Sounding the First Folio

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While directors of Shakespeare plays can use any edition they want, when it comes to mounting a performance in original pronunciation (OP) it makes sense to look to the First Folio as a source of inspiration. This is what Giles Block did, for *Troilus and Cressida* at Shakespeare's Globe in 2005 - the theatre's second such initiative, following the OP production of *Romeo and Juliet* the previous year - and several other OP productions have followed suit. Practitioners who laud the Folio do so because they feel it brings them as close as possible to Shakespeare and his fellow-actors, notwithstanding the typographical infelicities that have to be taken into account. And in a year when the Folio is being justly celebrated as a printed text, with all the distinctive orthographic features that form part of its appeal, it feels right to spend a little time presenting that text as it could have sounded to those who compiled it.

You will notice the word 'could'. Any reconstruction of an earlier period of pronunciation in a language is a tentative business. I never talk about authenticity, only of plausibility. It is the same with reconstructions of earlier theatres: nobody could sensibly say that the present-day Globes and Blackfriars are 'authentic', when aeroplanes are flying overhead and the theatres contain modern safety and toiletting facilities. But, in their contrast with present-day theatres, they offer audiences the chance to recreate the kind of theatrical experience that their Elizabethan counterparts would have had. Historical linguists interested in using their discipline to illuminate Elizabethan dramaturgy have a similar aim.

In the absence of audio recordings, only available for English from the end of the 19th cenury, explorations of OP have to rely on various kinds of written evidence. In the case of Shakespeare, this consists mainly of rhymes, puns, spellings, and observations about pronunciation made by contemporary writers.

- By rhymes, I mean couplets that do not match in modern English, but are likely to have done so in Elizabethan times, such as these, in the Folio text of the closing lines of *The Taming of the Shrew*:

> Horten.
> Now goe thy wayes, thou hast tam'd a curst Shrow.
> Luc.
> Tis a wonder, by your leaue, she wil be tam'd so.

- The Folio spelling of *shrew* reinforces the pronunciation of this word to rhyme with so. And spelling is an important guide in many other places, such as this couplet in *Romeo and Juliet* (1.4.65-6), part of the description of Queen Mab's chariot:

> her coullers of the Moonshines watry Beames,
> her Whip of Crickets bone, the Lash of Philome,

In a modern edition, the last word would appear as *film*, a monosyllable; but the Folio spelling clearly indicates two syllables - as is still heard today in some regional

accents, such as Irish, where we might see it written as *fillum*. Indeed, Hugh Leonard used this spelling as the title of his novel in 2005: *Fillums*.

- Puns are always more subjective, but I like this one, when Thersites talks to Achilles about Ajax, in *Troilus and Cressida* (2.1.62-3). Ajax has just given Thersites a beating, and in the insult sequence that follows he tells Achilles to look hard at Ajax:

> Ther.
> But yet you looke not well vpon him: for
> who some euer you take him to be, he is *Aiax*.
> Achil.
> I know that foole.
> Ther.
> I, but that foole knowes not himselfe.

The joke is lost to modern ears, but to contemporaries a pronunciation of *Ajax* as *a-jakes* would have echoed the word *jakes*, meaning 'lavatory'. Thersites' line seems to have little point otherwise.

- I like to quote Ben Jonson as an example of a contemporary writer, because he is so well known. In his *English Grammar* he gives us several pointers to pronunciations, such as this extract from his account of 'letter o', which tells us that *prove* could be sounded with a short vowel, rhyming with *love*, not the long 'oo' vowel that it has today:

> In the short time more flat, and akin to *u*; as *cosen*, *dosen*, *mother*, *brother*, *love*, *prove*.

(This doesn't of course disallow a pronunciation with a long vowel, as occasional spellings such as *prooue* suggest. Compare the way *scone* today has two variants, one rhyming with *on* and the other with *bone*.)

