.17, etc.; 59<sup>r</sup>.8, etc.), all of which show that Hart used *iu* also for the sequence /j/ plus /u/. This is of course acceptable in the work of a spelling reformer, though other writers pursuing the same aim prefer to use *y* for /j/ (see Gil, section 3.2 below). Unlike the phonetician Robert Robinson, who distinguishes between *iw* in *use* (c. 1617: 45.3, etc.) and *yu* in *young* (c. 1617: 51.30, etc.), Hart regards both *y* and *j* as unnecessary for the representation of the semivowel.

The well-known substitution of Eng /iu ~ ju:/ for Fr /y/ is exemplified in Hart by transcriptions like Fr *diu* 'du' and *piūsānse* 'puissance' (1569: 66<sup>r</sup>.16), which should be compared with the statement that the French pronounce Latin *u* as *iu* in words like *tua*, *tuum*, *regnum*, etc. (1569: 66<sup>r</sup>.22–3). In another passage Hart observes that the English pronounce the proper sound of *u* in a word like Latin *lux*, but that in Latin words like *lucet* and *lumine* some use 'the French and Scottish sound' (1569: 34<sup>r</sup>.18–20), that is, the contemporary reflex of IME /iu/.

We may then conclude that Hart's evidence cannot be adduced to show the existence in early Modern English of a vowel [y:] as a variant of the reflex of IME /iu/.

### 3.2 Alexander Gil

Gil's scattered comments on social and regional varieties of English include a passage in which he mentions the linguistic inventions of the Mopsae ('Mopsarum fictitias', 1621: B3<sup>r</sup>). Gil does not explain who these Mopsae were, but his disparaging words seem to refer to women from the countryside (the name Mopsa belongs to the pastoral tradition) inclined to use or imitate advanced pronunciations.<sup>10</sup>

Now, in his criticism of effeminate affectations in the speech of the Mopsae (1621: B2<sup>v</sup>–B3<sup>r</sup>), Alexander Gil rejects Hart's use of *iu* and prefers to adopt the letter *v* (corresponding to Gr *v*) for the reflex of IME /iu/. Dobson writes that Gil 'probably used [y:], for he rejects Hart's spelling *iu* as representing the pronunciation of the Mopsae and instead uses a single letter for ME [y:] as though it were a simple vowel' (1968: II, 702).<sup>11</sup> In his review of Dobson, Danielsson (1959: 281) dismisses this

<sup>10</sup> On the 'Eastern Dialect' and the Mopsae in Gil see Dobson (1968: I, 147).

<sup>11</sup> Viëtor (1906: 30–1) follows Ellis in ascribing [y:] to Gil.

hypothesis as untenable by quoting what Dobson himself writes in his first volume, namely that the difference between the two writers ‘is really only in the method of transcription’ (1968: I, 85).<sup>12</sup> But this is not entirely true, for Gil writes that his dispute with Hart ‘concerns only sound’ (1621: B2<sup>v</sup>: ‘quia de sono tantum certamen est’). In the case of Gil’s transcription *vz* as opposed to Hart’s *iuz* ‘use’ (OF *use*, L *ūsus*) this means either of two things: (a) Gil erroneously ascribes to Hart the pronunciation /ju:z/ or (b) Gil criticizes Hart’s use of *iu* because it could be taken to represent /ju:/, as in the ‘affected’ speech of the Mopsae.<sup>13</sup> In either case, Gil’s objection is quite understandable, since, as we have seen, Hart uses *iu* also to represent /j/ plus /u/ in *you* (< ME *yū*), which Gil transcribes as *yü*, i.e. *yū* (ME *yō*), beside the old variant *you* (approximately [jəu] < ME *yū*, OE *eōw*) (1621: 46. 2–3, etc.).

The fact that Gil chose a single letter and not a digraph to represent the reflex of IME /iu/ can easily be explained in the context of his approach to the reform of English spelling and by keeping in mind that the contemporary pronunciation of Gr *υ* was reproduced with the reflex of IME /iu/.

