Sonnet XXIX

When, in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes,
I all alone beweep my outcast state
And trouble deal heaven with my bootless cries
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possess'd,
Desiring this man's art and that man's scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,
Like to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth, sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remember'd such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.

~William Shakespeare

The tongue that Shakespeare really spoke

David Crystal

In 2004, Shakespeare's Globe in London launched a bold experiment as part of a commitment to introduce 'original practices' into its reconstructed theatre. Along with the exploration of original music, instruments, costume, and movement, it decided to mount a production of Romeo and Juliet in original pronunciation (OP) – that is, the kind of accent that would have been heard on the Globe stage at the end of the 16th century.

The reconstructed Globe opened its doors in 1997. That it took so long to mount an OP production was due to a suspicion that the accent would not be intelligible; and for a theatre which was open only six months of the year, and where the lack of a public subsidy demanded full houses to ensure survival, management was reluctant to support any venture which might put off an audience. Once the realization dawned that the differences were not as great as feared, and that OP was no more difficult for an audience to understand than any modern regional accent, director Tim Carroll was able to get a proposal accepted to mount a production. It was a 'toe-in-the-water' acceptance. The Globe was still uncertain about how an OP event would go down, so they devoted only one weekend in the middle of the season to OP performances; the rest of the run was in Modern English. The poor actors, of course, had to learn the play twice, as a result. I tell the full story in Pronouncing Shakespeare (2005).

Romeo and Juliet was highly successful, and attracted a great deal of interest, so the Globe followed it up with a second OP production in 2005 – Troilus and Cressida. American visitors to those events took the idea home with them, and over the next few years extracts of plays in OP were presented in several cities. A further visit by a group from the University of Kansas theatre department led to an OP production of A Midsummer Night's Dream in 2010 (now available commercially), and in 2011 an OP production of Hamlet was mounted by the theatre department of the University of Nevada. Other productions are in the pipeline.

At the same time, interest was being shown in the expressive individuality of OP by other groups interested in the Early Modern English period, notably those involved in vocal music, both secular and religious. The prospect of using OP also appealed to people working at heritage sites reconstructing life in the 17th century, such as those at Plimouth Plantation (USA). Other authors from the period began to be explored from an OP point of view, such as John Donne, whose 1722 Easter Sermon outside St Paul's was recreated online in 2012, with the text being read in OP. And the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible led to a number of readings of biblical extracts in OP throughout 2011.

Meanwhile, the British Library decided to add an audio dimension to its 2010-11 exhibition on the history of the English language, Evolving English. This included an OP reading of extracts from Old and Middle English, such as Beowulf and The Canterbury Tales, as well as some from Early Modern English, such as the Paston letters and Shakespeare. The latter attracted special interest, so the Library followed it up in 2012 by publishing a CD of extracts from the plays and poems, read by a company of actors, two of whom had been part of the Globe productions in 2004–5.

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Motivation

Why do people want to reconstruct OP? The chief expressions of interest come from theatre directors, actors, and performance poets – amateur as well as professional – who want to get as close as possible to how Shakespeare's lines would have sounded in his day. They are aware that when these lines are spoken in present-day English, the experience is not always satisfying, as the modern accent obscures important effects.

Rhymes

A significant number of lines which are supposed to rhyme do not do so because the pronunciation of one or both of the rhyming words has changed. For example, in 96 of the 154 sonnets a couplet fails to rhyme in Modern English, illustrated by such line-pair endings as *past* and *waste* or *one* and *alone*. There are 19 instances where *love* is made to rhyme with *prove, move*, and their derived forms. And when we look at the whole sequence, we find a remarkable 142 rhyme pairs that clash (13% of all lines). In sum: only a third of the sonnets rhyme perfectly in Modern English.

In a play which makes a great deal of use of rhyme, such as A Midsummer Night's Dream, we are repeatedly presented with couplets that fail, such as *stars* and *wars* or *mood* and *blood*. Rhymes are also an important indication of play structure, being a frequent marker of scene closure: 55 per cent of all verse scenes in the canon (376 out of 684, using the Oxford Shakespeare scene divisions) end in a rhyming couplet or have one close by. And when a rhyme fails – something that happens 44 times (12 per cent) – the effect is really noticeable, as in this example from Romeo and Juliet (2.2):

Romeo: O, let us hence! I stand on sudden haste.
Friar: Wisely and slow. They stumble that run fast.

