

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 153:  
ZOMBIE LETTERS**

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## EPISODE 153: ZOMBIE LETTERS

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 153: Zombie Letters. In this episode, we’re going to look at why so many English words have crazy spellings that don’t seem to make any sense. Why do words like *debt* and *doubt* have a B in there? Why does the word *sign* have a G in it? And why do names like *Thomas* and *Esther* have an H in them? Well, of course, the answers lie in the history of the language, and specifically an attempt by writers and printers in the 1500s to revive older spellings from the distant past. In many cases, letters were added to words to reflect sounds that had disappeared over time. In a sense, those letters were brought back to life to indicate where the word came from and to show the connection between related words in English. Those zombie letters that were brought back to life were important to scholars, but they were a nightmare for people who wanted the language to be spelled phonetically. So this time, we’re going to examine why those old spellings were revived, and how that process contributed to the wonderful mess that is English spelling.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). And you can sign up to support the podcast and get bonus episodes at [Patreon.com/historyofenglish](https://Patreon.com/historyofenglish).

I also wanted to let you know that the transcripts of the podcast episodes have been moved from Patreon to the main website – [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). So now, each episode page on the main website has the accompanying transcript. There are a handful of transcripts missing because I haven’t completed them yet, but about 90% of them are there.

Also, one other quick note. At the end of the last episode, I mentioned that I was going to talk about the so-called ‘Inkhorn Deabte’ in this episode, but I’ve decided to hold that discussion until next time. Around the current point in our overall story of English, several important authors started to write about the nature of the language. They debated whether English had borrowed too many words from Latin and Greek, and they debated whether English spelling should be strictly phonetic or if other factors should be taken into account. Over the next couple of episodes, I’m going to deal with both of those debates, but I want to begin with the spelling issue.

As we know, the relationship between pronunciation and spelling is often strained in Modern English. While English spelling is generally phonetic, there are lots of exceptions and many of those exceptions are found among very common words. It’s something that tends to frustrate a lot of people. And in fact, when people talk about how crazy English is, they’re usually referring to some aspect of spelling.

English spelling is so inconsistent that it was actually turned into a contest – the spelling bee. The spelling bee developed in the United States in the 1700s and 1800s. And it remained a largely English phenomenon until relatively recently. And even though a few other countries now have spelling bees in other languages, it’s still primarily an English contest because most other languages spell their words in ways that are more consistent and predictable.

Now a lot of people today complain about those English spellings, but those complaints are not new. In fact, in the mid-1500s, scholars in England started to complain about it too. And they had good reason to complain. That's because English words had started to acquire a lot of new spellings that weren't phonetic at all. In the mid-1500s, spellings were still in flux. The first proper English dictionary was still over half a century away. So people spelled words the best way they could. Most words were usually spelled like they sounded, but some common words had spelling conventions going back to Middle English. And sometimes, writers and printers would play around with spellings to indicate and convey some additional information – like the etymology or linguistic origin of the word. That information was important at the time because English had already borrowed a lot of words from French, and in the 1500s, it was borrowing a lot of words directly from Latin and Greek. And many writers and printers were interested in where those words came from and how they were related to each other. And since they knew how those words had been spelled in Latin, they would sometimes add in a letter to represent a sound that had disappeared over time. It helped readers to make the connection between the English version of the word and the traditional Latin version. And that fad for reviving old Latin letters was at its peak in the mid-1500s.

So let's begin this episode by putting those developments into some historical context, and let's look at what was happening in England at the time. We concluded the last episode with the death of Henry VIII in 1547. As we know from prior episodes, Henry had tried desperately to produce a male heir, which he finally did with his third wife Jane Seymour. And now, that young boy succeeded his father as king. His name was Edward, and at the very young age of nine, he became King Edward VI. Given his age, he wasn't old enough to rule in his own right, so a council was established to govern the country until he was older. His mother's brother was a nobleman name Edward Seymour, and he was named as the Lord Protector of the Realm and Governor of the King's Person. So he effectively served as the guardian or regent for the young king. Seymour gave himself the title Duke of Somerset, and historians generally refer to him as Somerset. And in his position as Protector, he was in charge of the government while his nephew Edward was a minor. And – SPOILER ALERT – Edward's only going to make to age 15. So, for much of his reign, his uncle Somerset was in charge, and Somerset faced a lot of challenges.