Gil gives no description of the articulation of vowels, because his aim as a spelling reformer was to devise a script based on all the available letters known to him – so much so that he criticized Hart for omitting ‘certain very useful letters’ (‘nonnullas literas ad usum pernecessarias’; 1621: B2<sup>v</sup>.40–1). Letters and their ‘powers’ are indeed very important for Gil, who is not infrequently influenced by the traditional spelling. He thus transcribes words like *wine* (OE *wīn*) with *j* (1621: 7.25), although he certainly used a diphthong (approximately [əi]) for the reflex of ME /ī/. His aim, here, was to differentiate the *i* in words like *wine* from the *i* in words like *win* (OE *winnan*; 1621: 7.24). When confronted with words spelt with *u* the matter was of course more complicated, because he had to employ three different letters. The first two could easily be found: *u* for *spun* (OE *gespunnen*; 1621: 13.10) and *ü* (i.e. *ū*) for *spoon* (OE *spōn*; 1621: 13.11). But what about the *u* of words like *due* and *true*? The solution was near at hand, since the Greek letter *upsilon* was exactly what a learned man like Gil needed for his script. Nor should it be forgotten that this solution allowed Gil to distinguish words with IME /iu/ from words with IME /εu/ (e.g. *fēu* ‘few’; 1621: 15.12) without having to employ *iu*, which might be taken to represent /ju:/. Gil’s choice obviously implied that words with IME /iu/ represented by a digraph had to be transcribed with *v*, as in *nv* ‘new’ (1621: 117.15, etc.) and *knv* (OE *cnēow*; 1621: 116.21, etc.), but this was inevitable and constituted no problem to a man who had set out to devise ‘a full and perfect alphabet’ (‘alfabetum plenum & perfectum’; 1621: 5.17).

Gil’s use of the Greek letter *upsilon* for the reflex of IME /iu/ is exemplified by such instances as *dv* ‘due’ (1621: 103.16, etc.), *nv* ‘new’ (1621: 117.15, etc.) and *trv* ‘true’ (1621: 27.30, etc.), as well as by the old variant *yvth* ‘youth’ (1621: 40.2, etc.), which

<sup>12</sup> In his review of Dobson, Ekwall had advanced a similar objection (1958: 308). In his history of Modern English sounds and morphology he regards all evidence in favour of [y:] as dubious (1922: §64).

<sup>13</sup> Zachrisson (1927: 81, fn. 1) suggests that Gil included *iu* among the linguistic inventions of the Mopsae merely because he considered the diphthong in *use* as a simple vowel.



seems to have /iu/ from /iu:/ owing to the development of a glide-vowel after /j/ in ME *yūþ* (OE *iugub*) – cf. Dobson (1968: II, 699, fn. 1).

That even a learned man like Gil cannot be taken to have used [y:] for the reflex of IME /iu/ is confirmed by William Salesbury, the well-known humanist scholar. As a Welshman educated at Oxford who spoke English from childhood, Salesbury was able to distinguish Welsh (and Greek) [y:] from English [iu]. In a marginal note to his treatise on the pronunciation of Welsh, he writes that ‘the englishe Scolers tongues be marueilously tormented in soundyng of the Greke *ypsilon* and yet atain not to the right sound’ (1567: 763).

We may then conclude that Gil’s evidence cannot be adduced to show the existence in early Modern English of a vowel [y:] as a variant of the reflex of IME /iu/.

### 3.3 John Wallis

John Wallis is clearly influenced by the same tradition of keeping to the ‘power’ of letters, and his comments on articulation are essentially derived from Hart, with whom he shares a digraphic transcription of the reflex of IME /iu/. Hart transcribes this reflex with *iu*, whereas Wallis prefers *iw* (cf. Robinson, above). Dobson writes that Wallis ‘includes in his vowel-system a labial vowel which is clearly [y:]; he explicitly says that it, like French *u*, is “sonus simplex” and contrasts it with [iu], “sonus compositus”’ (1968: II, 704).