(In OP, *haste* would be /hast/ rhyming with /fast/, both with short – as in northern British - /a/ vowels.) The effect is even more noticeable when it is the final couplet in a play, as in Macbeth, where generations of actors have tried and failed to make something of *one* rhyming with *Scone* – a rhyme that only works in OP.

Wordplay

Shakespeare's wordplay often fails to work in a present-day accent. Sometimes a pun is completely missed, so that a line makes little sense. At other times the OP offers an alternative reading, which may influence the way literary critics, directors, actors, and others interpret the text.

An example of a line making no sense without OP is in Troilus and Cressida (2.1.62), where Thersites complains to Achilles about Ajax with the line 'But yet you look not well upon him; for whomsoever you take him to be, he is Ajax'. It is intended as an insult, but in present-day English it is little more than a tautology. To appreciate the force of the line, we need to know that *Ajax* in OP sounded like 'a jakes', and that *jakes* was a word for a lavatory. Touchstone is also well aware of this ambiguity in As You Like It, when he euphemistically refers to Jaques as 'Master What-yecall't').

An example of an alternative reading is in the Prologue to Romeo and Juliet, where the homophony between *lines* and *loins*, /ləɪns/, adds a genealogical nuance to the physical sense of the word: 'From forth the fatal loins of these two foes'. In Hamlet, the double pronunciation of *woman* – as today, but also as 'woe-man' – adds an interesting series of possibilities (for the word is used 336 times in the plays), especially in such lines as 'Frailty, thy name is woman'.

Other evidence

In addition to the evidence provided by the above effects, there are several other clues. The orthography itself provides pointers. Because spelling was not standardized in Shakespeare's day, the choices made by the various writers and typesetters often provide indications as to how a

Shakespeare's Globe Theatre built in 1599

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word was pronounced. With no agreed spelling for a word, then the way it was said was likely to influence the way it was spelled. It is thus possible to work backwards from the spelling towards the likely pronunciation. For example, when Mercutio describes Queen Mab as having a 'whip of film', the Folio and Quarto spellings of 'film' as *philome* clearly indicate a disyllabic pronunciation, 'fillum' (as in modern Irish English). The omission of *h* in *orthography* and other such words suggests that it must have been pronounced with a /t/ (as in RP *thyme*). What is the evidence for *achieve* rhyming with *give* and *taste* rhyming with *last* (with a short /a/ vowel)? The words are sometimes spelled *atchive* and *tast*.

More important is the evidence which comes from the many commentaries on English orthography and pronunciation written throughout the period by writers concerned with spelling reform (*orthoepists*) and poetic performance, who often tell us which words rhyme and which do not. For example, Ben Jonson, better known as a playwright than a grammarian, wrote an English Grammar in which he gives details about how letters should be pronounced. How do we know that *prove* rhymed with *love* and not the other way round? This is what he says about 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*".

Of course, other pronunciations existed at the time. Thus, just as we find today two pronunciations of such words as *again* (rhyming with both *main* and *men*) and *often* (with or without the 't'), 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 John Hart (a Devonshire man) in 1570 (and think of the lengthening we sometimes here from singers today, who croon 'I lurve you'). But the overriding impression from the orthoepists is that the vowel in *love* was short.

Sociolinguistic implications

When we talk about the accent of Shakespeare's time, it would be more accurate to say 'accents', for the period in which he lived was characterized by huge social and linguistic variation and change, brought about largely by the increased mobility of people in England and the huge increase in the number of immigrants, making London a highly multilingual (and thus multidialectal) city. Dialect and accent diversity was an inevitable consequence, and norms were shifting as time passed.

We know this from the orthoepists' accounts of contemporary pronunciation. Those who wrote in the 1580s often describe sounds differently from those who wrote in the 1620s and 1630s. In some cases, the differences are probably due to the differing regional background or temperaments of the writers, or to the likelihood that they are thinking of different sections of the population when they make their descriptions. But sometimes opinions coincide in such a way that they point to a genuine language change. In the 1580s *musician* was pronounced 'musi-see-an'. Forty years later we see it as 'musi-she-an', and soon after we find the modern pronunciation. So in 1600 older people would very likely have said the former, and younger people the latter.

