The Change from the suffix th to s, in the Third Person.

Present Tense of the verb: A Problem in the History of English Language

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The suffix th, of the third person, present tense of the verb had begun, as early as the eleventh century, to be softened to s.¹ The transition was gradual, proceeding more rapidly in some parts of England than in others. At the present time the English may be said to have the form s in common use, and the archaic form th, still used occasionally in poetry.

The change from th to s may be followed by examining the prose and poetry, written in different periods, in the different parts of England. The two departments—prose and poetry, should for this purpose, be studied separately. Ten pages was the amount considered in the case of each author examined. The prose writers were considered first.

Leonard Cox, a Cambridge man, prose writer of Central England, whose chief work—"Art and Craft of Rhetoric", appeared 1524, had in ten pages—thirty cases of the suffix th in the third person, present tense of the verb. Miles Coverdale, a Cambridge man, of Northern England—"Prologue to Translation of the Bible", 
1523 - twenty-two cases th. Nicholas Udall, an Oxford man of Southern England - "Ralph Roister Doister", 1536 - eighteen cases th. Thomas Cranmer of Central England - "Use of Holy Scriptures", 1540 - thirty-eight cases th. Roger Ascham, a Cambridge Professor, from Northern England in "Toxophilus", 1544, had twenty-six cases th and three cases of s - "a place that entreats", "my head aches", and "every evil proves".2


Sir David Lindsay, a Scotch poet, in "First Book of the Monarche", 1546 - two cases *th*. He used many


Thomas Tusser of Southern England, Cambridge, in "Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry", 1573 - five cases th and five of s.17 George Gascoigne in "Steel Glas", a satire, 1575 used eight cases of th to seven of s.18


Christopher Marlowe, Cambridge, dramatist of Southern England - "Doctor Faustus", 1587 - four cases th to eighteen of s.21 Thomas Kyd, dramatist of Southern

William Shakspere of Central England in "Venus and Adonis", 1593 - ten cases th to twenty-seven of s, 25 and in "Lucrece", 1594 - five cases th to fourteen of s. 26 Michael Drayton, a poet of Central England in "Ideas Mirror", 1594 - five cases th to sixteen of s. 27

In the case of the transition from th to s in prose, a writer from Northern England - Roger Ascham, 1544, seems to have taken the lead in breaking away from the original verbal suffix th. The suffix s did not appear again in prose for nine years, in the writings of Thomas Wilson, of Central England, and here only sparingly.

The next suffix s appeared in the prose of John Lyly, of Southern England, twenty-six years later; in that of Thomas Lodge and of Anthony Munday, also of Southern England, in the same year. The use of the verbal suffix s is a little later found in the case of the prose writers of Southern England and still later in the case of writers of Central England.
The change seems to have started in the North, and to have proceeded through Central England to the South where it remained for some time, finally increasing in proportion to the decrease of th in Central England. The earlier employers in prose of the suffix s in the third person, present tense of the verb, were from Cambridge University, in Central England, while most of the writers who employed s a little later were from Oxford University in South Central England. Those using s still later were mostly from Cambridge. The question of the transition can hardly be said to have been influenced by one University, more than by the other.

The transition in the case of poetry was still less decisive. The first poet of those considered who employed the verbal suffix s was Thomas Sackville of Southern England, 1561. The substitution proceeded rapidly through Central England and to Northern England within five years - in the poetry of George Gascoigne, 1566. For many years following, the two verbal suffixes continued in almost equal use in Northern and Southern England, until finally the poets of Southern England employed the verbal suffix s in more cases than th. This use spread through Central England until in Michael
Drayton's poetry, 1594 - there were five cases th to sixteen of s.

The use of the suffix s first exceeds that of th in the writings of Barnabe Googe, an Oxford man of Central England, while the next poets who showed a decided increase were Cambridge men. In later years Oxford men again came to the front in the use of the suffix s.

The study of the transition of verbal suffixes in poetry is less satisfactory than that of prose because the employment of th covered a much longer period in poetry - in fact th has never completely died out in the case of poetry.


26. "Lucrece", William Shakspeare, ed. Chas. Praetorius,