But the passage in question and the whole context of Wallis’ testimony must be examined more closely. In his treatise *De Loquela*, Wallis introduces ‘thin *u*’ as a very familiar sound to the English and French (‘Anglis simul & Gallis notissimum’, 1699: 4), and says that the English use it in words with ‘long *u*’ like *mute*, *tune*, etc. as well as in words with *eu* and *ew* like *new*, *brew*, *lieu*, etc. (all with IME /iu/), although the latter are more correctly pronounced with retained ‘masculine *e*’ (‘quae tamen rectius pronunciatur retento etiam sono *e* masculi’; 1699: 4). With the latter variant Wallis means his reflex of IME /εu/ (probably [eu]) as an alternative to /iu/, which is attested by his transcriptions *niwter* ‘neuter’, *fiw* ‘few’, *biwty* ‘beauty’ (1699: 22, s.v. *eu*, *ew*, *eau*). The ‘thin *u*’ (‘*ú* exile’; 1699: 4) of the English and French he calls a ‘simple sound’, as opposed to the Spanish *iu* in a word like *ciudad* ‘city’ (‘est enim *iu* sonus compositus, at Anglorum & Gallorum *ú* sonus simplex’; 1699: 4). Now, since the Spanish word has [ju], it appears that Wallis (like Gil before him) rejects /ju:/ and calls /iu/ a simple sound because of spellings like *mute*, *tune*, etc. and because of the well-known substitution of Eng /iu ~ ju:/ for /y/ representing Fr *u* and Gr *v*.

That this is the correct interpretation is shown by two passages in the *Grammatica linguae Anglicanae*. In the first, Wallis introduces the English ‘long *u*’ and writes that it is pronounced like the French ‘thin *u*’, but almost as a combination of *ĩ* and *w* (‘Sono nempe quasi composito ex *ĩ* & *w*’; 1699: 22). Having described this sound as simple, Wallis was of course obliged to qualify his statement. In the second passage, Wallis comments on the ‘diphthongs’ *eu*, *ew* and *eau* and writes that /εu/ is used in words like *neuter*, *few*, *beauty* (all with IME /εu/), but that /iu/ is also possible (*niwter*, *fiw*, *biwty*),



especially in words like *new*, *knew*, *snew* ‘snowed’ (all with IME /iu/), although the pronunciation with ‘clear è’ (i.e. [e])<sup>14</sup> is more correct (‘At prior pronunciatio rector est’; 1699: 22). It is then clear that Wallis is here contrasting two diphthongs, one with [e] and one with [i] in combination with the second element [u]. The diphthong /iu/ he assigns to words with IME /iu/ such as *new* (OE *nīwe*, *nēowe*), *brew* (OE *brēowan*), *snew* (OE *snēow*), *mute* (OF *müet*, L *mūtus*), *tune* (AN *tun*, OF *ton*), etc. The diphthong /eu/ he gives as an alternative pronunciation in words with IME /eu/, such as *neuter*, *few*, *beauty*, etc.

We may then conclude that the evidence provided by Wallis does not support the assumption of a pronunciation [y:] for the reflex of IME /iu/.

### 3.4 William Holder

In his *Elements of Speech* William Holder aims at enquiring ‘into the natural production of letters’ (1669: 1) with a view to establishing in theory all the possible sounds of speech. His interest in the potentialities of the organs of speech is justified by his chief purpose, which is ‘to prepare a more easie and expedite way to instruct such as are Deaf and Dumb’ (1669: 15).<sup>15</sup> A good example of his theoretical approach occurs in a passage in which he deals with the articulation of vowels: ‘There is so much space between *a* and *e*, that there may be a vowel inserted between them, and a fit character for it may be *æ*, and perhaps some Languages may have a distinct use of such a vowel’ (1669: 81).

This comment seems to indicate a realization [a] for the reflex of ME /a/, but Holder’s evidence is not always easy to interpret, because he adduces only a few word examples and even fewer transcriptions. His work is a valuable study in phonetic theory, but the scarcity of his examples and the fact they are not always readily reconcilable with his descriptions and classifications certainly impair its utility. Moreover, although he declares that he has avoided reading the writings of other men,<sup>16</sup> Holder surely knew the work of John Wilkins, whom he sometimes follows, at least in the use of certain symbols (see below). Nor should it be forgotten that, as a member of the Royal Society, Holder was personally well acquainted with his fellows Wilkins and Wallis, who shared with him a keen interest in pronunciation.