Trouble was brewing on a lot of different fronts. As we'll see next time, there were economic problems, and the break between the Protestants and Catholics was becoming even more heated. And that fed into the lingering concern about the royal succession. Edward was only nine years old – so it would be several years before he would be old enough to marry and have children who could inherit the throne from him. In an age when plague and other diseases were rampant, there was a concern about what would happen if Edward died before he produced an heir.

In that event, Henry VIII's last will and an act of Parliament had declared that the throne was pass to Edward's siblings, Mary and Elizabeth. Of course, they were Edward's half-sisters. They all had different mothers. Mary was the eldest sister, so she was next in line to the throne. And if she died without any descendants, the throne would pass to the other sister Elizabeth.

Now this posed a couple of problems. First, England had never been ruled by a queen, but at this point, there were no male heirs in the Tudor line beyond Edward. In actuality, the gender of Mary and Elizabeth was only a secondary concern. The main concern was their religion. Mary was a devout Catholic, being the daughter of Catherine of Aragon. And Mary had never really accepted her father's annulment of the marriage to her mother. So the Protestant reformers in the royal court dreaded the thought of Mary becoming queen. It was thought that she would reverse all of the Protestant reforms that had taken place. Meanwhile, Elizabeth was a Protestant, but she was the daughter of Anne Boleyn, and once again, that annulment issue posed a problem. Since the annulment of Henry's first marriage to Catherine of Aragon was never recognized by the Pope, there was a question as to whether Henry's second marriage to Anne Boleyn was lawful – especially in the eyes of Catholics. And if it wasn't lawful, that meant that Elizabeth was technically illegitimate. So, in the same way that many Protestants would not accept Mary as queen, many Catholics would not accept Elizabeth.

Now I should note that Mary and Elizabeth were not the only options. Their father Henry VIII had a couple of sisters, and they had descendants of their own who were also Tudors. And again, those descendants were also females. So it seemed clear that England was going to be ruled by a queen if anything happened to Edward.

Henry VIII's youngest sister was named Mary – a very common name at the time. She had a granddaughter named Jane Grey, known to history as Lady Jane Grey. And as we'll see next time, she became very important as young Edward's health declined, and he and his advisors looked around for a Protestant alternative to his Catholic sister Mary.

Now Henry VIII also had a sister named Margaret, and I mentioned her in an earlier episode because she married the King of the Scots named James IV. They had a son together who became King James V of Scotland, but he had died about five years earlier in 1542 leaving an infant daughter to succeed him. She was also named Mary, and she became known to history as Mary Queen of Scots. And she is important to our story because she was also a Tudor descendant being the grand-niece of Henry VIII. Of course, in time, she will emerge as the Catholic alternative to Elizabeth, and their rivalry will become the stuff of novels and Hollywood movies. But at the current point in our story in 1547, she was the four-year old queen of the Scots, while Edward VI was the nine year old King of England.

And even though they were cousins, arrangements had actually been made for them to marry each other when they were older. That was part of a marriage agreement that Henry VIII had worked out before he died. He thought that the marriage would bring Scotland under English rule. Even though Henry secured a tentative marriage agreement with the Scots, the nobles of Scotland balked at the idea, and they broke the agreement, which led to more conflict between England and Scotland. And in the summer of 1547, just a few months after Edward was crowned as the new king, his uncle Somerset launched an invasion of Scotland. The Scots suffered a major defeat losing over 10,000 men in the fighting. And the English soldiers remained in parts of Scotland as an occupying force, which proved to be incredibly expensive over time.

The Scots then turned to their traditional ally France, and they agreed to a new marriage alliance with the French king. It was agreed that Mary Queen of Scots would marry the French king's son who was the heir to the French throne. And with that, young Mary was sent to the royal court in France.