When these four kinds of evidence are brought together, and placed within the framework of what we know about the development of pronunciation from Old English to Modern English - the academic field of historical phonology - we encounter an accent (more accurately, a set of accents) that is linguistically plausible, aesthetically pleasing, and dramaturgically effective, judging by the extent to which it has been taken up by actors and directors around the world. By 2020 over twenty of Shakespeare's plays had been performed in OP, as well as works by other authors, including Marlowe and Henslowe. OP renditions of early music, by such composers as Byrd and Dowland, and of the King James Bible, also illustrate a popular interest in the process, notwithstanding the inevitable uncertainties that accompany any attempt to recreate the linguistic past. We know little about the intonation of the time, for example, other than some very general remarks, so any renditions are going to be heard with a modern tone of voice superimposed.

It's important to appreciate that OP is a recreation of a sound system, not a personal accent - though that of course is how it is heard when someone uses it, as in the recordings that accompany this article. Present-day English consists of innumerable accents, reflecting the regional or social backgrounds of the speakers, but they have

certain features in common - which is why we can say thay are all English, and not some other language. It was the same in Elizabethan times. There was no single OP, but a range of accents that would have differed depending on where the speakers came from and how educated they were. I recall Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost* (5.1.19-24), who has very strong feelings about the way some people pronounce words. He describes them thus:

> rackers of ortagriphie, as to speake dout *fine*, when he should say doubt; det, when he shold pronounce debt; d e b t, not det he clepeth a Calf, Caufe: halfe, haufe: neighbour *vocatur* nebour; neigh abreuiated ne: this is abhominable, which he would call abhominable.

(The last word should of course have been typeset without an 'h'.) And another instance is when Orlando, in *As You Like It* (3.2.329-32), detects something strange in the way Rosalind, disguised as a rustic youth, is speaking

> Orl.
> Your accent is something finer, then you could purchase in so remoued a dwelling.
> *Ros.*
> I haue bin told so of many: but indeed, an olde religious Vnckle of mine taught me to speake

But despite these differences, there would have been certain features of pronunciation that all Elizabethan speakers would have shared, that distinguish the older sound system fro what is herd today. The *r* after a vowel, in words like *heart* and *car*, was sounded, whereas today this is missing in many accents - most famously, in the southern educated British accent known as Received Pronunciaton (RP). And the ending in such words as *conversation* and *invention* was sounded as 'see-on' - sometimes still heard in liturgical singing, as when, during Evensong in the Anglican tradition, we hear a choir sing 'And grant us thy salvation', with a full four syllables in the last word.

These features I think are the reason that OP has proved appeaking to theatre companies in different parts of the English-speaking world. The post-vocalic *r* brings the accent closer to the way many Americans speak, for instance, and it is a repeated observation by US actors that this helps them develop a stronger sense of 'ownership' of Shakespeare than was ever possible if they attempted to speak the lines in a British RP. Similarly, to British ears, OP contains echoes of several accents heard today in the UK and Ireland, so that a common reaction from people who hear it for the first time is 'we speak like that where I come from', giving them a stronger sense of ownership too. The echoes help to draw in those members of the theatre audience who do not have an RP accent (the vast majority of people in the UK, in fact), and for whom that accent has an upper-class resonance with which they cannot identify.

Every time a Shakespeare play or poem is performed in OP, I have learned something new about it, and the novel phonaesthetic has generated a fresh reaction to what are often very familiar lines. Actors and directors have the same experience, as I report in my *Pronouncing Shakespeare*, the account of the 2004 *Romeo and Juliet* production (published in 2005, and updated in 2019). So it seems a very natural response to the

Folio400 initiative, which will stimulate fresh interest in the work, to accompany it with a few recordings that place it in its original auditory context. The exercise makes me think that it would be rewarding to have the entire work recorded in OP, and perhaps one of the outcomes of the anniversary year will be a funding initiative that would enable a theatre company to do just that.