Dobson regards Holder as an accomplished phonetician and possibly the best authority for /y:/ in early Modern English (1968: I, 265–6; II, 701–2), whereas Danielsson dismisses Holder’s description of the symbol *u* as ‘an excellent one of [iu]’ (1959: 281).

The controversial passage deals with the two ‘letters’ *u* and *υ* (a ligature taken from Wilkins),<sup>17</sup> which Holder describes in detail before coming to the conclusion that

<sup>14</sup> This ‘è clarum’ appears to be identical with ‘é masculinum’, which is said to be pronounced with an acute and clear sound (‘sono acuto claroque, ut Gallorum é masculinum’ (1699: 18).

<sup>15</sup> On Holder’s activities concerning the deaf see his *Appendix Concerning Persons Deaf & Dumb* (1669: 111–58).

<sup>16</sup> Holder (1669: 20–1): ‘And although I have bin told of some more accurate Authors who take not the vulgar Alphabets and Rudiments of Grammar for their Canon; yet I have refrained to look into them, for fear of being led away by other men’s fancies; whereas I rather chose to consult Nature at Hand.’

<sup>17</sup> Wilkins (1668: 364): A character ‘which is used in Greek for ou Diphthong’.

vowels can have a labial point of articulation (1669: 87–9). Holder’s list of word examples for his eight English vowels presents difficulties (cf. Dobson 1968: I, 265–9), but the quality of *ɜ* – exemplified by *two* (1669: 81) – can be shown to be [u], since Holder uses the same symbol for the semivowel of a word like *waul* ‘to howl’, transcribed as ‘*ɜaʊl*’ (1669: 95).<sup>18</sup>

With regard to the vowel *u*, Holder says that it is articulated ‘by the Tong and Lip’ and that the tongue is ‘in the same posture’ as *i*. He then adds that it is ‘framed by a double motion of Organs, that of the Lip, added to that of the Tong’, so that it is ‘a single Letter, and not two, because the motions are at the same time, and not successive, as are *eu. pla. &c.*’ (1669: 87–8). He then goes on to observe that *u* does not seem to be absolutely so simple a vowel as the rest, because the voice passes ‘successively from the Palat to the Lips’, where it is ‘first moulded into the figures of *oo* and *i*, before it be fully Articulated by the Lips’ (1669: 88). This qualification has been taken by Danielsson (1959: 281) and others before him (Jespersen 1907: 54–6; Zachrisson 1927: 84; Ekwall 1958: 308) as attesting a pronunciation [iu] rather than [y:]. But Holder is merely saying that [y] differs from other simple vowels because it is formed by combining two articulations: that of [u] and that of [i]. Like Hart before him, Holder considers ‘labial’ as the distinctive feature of [u], so that the point of articulation of his *oo* is provided by the lips, not by the position of the tongue.<sup>19</sup>

Holder himself proves Danielsson wrong when he writes: ‘Thus *u* will be onely *i* Labial ..., that is, by adding that motion of the under-Lip, *i* will become *u*’, i.e. [y] (1669: 90).<sup>20</sup> What Holder is trying to say finds an almost exact parallel in Hart, who gives an accurate description of [y:] but calls it a diphthong. Unlike Hart, Holder does not normally mention or discuss foreign languages, since he is chiefly concerned with the potentialities of the organs of speech. Yet he says that [y:] is not ‘so simple a vowel as the rest’ (1669: 88) because it combines the tongue position of [i] with the lip-rounding that characterizes the vowel [u].