Now I wanted to take you through those political developments because it sets the scene for so much of what happens later in our story— because the Stuart monarchs who succeeded the Tudors were the descendants of Mary Queen of Scots. When the Tudor line came to an end with the death of the Elizabeth in the early 1600s, England looked to the descendants of Mary Queen of Scots for an heir. And that led to Mary's son James becoming the king of both countries, and that set the stage for the political union of England and Scotland in what would become known as Great Britain.

Now I mentioned the Stuart monarchy in Scotland, which also eventually became the Stuart monarchy in England. And if you're a fan of this period of history, you may have read about the Stuarts and noticed that the family name is often spelled two different ways – either 'S-t-u-a-r-t' or 'S-t-e-w-a-r-t.' That's true for that name today in general. Well those alternate spellings are really the result of what happened when the young Mary Queen of Scots was sent to the French court.

The Stewart family had ruled Scotland since the 1370s, when Robert the Bruce's daughter married a man named Walter who held the title of High Steward of Scotland. *Steward* had become essentially a family title, and by that point, the family had converted that title of *Steward* into the surname *Stewart* – spelled just like *Steward* except with a 't' at the end, so 'S-t-e-w-a-r-t.'

But when Mary went to live in France, she found that the French speakers around Paris had a problem pronouncing that 'w' sound. They sometimes substituted a different sound for the 'w' sound like the 'g' sound. We've encountered that issue before. That's why English has several word pairs where one version of the word came from Norman French where the 'w' sound was pronounced, and the other version came from standard French around Paris where a 'g' sound was often substituted at the beginning of the word. That gave us Norman *warranty* and Parisian *guaranty*. And Norman *warden* and Parisian *guardian*.

Well, when Mary Queen of Scots arrived in Paris, she found that most people pronounced her surname *Stewart* without the 'w' sound in the middle. So Mary modified the spelling of the family name by dropping the W in the middle, and inserting a U to represent the vowel sound. That brought the spelling more in line with the French pronunciation. And from that point on, the House of Stewart – spelled 'S-t-e-w-a-r-t' – became the House of Stuart – spelled 'S-t-u-a-r-t.' Today, you might find the name *Stewart* spelled in the English fashion with a W or in the French fashion with a U thanks in part to Mary Queen of Scots.

By the way, this also helps to explain why we call that letter 'double-U' in English, but in French, it's called 'double-vay' (literally 'double-V'). English had developed the letter by putting two U's together – thus 'double U.' Well, French didn't need that letter at the time, but they

eventually adopted it in the 1800s, in part because loanwords were entering French with that sound and that letter. But by that point, printers had settled on the modern form of the letter which looks like two V's instead of two U's. So for that reason, French speakers called it 'double-V' (or 'double vay'). So the difference in the name of the letter in French has to do with the evolution in the design of the letter and its delayed adoption within French.

So the different spellings of the name *Stewart* exist in part today because of the influence of two different languages on the name. A sound that was common within English was lost within French, and a letter to represent that sound in English was discarded in French. That a good example of how words can lose certain sounds and letters over time as pronunciations change and as words pass between languages where the sounds are slightly different.

But sometimes, that process can work in reverse. A dropped letter can be revived and brought back to life, and when it is put back in the word, it can start to be pronounced again. And just as *Stewart* lost its W when it passed to French, we have examples where French words actually gained a 'w' sound when they were borrowed into English. And one very good example of that is the word *language* itself.

The word *language* is derived from the Latin word *lingua* – spelled 'l-i-n-g-u-a.' The Romans had the 'w' sound, and they represented it with the letter U. And that's how the U was used in *lingua*. But again, the standard French of Paris lost that sound over time, so Latin *lingua* evolved into Old French *langage* – usually spelled 'l-a-n-g-a-g-e.' And that's how the word passed into English in the early Middle English period. And that's how English speakers pronounced the word – /lang-age/. And it was still being pronounced that way in English at the current point in our overall story in the mid-1500s. And we know that because an English scholar named John Hart composed a detail summary of English pronunciation and spelling during this period, and he specifically indicated that the word *language* was pronounced /lang-age/ without a 'w' sound in the middle.