An important sociolinguistic feature of the period is that there was no single prestige variety such as we encounter in present-day British English. Received Pronunciation (RP) was an accent that developed at the end of the 18th century. No such accent existed in the Jacobethan period. People with strong regional accents could achieve the highest positions in the land (such as Raleigh and Drake with their Devonshire speech). When James came to the throne in 1603, Scottish accents became the dominant voice of the court. The primary way you could show, through the way you talked, that you were a member of the educated elite was to use special vocabulary or grammar. Accent alone would not do it. Educated people would probably display their literacy by having their pronunciation reflect the way words were spelled – a practice that must have been common, for Shakespeare plainly expected people to recognize the character of Holofernes in Love's Labour's Lost, with his exaggerated respect for

spelling. Holofernes is horrified at the 'rackers of orthography' who omit the /b/ in such words as *doubt* and *debt* and who leave out the /l/ in *calf* and *half*.

That Shakespeare was well aware of accent and dialect variation is clear not only from Holofernes' attitude, but also from Mercutio's contemptuous description of Tybalt as one of the 'new tuners of accent' (in Romeo and Juliet) and Orlando's surprise when he hears the refined accent of disguised Rosalind in As You Like It. Such examples show that there was a diversity of accents of English in 1600 – as there is today. Doubtless Shakespeare's personal accent was a mix of his Warwickshire origins and accommodation to the London accents of his time. And others who were on the Globe stage with him would have displayed their regional origins too, such as Robert Armin, born in Norfolk, and John Heminges, born in Worcestershire. But they would all have reflected the underlying phonological system of Early Modern English..

The same variation is heard when we encounter OP today. We hear it with the accent of the present-day speaker superimposed. In the Globe production of Romeo and Juliet in 2004, there was a Scots-tinged Juliet, a Cockney-tinged Nurse, an RP-tinged Romeo, and a Northern Irish-tinged Peter, for example. But they all used the same underlying segmental phonology: they all said 'musisee-an' or 'musi-she-an' and not 'musi-shun'; they all rhymed *love* and *prove* or *one* and *alone*; they all stressed *advertise* on the second syllable and *perspective* on the first; and so on.

When people hear OP for the first time, they think they recognize it. I interviewed members of the audience during the intervals of the OP performances at the Globe, and virtually everyone claimed that 'we speak like that where I come from'. But of course none of them did. People who live in an area where they use postvocalic *r* (e.g. the West of England) will tune in to that feature of OP. Those who notice the long pure vowels in words like *go* will be from a part of the world (e.g. Scotland, Ireland) where such vowels are common. The Irish recognize the double stress in such words as *ruminate*. Scots people recognize the pronunciation of *prove* (to rhyme with *love*). Australians notice the high vowel in *yet* – sounding more like 'yit'. Londoners notice the schwa ending of words like *window* and *shadow*. But the exact combination of sounds we find in OP is to be found in none of these accents, or in any other modern phonology. And several features of OP are to be found nowhere in Modern English, such as the pronunciation of *musician*. The overall effect is unique.

1870 painting by Ford Madox Brown depicting Romeo and Juliet's famous balcony scene. In 2004, Shakespeare's Globe in London staged Romeo and Juliet in original pronunciation (OP) – that is, the kind of accent that would have been heard on the Globe stage at the end of the 16th century.

OP is an exciting research area, as it brings to light theatrical effects and literary readings that are obscured by Modern English phonology. Every play reveals surprises. And we are at the very beginning of its exploration. Twelve Shakespeare plays have been done in OP to date. Another 25 (or so) to go, and several other Elizabethan dramatists waiting in the wings. ¶

Find out more

Books

David Crystal (2005) Pronouncing Shakespeare: The Globe Experiment: Cambridge University Press

Online

Learn more about Shakespearean OP at www.originalpronunciation.com and www.pronouncingshakespeare.com

CD

Hear some OP on the CD: Shakespeare's Original Pronunciation, available from the British Library.