However, what really matters in this context is that Holder is describing a theoretical vowel, just as he did when dealing with *æ* (see above). As Dobson notes (1968: I, 269, fn. 2), Holder’s argumentations about ‘labial vowels’ must take account of the discussion of phonetic theory by members of the Royal Society. Wallis and Wilkins postulate three ‘labial vowels’ ([o], [u] and [y]), whereas Holder maintains that the labialization of *o* is not essential and accepts only *u* and *ɜ* ([y] and [u]) as ‘labials’. Now, the problem with Holder is always examples and lack of transcriptions. Wallis describes [y] but transcribes the reflex of IME /iu/ (as in *new*, *mute*, etc) with *iw* (see above); Wilkins describes [y] but says that *i* and *u*, as in *light* and *lute* (OFr [e]ut) are

<sup>18</sup> Dobson writes that this is probably ‘a rare and old-fashioned’ diphthongal pronunciation (1968: I, 269), but it could also be explained as a case in which /au/ was preserved because of the echoic nature of the word.

<sup>19</sup> Holder also writes that if we do not admit *u* (i.e. [y]), as well as *ɜ* (i.e. [u]) as single vowels, we must exclude the lips ‘from being the Organs of any single Vowel’ (1669: 88–9). But this has nothing to do (despite Ekwall 1958: 308 and Danielsson 1959: 281) with Holder’s description of his ‘letter’ *u*.

<sup>20</sup> Yet Zachrisson maintains that ‘this description applies both to (ju:) and to (y:)’ (1927: 85). For a rejection of Jespersen’s and Zachrisson’s views see Dobson (1968: I, 265–6).

diphthongs (1668: 364). Holder follows them in correctly describing [y], but gives no transcription for his sole example *rule* (AN, OF *rule*), which has ‘long *u*’, the reflex of IME /iu/ traditionally associated (though not identified) with French [y].

Dobson (1968: I, 265–9) does his best to make order in the confusion created by Holder’s word examples for each of his eight English vowels. Yet, when dealing with Holder’s consonantal use of *u*, he must admit that it is ‘merely a theoretical concept’ (1968: I, 269). However, Dobson does not mention Holder’s sole example for the consonantal use of *u*, namely *euge* (Greek εὖγε) ‘well done’, which provides indisputable evidence that Holder’s examples cannot be adduced as reliable evidence for real pronunciations.

That Holder’s choice of *rule* was suggested by the spelling rather than by a real pronunciation is indeed confirmed by his theoretical discussion of diphthongs, which he rejects in favour of a consonantal use of the three highest vowels *i*, *ɜ* and *u* ([i], [u] and [y]) preceded or followed by another vowel (1669: 93–5). When he comes to exemplifying the consonantal use of [y] (1669: 95), the only instance Holder can provide is *euge* (Greek εὖγε) ‘well done’, now pronounced /ˈjuːdʒi:/. This word exhibits the reflex of IME /eu/ (> /iu/), which in Holder’s notation would be *eɜ*, *ew* or *iɜ*, *iw*, a sequence of vowel plus consonant which is said to require two successive articulations (1669: 88). In the same context, Holder offers *wawl* ‘to howl’ as an example of the consonantal use of [u] (see above) and provides the transcriptions ‘*ɜ*awl, *wawl*’ (1669: 95). For *euge* he gives no transcription, but his example cannot be taken to have been actually pronounced with [iy] (or [ey]).<sup>21</sup>

Having refused to recognize the existence of diphthongs (apart from the ‘improper’ *ea*, *oa* and the ‘vulgar’ *i* in *stile*; 1669: 94–5), Holder cannot provide a real example of consonantal [y] (as in, e.g., French *huit*, /ɥit/) and takes refuge in the far-fetched instance *euge*, in which, as he writes, *u* follows *e* (1669: 94–5). If he is not confusing letters with sounds, Holder is here pointing to a diphthongal pronunciation for what other writers call ‘long *u*’ (written *eu*, *ew*, *eau*), which was traditionally associated not only with Fr *u* and Gr *υ*, but also with Gr *ευ* (cf. Cooper’s testimony, below). Be that as it may, there seems to be no doubt that the unique example *euge* (Greek εὖγε) shows that in discussing the ‘letter’ *u* Holder was thinking of the traditional pronunciation of Greek *upsilon*. His symbol *u* stands for [y] (which he accurately describes), but his discussion of the consonantal use of the three highest vowels *i*, *ɜ* and *u* confirms that [y] did not exist in his type of speech and that his reflex of IME /iu/ was a diphthong which may or may not have included the reflex of IME /eu/.