Well, most English writers and scholars spoke Latin, and they knew that the word /lang-age/ had come from the Latin word *lingua*. So they knew that the original version of the word had a U in it, which marked a /w/ sound that had been lost over time. And many of them considered the Latin version of the word to be the 'proper' or 'correct' form of the word, which had been slurred and altered over time within French and English. So by the mid-1500s, many of those English writers and scholars were starting to add that U back into the word /lang-age/ when they spelled it. So it went from 'l-a-n-g-a-g e' to 'l-a-n-g-u-a-g-e.' They thought that spelling was better because it helped to link the English word back to its original Latin version.

We also need to keep in mind that Latin spelling had been fixed and standardized, whereas English spelling was still in flux. That also gave the Latin form of the word a certain legitimacy and prominence. English words were usually spelled phonetically, which inevitably produced variation. And without fixed spellings, there was a looseness and flexibility in the way English words were spelled. So it sort of made sense that English writers who were fluent in Latin – and revered Latin – would add in an original letter when they sensed that the letter was missing in the English version of the word. It was done in part to provide a link back to the original Latin root.

It was also done to show how related English words were connected to each other thanks to that common root. And in some cases, it was probably done in an effort to recreate what they saw as the ‘proper’ pronunciation of the word which had been altered over time. And those are some of the reasons why English writers started to spell the word /lang-age/ with its original Latin U after the G.

Eventually, that spelling was adopted by printers, and then later by dictionary makers. As literacy spread with the printing press, more and more people read the word *language* with that U after the G. And since the letter U could still sometimes be pronounced as a ‘w’ sound within English, people started to pronounce the word that way. And over the course of the Modern English period, the word /lang-age/ came to be pronounced as *language*. And through that process, writers and printers brought that U back to life in the word, and the word re-acquired a sound and a letter that had been lost in French.

The history of the word *language* shows how English scholars tried to deal with the conflict between Latin and French. Many Latin words had evolved within French. And of course, English had borrowed words from both languages. It borrowed a lot of French words in 1300s and 1400s. But in the 1500s, with the Renaissance underway, English was borrowing a lot of words directly from Latin. So English often ended up with two different versions of the same Latin word – one from French and one directly from Latin. And the French version was often a shortened form of the original Latin word. The words had become worn down over time within French. So English writers had to determine how to spell all of those French loanwords. Did they treat the French word as a distinct word with its own unique pronunciation and spelling, or did they treat it as basically a mispronounced Latin word, in which case they could ‘correct’ the spelling by inserting letters to represent the sounds that had been lost?

Consider words like *frail* and *fragile*. Ultimately, they are both variations of the same Latin root word – *fragilis*. The Latin word passed through French and lost its ‘g’ sound in the middle, so it evolved from /fra-gilis/ to /fra-jilis/ to /frail/. And that’s how the word *frail* passed into English in the 1300s. But in the 1500s, English borrowed the word *fragile* directly from Latin. So English ended up with *fragile* with its Latin ‘g’ sound in the middle and the French form *frail* without that ‘g’ sound. In that particular case, the two words were considered to be distinct words within English, and *frail* never got a new letter ‘g’ within English. It continued to be spelled like it sounded.

The same thing happened with words like *secure* and *sure*. They’re both derived from the Latin word *securus*. The word passed through French and lost its ‘c’ sound in the middle, and that produced the word *sure*. Again, English borrowed that word from French in the 1300s. But around the current point in our overall story in the mid-1500s, English re-borrowed that original Latin root as the word *secure* with its ‘c’ sound in tact. But again, *secure* and *sure* were apparently considered to be distinct enough that *sure* was left alone. It continued to be spelled based on its pronunciation, and it didn’t get a brand new C to reflect its Latin root.

Another example of this process is found in the words *poor* and *pauper*. Again, *pauper* is the Latin root word, and *poor* is the French version which lost the ‘p’ sound in the middle. English

took the word *poor* from French in the 1200s, and *pauper* was borrowed directly from Latin in the early 1500s. But again, by that point, the word *poor* had been firmly established in English as a distinct word. So writers and printers apparently felt no need to add the missing ‘p’ back into the middle of the word *poor*.

