

Performing the tongue that Shakespeare spoke

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In May 2004 a company of actors was sitting in a rehearsal room at Shakespeare's Globe in London, awaiting my arrival. They were all holding their parts from *Romeo and Juliet*, but in a version they'd never seen before. Their faces were a picture - a horrified fascination - for the scripts were covered with phonetic symbols, showing the way the words would have been pronounced in Shakespeare's time. They had already begun a run of the play in modern English, and now they were committed to a weekend of performances in original pronunciation. This was their first rehearsal, and they had just one month to get it right.

My own face must have been a picture too - an excited trepidation, perhaps - for this was the first time such an experiment had been attempted for half a century. John Barton had done it in 1952 in Cambridge, but Shakespearian accents hadn't been heard on a London stage in 400 years. It was a significant moment, linguistically as well as dramatically. When I compared notes with Barton a few weeks later, he said I had been 'a lucky fellow'. And he was right. As a specialist in English linguistics, this was a rare opportunity to put into practice my ideas about the history of the language in Shakespeare's time. But on that first day, I didn't feel lucky. All I could see was the size of the task ahead of us.

Indeed, the whole thing was uncharted territory. The Globe is well known for its 'original practices' philosophy, in such areas as staging, music, and dress; but they had never tried pronunciation. They were, quite naturally, suspicious of it. Would it be so different from modern English that the audience wouldn't be able to follow it? The spectre of people walking out because they couldn't understand a word must have loomed large in front of the Globe decision-makers. But they were brave-ish. They decided to mount the production - though just for a weekend, to see how it went.

I don't blame them. I wasn't sure what I was letting myself in for either. I knew what the linguistic issues were, but not what the theatrical consequences would be. Would the actors be able to learn the original pronunciation in time? Would they be able to handle rehearsing the original version in parallel with the modern English version? How would the older way of speaking affect the interpretation of their characters? One said to me: 'How do we ground ourselves in an accent we've never heard before and which doesn't relate to anywhere?' The atmosphere was very much that of an experiment. And on the first night, there were more than the usual thespian anxiety flutters in the wings.

So how does it sound, original pronunciation? Here's the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*.

[READ]

It's an unusual accent, isn't it. You can hear resonances of all kinds of modern accents, and yet it's like none of them. Some of you will hear West Country England, especially because of the *-r* after vowels. Some might hear fragments of Wales or Ireland, especially in the long vowels like [o:]. Certain words have echoes of American English. There are even hints of Australian later in the play, such as *yes* and *yet* pronounced as [yis] and [yit]. And the reason for the familiar resonances is that this accent predates the modern ones. All modern English accents can be traced back to this one, more or less.

That 'more or less' is important. The question I was asked most often, of course, was, 'How do we know what original pronunciation sounded like?' 'Can you be sure?' It is indeed difficult to be definite, but I think there's enough evidence to make us around 80 percent certain about how it was. The spellings in the original texts, for instance, can be a helpful guide to the way words were pronounced. When Mercutio describes Queen Mab's whip as having a 'lash of film', the First Folio and most of the Quartos spell the word, film, *Philome*. It must have been a two-syllable word: *a lash of filum* - as in Modern Irish, indeed, *filum*.

Then there's the evidence of the rhythms, puns, and rhymes used by Shakespeare himself. We can deduce the stress pattern of a word from the metre of a line. We can deduce whether a consonant was sounded from the way puns work. We can deduce the value of a vowel from the way words rhyme. For instance, how should we pronounce the last syllable of Romeo's first love - is it *Rosalin* or *Rosaline*? It has to be the second, because of the rhyme in the Friar's reply to Romeo:

ROMEO Thou chidst me oft for loving Rosaline.

FRIAR: For doting, not for loving, pupil mine.

And we mustn't forget the evidence provided by contemporary writers. One of the most noticeable features of the accent is the pronunciation of *r* after vowels, in such words as *far* and *heart*. How do we know? Because the writers of the time tell us. Ben Jonson, for instance, talks in his *Grammar* about *r* being pronounced with a 'doggy sound' (think of *grrr*). He also describes it as a 'liquid' sound, less 'firm' than the *r* which occurs at the beginning of a word. This suggests that the sound was probably beginning to weaken. It would later disappear completely from the prestige accent we know today as Received Pronunciation, and which most actors use in the UK. As a result we now associate *r*-accents with regional speech, and a hint of West Country inevitably pervades the play.