<sup>21</sup> Dobson (1968: II, 708) rightly rejects Luick’s view (1928: 323–4) that John Ray’s statements show [iy] or [iy:] for the reflex of IME /iu/ and suggests (1968: II, 709) confusion between French /y/ and a fronted variety of English [u] after /j/ (‘provided that the [j] is kept’). An alternative explanation is that Ray’s ‘French or whistling *u*’ as the second element of /iu/ (1691: 156) reflects confusion between [y] and [u] in a diphthongal pronunciation [iʉ]. Ray writes: ‘As for the Letter *u* in *use*, *muse*. &c. my Lord of *Chester* [i.e. John Wilkins] would have it to be a Diphthong, and the Vowel which terminates the Diphthong, or the Subjunctive Vowel to be *oo*, wherein I cannot agree with him, the Subjunctive Vowel seeming to me rather to be the *French* or whistling *u*, there seeming to me to be a manifest difference between *Luke* and *Look*, *Luce* and *Loose*, and that there is nothing of the sound of the latter in the former.’

As in the case of Gil and other authorities, Holder is influenced by the spelling and by traditional descriptions of Greek *υ*. That his reflex of IME /iu/ in *rule* cannot have been /y:/ is confirmed also by the evidence of John Wilkins. In his *Essay towards a Real Character and a Philosophical Language*, Wilkins explicitly says that ‘*u Gallicum, or whistling u*’ is not used in English (1668: 363). For the reflex of IME /iu/ he uses the digraph *iv* (1668: 373, i.e. *iw*) in his transcriptions of *crucified* (OF *crucifier*) and *communion* (AN *communion*). For the reflex of IME /εu/ he gives the diphthong *ev* (1668: 371, i.e. *ew*), as in *hew* (OE *hēawan*).

As mentioned above, Wilkins was Holder’s close contemporary and, like him, Fellow of the Royal Society. If Holder’s reflex of IME /iu/ had been [y], Wilkins would not have written that ‘the *u Gallicum, or whistling u*’ is of ‘laborious and difficult pronunciation to all those Nations amongst whom it is not used (as to the English)’ (1668: 363).

A younger contemporary, Christopher Cooper, writes of a diphthong *iu* (‘quem vocamus *u longum*’; 1685: 27) in *mute* and *neuter* (1685: 16), as well as in *huge* (OF *ahuge*), *chew* (OE *cēowan*), etc., adding that the English use it for L *eu* and Gr *ευ* (‘sic semper pronunciamus *eu latinum & ευ Græcum*’; 1685: 28). He then compares the English diphthong to Fr *u* but states that this vowel is difficult and peculiar to the French (‘*difficilis & Gallis propria*’; 1685: 27–8).

In his short review of some early authorities<sup>22</sup> Roger Lass (1999: 98–9) refers to Cooper’s comparison of the English diphthong to Fr *u*,<sup>23</sup> but he does not mention Cooper’s very clear statement that [y] is difficult and peculiar to the French. Confronted with apparently irreconcilable statements, Lass prefers to assume that ‘both the diphthongal descriptions and the likening to French /y/’ may be accommodated by assuming that the reflex of IME /iu/ was realized as [iü] or [iu], later [jü:] or [ju:], and that ‘Early Modern /y:/, like late ME /y:/, is imaginary’ (1999: 99). Such a solution is not new<sup>24</sup> and is of course quite legitimate, at least in a work of wide scope, but it fails to explain the apparently conflicting evidence of the early sources.

When dealing with the early authorities who do not recognize or explicitly deny the existence of [y:], Dobson (1968: II, 710–11) observes that (i) the early writers on orthography and pronunciation tended to deny ‘the existence of well-established pronunciations which they did not happen to use themselves’; (ii) the vowel ‘[y:], if it existed, was only a diaphonic variant of [iu]’ (i.e. a variant ‘used by different speakers or by the same man in different styles of speech’; 1968: II, 704, fn.); (iii) the vowel ‘[y:] (again if it existed) was obviously always the rarer variant, and by the second half of the seventeenth century may have been obsolescent’.