But now let’s consider another pair of words – *count* and *compute*. Again, these are variations of the same Latin word – *computare*. Of course, *count* is the version that passed through French where it lost its ‘mp’ sound in the middle. It was borrowed into English in the 1300s where it was often used in place of the native word *reckon*. Today, *count* is a very basic word in English, but in the late 1400s, English writers went back to that Latin root and borrowed the word again as *compute*, and as often happened, the Latin version has a slightly more elevated sense. Small children can *count*, but *compute* implies some type of advanced calculation. Well, English scholars knew that *compute* was just the Latin version of *count*, and that *count* had lost the ‘mp’ sound in the middle. So in this case, many of those writers and printers decided to alter the spelling of the word *count* to add that ‘mp’ back in. And in the 1500s, many English documents spell the word *count* as ‘c-o-m-p-t.’ So the spelling wasn’t phonetic at all. But that revised spelling was never fully accepted. Maybe the ‘m’ and ‘p’ together were a bit too much. Eventually, the ‘m’ and ‘p’ were dropped, and *count* maintained its alternate phonetic spelling, which it still has today.

But there is an interesting side note to this effort to re-spell the word *count*. Sometimes, the writers of this period made a mistake. In fact, mistakes were quite common. Around this time, in the 1400s and 1500s, England had an official who was in charge of the accounts of the king’s household. The person was called the *controller*. Well, many of these scholars thought that the term *controller* was based on the word *count*. And that made sense because the controller was a type of accountant, and the first four letters of *controller* are ‘c-o-n-t’ – so very similar to the word *count*. In reality, the word *controller* is derived from the word *control* – not the word *count*. But this mistake led many writers to re-spell the word *controller*, just like they sometimes re-spelled the word *count*. And in the same way that *count* was sometimes spelled ‘c-o-m-p-t’ on the model of *compute*, the term *controller* was sometimes spelled ‘c-o-m-p-t-r-o-l-l-e-r.’ Well again, that was just a different way of spelling *controller*, but both spellings existed side-by-side. And eventually, people accepted the alternate spelling as a distinct word – and they started to pronounce it like it was spelled. And that gave us the modern term *comptroller*. And today, some places have the official position of *comptroller*, which again, is just the word *controller* with an alternate spelling that became common in the 1400s and 1500s.

As that example indicates, sometimes these new spellings stuck, and they gave English pronunciations that were historical, but not phonetic. That’s how words like *debt* and *doubt* got their modern B’s. *Debt* was the French version of the Latin word *debitum*. Again, the word was slurred and shortened within French, and then English borrowed the word from French in the 1200s. Throughout the Middle English period, it was spelled ‘d-e-t’ and ‘d-e-t-t-e.’ There was no B in it because there was no B in the pronunciation. But in the 1400s, English speakers went back to the Latin root and borrowed it again as *debit*. Well, writers and printers knew that *debt* was just the French version of *debit*, so in the mid-1500s, they started to stick a B in the word *debt* to help make that connection, or perhaps to ‘correct’ what they saw as mispronunciation of



the original Latin root word. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first recorded use of the letter B in the word *debt* was in the Book of Common Prayer which was composed around the current point in our overall story in 1549. I'll talk more about that book next time, but it shows how these new spellings based on etymology were very common in the mid-1500s.

Around this exact same time, we have the first recorded use of the word *dubious* in English. It was taken directly from the Latin word *dubitare* meaning 'to hesitate or waver or indicate uncertainty.' Well, English also had a version of that word via French. It was the word *doubt*, which had been borrowed a few centuries earlier. So again, from *dubitare* to *doubt*, we hear how that 'b' sound in the middle was lost in French. English writers usually spelled the word 'd-o-u-t,' or some similar variation, but in the late 1400s and 1500s, it started to appear with a brand new B. Once again, writers made that basic connection between *doubt* and *dubious* and Latin *dubitare*. Through that process, the word *doubt* picked up its modern B in the spelling.

Around this time, the word *subtle* also got its modern B. It is first recorded around the year 1547 – the year that Henry VIII died and his son Edward became king. The B comes from the Latin root *subtilis*. Again, the 'b' sound was lost in French, and English picked up the word *doubt* in the early Middle English period without that 'b' sound, but it eventually got its B back thanks to English scholars who wanted to draw a link back to the word's Latin root.

