

Saying it as it was

This year, for the first time, the Globe Theatre Company will attempt three performances in the pronunciation of Shakespeare's time. But how can we reconstruct the speech of a vanished age? **David Crystal**, who has prepared a phonetic text of *Romeo and Juliet*, tackles the issue.

The Globe stages the first modern production of a Shakespeare play - *Romeo and Juliet* - in original pronunciation at the end of June. Globe enthusiasts are of course used to encountering the word 'original' in relation to such domains as staging, costumes, and music. But not, until now, in relation to pronunciation.

It is the most difficult domain to interpret historically because, in an era before sound recording, speech - unlike buildings, costumes, and props - leaves no evidence of how it was. Everything has to be deduced from the written language, which is a notoriously poor guide to the way words were spoken. The philological controversies surrounding the way people spoke in Elizabethan times are just as ferocious as anything you may have encountered in relation to the Globe's architecture or performance practices.

The principles

How do we know how people spoke, before sound recording? We have to begin at the beginning.

We have to assume that when people first write a language down they try to reflect the way it sounds. In the case of English, this happened in the Anglo-Saxon period, when Irish monks devised the alphabet. Scribes all over the country then used this alphabet to write their texts. And we can tell from the different ways in which they spelled a word that they pronounced these words differently.

We can plot these spelling differences as the language changes, from Old English through Middle English into Early Modern English (the period in which Shakespeare was writing - EME) and thence into Modern English. We know how people speak today, so we can also work backwards, deducing what earlier spelling variations must have meant. Spelling didn't really standardize until the 18th century, and before that it can be a helpful guide to how words were pronounced.

For example, in *Romeo and Juliet* how are we to say the final word in this line from Mercutio's description of Queen Mab (1.4.66)?

Her whip, of cricket's bone; the lash, of film

The Folio and most of the Quartos spell it *Philome*. It must have been a two-syllable word (as in modern Irish). Or how should we take *poppering-pear* (2.1.38)? The First Folio spells it *Poprin Peave*. That tells us two things. Poppering must have had just two syllables. And there was no -g sounded in the -ing ending. More on this below.

Direct evidence comes from contemporary accounts. Sometimes characters themselves comment, as when

Holofernes talks about the various ways of pronouncing *calf* and *neighbour* (in *Love's Labour's Lost*). But more often the evidence comes from writers (known as orthoepists) who gave detailed accounts of pronunciation. For example, in John Hart's *Orthographie* (1569) we find a detailed description of the sounds of 16th-century English.

But the best evidence lies in the rhythms, rhymes, and puns used by the writers. We can deduce the stress pattern of a word from the metre of a line. We can deduce the value of a vowel from the way words rhyme. We can deduce whether a consonant was sounded from the way puns work. For instance, how should we pronounce the last syllable of *Rosaline* - to rhyme with *fin* or with *fine*? The text makes it clear:

ROMEO Thou chidst me oft for loving Rosaline.

FRIAR For doting, not for loving, pupil mine.

Comparisons like this often have to be interpreted, of course. If we know that A rhymes with B, all we know is that the two words sounded the same: we do not know whether A sounded like B or B sounded like A. This problem comes to the fore when both the rhyming words are of uncertain value, as in this sequence:

ROMEO O, let us hence! I stand on sudden haste.

FRIAR Wisely and slow. They stumble that run fast.

Was *fast* pronounced like *haste* or the other way round? After considering other evidence, I opted for a pronunciation midway between the two, for both words.

Some noticeable features

Which are the most noticeable features of EME pronunciation? The lost -g, already mentioned, is certainly one. Today we associate it with class distinction - either upper-class, (huntin' shootin' and fishin') or lower-class (where you goin'?). There was no such class connotation in Shakespeare's time: it was the normal pronunciation for everyone. The problem for us now, of course, is to forget the distracting modern associations.

Even more distracting is the way -r is pronounced after vowels, in such words as *here* and *heart*. It was widespread in EME London. Ben Jonson in his *Grammar* 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 (RP). As a result we now associate -r accents with regional speech, and a hint of West Country inevitably pervades the play.

But this raises a problem. If everyone is using a 'rustic -r', how is a director to distinguish his 'upper-class' characters from his lower-class ones? I think the difficulty goes away when we consider that the original Globe actors would have had different regional and social backgrounds, and would have spoken in different accents. There was no pressure then to conform to a particular accent type. No RP in those days. No RADA vowels. You could get to the top of the kingdom with a strong regional accent, as did Raleigh and Drake with their Devonshire speech. Indeed, from 1603 Scottish accents dominated the court. So a welter of different accents would very likely be heard on stage. And it is possible, therefore, for different strengths of -r to be used as a distinguishing feature – pronounced weakly by the higher-class characters, and strongly by the servants or the Nurse.

The same point applies to the use of *h*- in such words as *heart*. People have dropped their *h*'s from the early Middle Ages. Today, it is considered an uneducated feature. Not so in Shakespeare's time, where it was simply a feature of colloquial speech. People who spoke carefully, or who tried to make their speech mirror spelling (as many orthoepists insisted), would put the *h*- in. We would expect the older Capulets and Montagues, and probably the Friar, to be scrupulous. We would expect the young bloods to drop it. And certainly the servants would. Would the Nurse? It depends on how she is played. And a young Prince would have been in a quandary. Should he pronounce *h*- according to his station, or speak like 'one of the boys'? These are matters for the Master of Play to decide.

Pronunciation was rapidly changing, then as now. We know this from Mercutio, who criticises Tybalt as a 'new tuner of accent'. So, I have given the older people a somewhat different pronunciation from the younger ones. For instance, in words such as *see*, young people would have pronounced the vowel as today; older

people would have used a more conservative pronunciation, more like modern *say*. The 'sh' sound in such words as *musician* was also coming into the language: the youngsters would probably have used it. But the older generation would probably still be using an *s* sound – *musi-s-ian*.

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. How far a production reflects this style is another decision for the director.

In the last analysis, 'original pronunciation' can only be informed guesswork. We can never be sure, because several alternative pronunciations co-existed, and we have to make a choice. I had to make several arbitrary decisions in writing my transcription. I read each line aloud several times, in different ways, to make sure they would work, and tried to be consistent. Not everyone will agree with my decisions, I know, but the overall effect is bound to be exciting. It will be thrilling to hear the rhymes working well, and to hear puns that are missed in modern English. And I can guarantee one thing. No-one will ever have heard anything like it before.

I write this in April, having just finished the transcription, and before the director, actors, and dialect coach have begun to work with it. There is another article to be written, after the performances, reporting on how it sounded and what the audiences felt about it. Watch this space.

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For details of the original pronunciation performances of *Romeo and Juliet* see Diary.



An extract from the *Romeo and Juliet* transcription (I.iv.96,ff.). After discussion with the Master of Play, we decided that the most helpful transcription would be a mixed one in which just the distinctive sounds in EME would be given a phonetic transcription. This would draw the attention of the actors to the features which needed special focus.

@I talk of dreams;
 Hwich aRe the children of an @Idle bren;
 Begot of nGthin but ve:n fantasy;
 Hwich is as thin of sGbstance as the E:R,
 And mo:Re inconstant than the wind, who woos
 i:n n@U the fro:zen bosom of the NoRth,
 And, bein angeRed, pGffs awe: from thence,
 TaRnin his s@Ide to the dew-droppin S@Uth.