However, all these arguments cannot obscure the fact that (i) our authorities tend to condemn pronunciations which they did not use themselves, but none of them

<sup>22</sup> Lass mentions Hart for /iu/, as well as Cooper and Wallis for apparently conflicting statements.

<sup>23</sup> This is Cooper’s statement: ‘the same almost with the French whistling *u*’ (1687: 9).

<sup>24</sup> See, e.g., Matthews (1959: 362): ‘Orthoepical variation (even in a single source) between [iu] and [y:] might be resolved by postulating [iu]’. Zachrisson, who rejects [y:], suggests [ü] as the second element of the diphthong (1927: 95).

condemns the use of an alleged [y:] in the English language; (ii) none of them mentions [y:] as a variant, diaphonic or otherwise, while some of them explicitly state that [y:] is not used in English; (iii) little more than a century earlier, when the alleged [y:] cannot be said to have been obsolescent, William Salesbury states that Welsh *u* (i.e. [y:]) is not like English *u* in *sure*, though it is like French *u*, Dutch (i.e. German) *ü* and ‘the Scottish pronunciation of *u*’ (1567: 760–1; cf. Dobson 1968: I, 16).

We may then conclude that the testimony of William Holder is only apparently in favour of an early Modern English vowel /y:/ instead of, or beside, the reflex of IME /iu/. Like Hart, he gives an accurate description of [y:] for his symbol *u*, but the evidence he provides shows that this cannot have been his reflex of IME /iu/.

#### 4 Conclusions

The early writers on orthography and pronunciation provide no reliable evidence for the existence of a vowel /y:/ in early Modern English. This conclusion appears to confirm the view that in the Middle English period, Anglo-Norman or French /y/ was normally replaced by native /iu/, except perhaps in highly cultivated types of speech (cf. Jordan 1934: §230 and Dobson 1968: II, 711).

The actual realization in early Modern English of the reflex of IME /iu/ cannot be ascertained, but the variation occurring in some types of American English (Kenyon 1967: §§341–50; Kenyon & Knott 1953: §§22, 109) suggests that it may have varied between [iu] and [ɪu]. The fact that in those types of American English words with ‘long *u*’ in initial position exhibit /ju:/ (as in *use*) appears to confirm that the development to /ju:/ first occurred in that position (cf. Dobson 1968: II, 705). In the types of speech exhibiting the advanced pronunciation /ju:/ ~ /u:/ (as in *use* and *rude*) the second element of the sequence /ju:/ may well have been fronted to [ɪu] as in present Standard English (cf. Dobson 1968: II, 709 and fn. 24, above).

*Author's address:*

*Dipartimento di Lingue e Letterature Straniere  
Università degli Studi di Milano  
Via Carlo Ravizza 14  
I-20149 Milan  
Italy  
[fausto.cercignani@unimi.it](mailto:fausto.cercignani@unimi.it)*

#### References

- Bergs, Alexander & Laurel J. Brinton (eds.). 2017. *The history of English*, vol. 4: *Early Modern English*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
- Cercignani, Fausto. 1981. *Shakespeare's works and Elizabethan pronunciation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Cooper, Christopher. 1685. *Grammatica linguae Anglicanae*. London: Benjamin Tooke.
- Cooper, Christopher. 1687. *The English teacher*. London: Walter Kettleby.