The general style of speech – compared with today's typical stage articulation – was very casual. Sounds were left out, and words run together. You can see it in such textual spellings as *i'th*, but most words were affected to some extent. The accumulated differences in the vowels, consonants, and syllable lengths gives dramatic speech a totally different pace. When Romeo sees Juliet and says (in modern pronunciation) 'It is my lady. O, it is my love!', listen to how long the *my* vowels are. Now listen to it in the original version: 'It is my lady. Oh, it is my love.' It's much faster. And when you add up all those increases in speed, the production in original pronunciation turned out to be 10 minutes shorter than the modern one.

Everyone worried about whether the speech would be intelligible. The Globe had worried about it, which is why it dipped only a weekend toe into the linguistic water. Tim Carroll had worried about it. And the actors were certainly worried at the outset. But when they heard me read the opening scene of the play, in their first rehearsal, I could see the relief on their faces. Original pronunciation is in fact no more different from modern English Received Pronunciation than, say, present-day Scots is.

[Nonetheless, without a contemporary point of reference, some of the company found the accent quite tricky to learn, and with such a short rehearsal time-frame there was still some inconsistency in performance which a few days more practice would have eliminated. Still,] the first night was unforgettable. I had butterflies for the first time in my life. In the Green Room, I was bombarded with last-minute check-ups. Lines and fragments of lines came from all directions. And in the theatre precinct, just before the performance, there was a palpable tension. I walked around, eavesdropping. The buzz everywhere was 'Will we understand it?' One punter confided that she had a text of the play with her, in case she didn't.

Then they were off, pulling out all the stops, as actors do, and getting a great audience response. In a talkback session after the performance, people said they had got used to the new accent by the middle of Act 1. The applause at the end was longer than at any previous performance. Five minutes after it had died down, I realised I hadn't moved from my seat. The Original Pronunciation hadn't just worked; it had worked brilliantly. And I realized, at that moment, that I just had to write a book about it.

All the actors found themselves rethinking their characters. For example, Bette Bourne, playing the Nurse, said she 'became a totally different woman', tougher and more direct. Kananu Kirimi felt the same about Juliet. And I was particularly pleased to see that the humour hadn't been affected. I had a test case which I listened out for at each performance. One of the best jokes in the play is when the Nurse, having been baited by Mercutio, says to Peter: 'And thou must stand by too, and suffer every knave to use me at his pleasure?' And Peter replies, 'I saw no man use you at his pleasure'. It gets a huge laugh in modern pronunciation. Would it, in Original Pronunciation, with *pleasure* pronounced so differently - as 'plez - uhr'? It made not the slightest difference. At each performance, the audience roared.

But the litmus test for engagement, I always think, is the kids. The Globe yard can be full of youngsters, usually school parties of secondary-school age. During the intervals, I made a point of asking some of them how they were finding it. They knew about the Original Pronunciation. Their teacher had told them. So what did they think? 'Cool.'. 'Wicked.'. Why? One 15-year-old lad, in a strong East London accent, piped up. 'Well, they're talking like us.' They weren't, of course. Original Pronunciation is nothing like a Cockney accent. But I knew what he meant. The actors were talking in a way that they could identify with. Had they been to other theatre shows before? Yes. And what did they think of the voices then? 'Actors always sound posh', said one. There was a chorus of assent. 'But not here,' chipped in another. Received Pronunciation nil, Original Pronunciation one.

The experiment was plainly a success, and the reaction was so enthusiastic that the Globe have decided to do another production this year, *Troilus and Cressida*, directed by Giles Block. But there is going to be a crucial difference: this time *all* the performances will be in Original Pronunciation, which means that the actors will be exposed to the accent from the very beginning of the rehearsal period, and will be able to assimilate it more intimately. not for them the problem of keeping two versions of the play in their heads at the same time. And I therefore expect to hear performances that are much more confident and consistent than was possible last year.

Troilus is a very different play - it's less familiar than *Romeo*, and its language is more complex. So it presents fresh challenges when working in Original Pronunciation - and offers the opportunity for fresh discoveries too. And that's the main pay-off from doing all this - lines yielding fresh meanings. 'From forth the fatal loins of these two foes', says the *Romeo* Prologue in Modern English - but with *loins* pronounced the same as *lines* [PRON], there's a pun here which is usually missed - the lovers have come from genealogical lines as well as physical loins. And in *Troilus*, when Thersites says of Ajax, 'for whomsoever he be, he is Ajax', the line sounds a bit pointless until you hear it in original pronunciation: PRON. *A jakes*, of course, was the Elizabethan word for a mouldy toilet.

I hope the Globe keeps on with the experiment, and that other companies try it out too. I'd love to hear *A Midsummer Night's Dream* done in this way, for instance, with all its rhymes. In fact, I'd love to hear them all the plays done in this way. So where are we? Two down. That's only 37 to go.