

Sounding the Sonnets

We can learn more about Shakespeare's Sonnets if we put an Elizabethan ear to them, writes **David Crystal**.

Anyone who reads the Sonnets can't avoid feeling a little discomfited by the fact that, in modern English, the rhymes don't always work. In a sequence where rhyme is plainly the be-all and end-all of the genre, the clashing syllables inevitably diminish the aesthetic effect. This example from Sonnet 25 illustrates the problem:

Then happy I that love and am beloved
Where I may not remove, nor be removed.

It is a frequent difficulty. There are 19 instances where *love* is made to rhyme with *prove*, *move*, and their derived forms. And when we look at all the Sonnets, we find a remarkable 141 rhyme pairs that clash (13% of all lines). Moreover, these are found in 96 of the Sonnets. In sum: only a third of the Sonnets rhyme perfectly in modern English. And in 18 instances, it is the final couplet which fails to work, leaving a particularly bad taste in the ear.

Might the discrepancies be explained by the notion of an 'eye-rhyme' – words which look the same but sound different?

Certainly, eye-rhymes are increasingly encountered in English literature after the Middle English period –

a consequence of more private reading of poetry, less oral performance, and the emergence of a more standardized spelling system. But eye-rhyme was never a dominant shaping influence on the poetry of the Elizabethan period, and it certainly can't be

invoked to explain the auditory anomalies in Shakespeare's Sonnets. There are simply too many of them. I can't believe that someone could write a sonnet in which four of the seven line-pairs are eye-rhymes, as happens in Sonnets 72 and 154. Another five have three line-pairs anomalous (17, 61, 105, 116, 136). A further 29 have two line-pairs affected.

Benedick (*Much Ado*, 5.2.35) is one of many lovers who make it clear that good rhymes are prerequisite for romantic success, and all the evidence points to auditory rhyme as the basic criterion for sonnets. Even if we allow that there may be the occasional eye-rhyme, I agree with Helge Kökeritz, who says in his *Shakespeare's Pronunciation*, 'No magic formula exists by means of which we can single out the eye rhymes in Shakespeare'. Interestingly, the examples of half-rhymes which can be found in the Sonnets are all auditory rather than visual in character: *open/broken* (61), *character/register* (108), *spirit/merit* (108), *remembered/tendered* (120), and *canopy/eternity* (125).

Far more satisfying is to take on board a phonetic perspective, recognizing that the reason rhymes fail to work today is because pronunciation has changed since the 16th century. Regular readers of *Around the Globe* will recall that the company took this

principle on board in 2004 and 2005, when it presented *Romeo and Juliet* and *Troilus and Cressida* in 'original pronunciation' (OP). These productions gave us a novel and illuminating auditory experience, and introduced us to rhymes and puns which modern English totally obscures. The same thing happens when the Sonnets are rendered in OP.

How do we know how words sounded 400 years ago? The spellings provide one clue. What is the evidence for *achieve* rhyming with *live* and *taste* rhyming with *last* (with a short vowel)? The words are sometimes spelled *atchive* and *tast*. Puns provide more evidence. How do we know that *tongue* rhymed with *song*? Because of puns like *tongues* and *tongs* (eg in *The Tempest*). But the most important source of information is in the writing of the orthoepists and grammarians, who often tell us which words rhyme and which don't. Ben Jonson is better known as a playwright than as a grammarian, but he did write an *English Grammar* in which he gives details about how letters should be pronounced. How do we know that *prove* rhymed with *love*? This is what he says about the letter *O* in Chapter 4. 'It naturally soundeth ... In the short time more flat, and akin to *u*; as *cosen*,

dosen, *mother*, *brother*, *love*, *prove*'. In another section, he brings together *love*, *glove* and *move*.