- Danielsson, Bror. 1959. Review of E. J. Dobson, *English Pronunciation 1500–1700*. 1957. *Studia Neophilologica* 31, 275–84.
- Danielsson, Bror. 1963. *John Hart's works*, vol. 2: *Phonology*. Stockholm, Almqvist & Wiksell.
- Dobson, E. J. 1955. Early Modern Standard English. *Transactions of the Philological Society* 54, 25–54.
- Dobson, E. J. 1968. *English pronunciation 1500–1700*, 2nd edn, vols. I–II. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ekwall, Eilert. 1922. *Historische neuenglische Laut- und Formenlehre*, 2nd edn (1st edn 1914). Leipzig: Göschen.
- Ekwall, Eilert. 1958. Review of E. J. Dobson, *English pronunciation 1500–1700*. *Review of English Studies* 9 (35) 303–12.
- Ellis, Alexander J. 1869. *On Early English pronunciation*, vol. I. London: Philological Society.
- Gil, Alexander. 1621. *Logonomia Anglica*, 2nd edn (1st edn 1619). London: Johannes Beale.
- Hart, John. 1569. *An orthographie*. London: William Seres.
- Holder, William. 1669. *Elements of speech: An essay of inquiry into the natural production of letters, with an appendix concerning persons deaf & dumb*. London: Royal Society.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1907. *John Hart's Pronunciation of English*. Heidelberg: Winter.
- Jespersen, Otto. 1928. *A modern English grammar*, 3rd edn, vol. I (1st edn 1909). Heidelberg: Winter.
- Jordan, Richard. 1934. *Handbuch der mittelenglischen Grammatik*, 2nd edn revised by H. Ch. Matthes (1st edn 1925), Heidelberg: Winter.
- Kenyon, John Samuel. 1967. *American pronunciation*, 10th edn. Ann Arbor: George Whar.
- Kenyon, John Samuel & Thomas Albert Knott. 1953. *A pronouncing dictionary of American English*, 4th edn. Springfield, MA: Merriam.
- Kökeritz, Helge. 1961. Review of E. J. Dobson, *English pronunciation 1500–1700*, 1957. *Language* 37(1), 150–61.
- Lass, Roger. 1999. *The Cambridge history of the English language*, vol. III: 1476–1776. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Luick, Karl. 1921. Beiträge zur Englischen Grammatik. *Anglia* 45, 132–81.
- Luick, Karl. 1921–40. *Historische Grammatik der englischen Sprache*, vol. I, 1–2. Leipzig: Tauchnitz.
- Luick, Karl. 1928. Ein bisher unbeachtetes Zeugnis für den frühneuenglischen Lautwert des Vokals in use. *Anglia Beiblatt* 39, 323–4.
- Matthews, William. 1959. Review of E. J. Dobson, *English pronunciation 1500–1700*. *Modern Language Notes* 74 (4), 356–63.
- Quirk, Randolph & W. M. Smith. 1958. Review of E. J. Dobson, *English pronunciation 1500–1700*. *The Modern Language Review* 53(2), 228–31.
- Ray, John. 1691. *Collection of English words not generally used*. With: *An account of some errors and defects in our English alphabet, orthography, and manner of spelling*. London: Wilkinson.
- Robinson, Robert. c.1617. = Dobson, E. J. (ed.). 1957. *The phonetic writings of Robert Robinson*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Salesbury, William. 1567. *A briefe and a playne Introduction, teaching how to pronounce the letters in the Brytische tongue, now commonly called Welshe*. Reprint in A. J. Ellis. 1870. *On early English pronunciation*, vol. III, 743–68. London: Trübner.
- Schlüter, Julia. 2017. Phonology. In Bergs & Brinton (eds.), 27–46.
- Viëtor, Wilhelm. 1906. *A Shakespeare phonology*. Marburg: Elwert.
- Wallis, John. 1699. *Opera mathematica*, 5th edn (1st edn 1653), vol. 3: *Grammatica linguae Anglicanae cui praefigitur De Loquela, Tractatus Grammatico-Physicus*. Oxford: Sheldonian Theatre.



- Wilkins, John. 1668. *Essay towards a real character and a philosophical language*. London: Royal Society.
- Wyld, Henry Cecil. 1927. *A short history of English*, 3rd edn (1st edn 1914). London: Murray.
- Wyld, Henry Cecil. 1936. *A history of modern colloquial English*, 3rd edn (1st edn 1920). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Zachrisson, R. E. 1912. *Pronunciation of English vowels 1400–1700*. Uppsala: Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskaps-Samfundet.
- Zachrisson, R. E. 1927. *The English pronunciation at Shakespeare's time as taught by William Bullokar*. Uppsala: Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskaps-Samfundet.