This isn't to deny, of course, that other pronunciations existed at the time. That's a normal experience, especially when people from very different linguistic

backgrounds end up living near each other, as was the norm in 16th-century London (or indeed today). Thus, just as we find today two pronunciations of such words as *again* (rhyming with both *main* and *men*), *says* (rhyming with both *lays* and *Les*), *often* (with or without the 't'), *schedule* (with 'sh' or 'sk'), and hundreds more, so in 1600 we find alternative pronunciations for *gone* (rhyming with *alone* and *on*), the *-ly* ending on adverbs rhyming with *be* and *eye*, and so on. *Love* may actually have had a long vowel in some regional dialects, as suggested by the Devonshire man John Hart in 1570 (think of the lengthening we sometimes hear from singers today, who croon 'I lurve you'). But the overriding impression from contemporaries is that the vowel in *love* was short.

The tendency of the time to drop the 'h' at the beginning of words would have offered people the choice of a casual versus a colloquial reading. *H*-dropping was certainly often done, as we know from such Shakespearean usages as *an Hebrew*, *t'hold*, *Ercles*, *th'harmony*, *Abram* (*Abraham*), *dungell* (*dunghill*), and many more. So should we drop *h*'s in an OP reading of the Sonnets? Doubtless there were those who declaimed their sonnets in a consciously poetic style, 'mouthing' rather than

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speaking 'trippingly', and carefully pronouncing all the *h*'s. But it is difficult to imagine a poetic style for the opening of Sonnet 40, with its markedly colloquial syntax:

Take all my loves, my love, yea, take them all;
What hast thou then more than thou hadst before?

Would someone who has just said 'mi luv' and 'yeah' pronounce *hast* and *hadst* with full-blown *h*'s? (Holofernes would, of course.)

Here are a few examples of line pairs which work well in OP, from Sonnets 32, 36, and 83:

But since he died and poets better prove,
Theirs for their style I'll read, his for his love.

Let me confess that we two must be twain,
Although our undivided loves are one: [pronounced 'ohn']
So shall those blots that do with me remain,
Without thy help, by me be borne alone.

This silence for my sin you did impute,
Which shall be most my glory being dumb,
For I impair not beauty being mute,
When others would give life, and bring a tomb. [pronounced 'tum']

But it is not only the rhymes which gain from an OP reading. Interesting assonances are revealed too. Take this extract from Sonnet 55: the underlined syllables echo each other:

When wasteful war shall statues overturn,
And broils root out the work of masonry,
Nor Mars his sword nor war's quick fire shall burn
The living record of your memory.

Waste was pronounced 'wast' (like *fast*, both with a short *a*) and *war* was pronounced 'wahr', as was the beginning of *work*. A new auditory aesthetic is the result.

Or note what happens when we read Sonnet 53, with its repeated instances of *one* ('ohn'). Apart from the new resonance in line 3, there is a new pun in line 4: *one/own* now neatly opposes *lend*.

What is your substance, whereof are you made,
That millions of strange shadows on you tend?
Since every one hath, every one, one shade,
And you, but one, can every shadow lend.

Wordplay is an often noticed feature of the Sonnets, so it is fascinating to come across places where an OP rendition brings to light a possible new reading. Note the effect in line 5 of Sonnet 95, for example. The words *vice* and *voice* would have sounded exactly the same. (The *Romeo* prologue has a similar pun: *loins* and *lines*.)

That tongue that tells the story of thy days
(Making lascivious comments on thy sport)
Cannot dispraise, but in a kind of praise,
Naming thy name, blesses an ill report.
Oh what a mansion have those vices got [voices]
Which for their habitation chose out thee,
And what might be made of the homophony between *hour* and *whore*, both pronounced 'ohr' in Sonnet 63?
Against my love shall be as I am now
With Time's injurious hand crushed and o'er-worn, [whore-worn?]

When hours have drained his blood and filled his brow
[whores?]

With lines and wrinkles, when his youthful morn
Hath travelled on to age's steepy night...
A great deal can be gained, it seems, from listening to the Sonnets with a 16th-century ear.

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