This same process gave the word *sign* its modern G – 's-i-g-n.' It comes from the Latin word *signum*, which English writers had tapped for the word *signal*. Once again, *sign* is the version that passed through French, where it lost its 'g' sound in the middle. English borrowed the word *sign* in the 1200s, and throughout the Middle English period, it was spelled both ways – sometimes as 's-i-n-e' based on its pronunciation and sometimes as 's-i-g-n' based on its etymology. But by the 1500s, the G had become a permanent fixture in the spelling.

The word *indict* also got a new silent letter C through this process. The Latin word was *indictare*. It's the same root word that gives us the word *dictate*. If you 'dictate' something, you speak it or say it out loud. If you 'indict' someone, you openly accuse them of a crime. The 'c' sound was lost in the word *indict* as it passed through French. It came into English in the 1300s, usually spelled 'e-n-d-i-t-e.' But after *dictate* was borrowed directly from Latin in the 1500s, English writers started to make that connection back to the Latin root by putting a C in *indict*.

The same thing happened with the word *receipt*. It comes from the Latin word *recepta*. That Latin word passed through French where it lost its 'p' sound. That gave us the word *receipt* in the 1300s, usually spelled 'r-e-c-e-i-t' or a similar variation. But then English borrowed the word *reception* directly from Latin in the late Middle English period. And we can see and hear the P sound in that word. Well, by the late 1500s, writers were starting to bring that P back to life and include it in the spelling of *receipt*, as well.

Now as you might imagine, this process wasn't always orderly. People didn't have access to etymology dictionaries, so they sometimes made mistakes when they tried to re-create an older spelling, just like we saw earlier with the word *comptroller*, which was formed out of *controller*

under the mistaken assumption that *controller* was derived from words like *count* and *compute*. Well, again, that type of thing happened a lot.

The word *island* got its modern S based on an assumption that it was derived from the French word *isle* – ‘i-s-l-e’ – which comes from the Latin word *insula*. The ‘s’ sound in *insula* had been lost in French and produced the word *isle*, which still retained a silent S in the spelling. Well, many English writers assumed that *island* came from the word *isle*, but *island* was usually spelled ‘y-l-a-n-d.’ There was no S in it. That was thought to be a mistake, so an S was added to the word *island* to bring it in line with words like *isle* and its Latin root *insula*. The problem is that the word *island* isn’t related to *isle* or *insula* at all. It’s actually a native Old English word – *yland*. So it never had an ‘s’ sound. Nevertheless, in the mid-1500s, it got its modern S under the false assumption that it had been partly borrowed from the French. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first recorded spelling of *island* with an S occurred in 1546 – the year before Henry VIII died.

*Scissors* also got its modern C in the late 1400s and 1500s thanks to a mistake. The word is actually derived from the same Latin root that gives us the word *excise* meaning to ‘to cut out.’ That Latin root was *excisus*. The word *scissors* was borrowed into English in the 1400s with various spellings like ‘s-i-s-o-u-r-s’ and ‘s-i-s-s-a-r-s.’ Again, spelling was phonetic and loose at the time. But apparently, some English writers thought that the word *scissors* was derived from the Latin word *scindere* spelled ‘s-c-i-n-d-e-r-e,’ which meant ‘to split.’ And they probably made that connection because a tailor was sometimes called a *scissor* in Latin spelled ‘s-c-i-s-s-o-r.’ And a *scissor* – or tailor – was someone who used scissors. And it appears that that connection led writers to bring the letter C over from the name of the occupation to the cutting tool – even though the two words were unrelated.

The word *delight* also received a new spelling by mistake. *Delight* is another French loanword with Latin roots, but it has a distinctively English spelling. It has a silent GH in it – ‘d-e-l-i-g-h-t.’ As we know from prior episodes, English has a lot of words with a silent GH because that letter combination usually represents an Old English /x/ sound that disappeared from standard English over time. So most words that have a GH in Modern English are Old English words. In fact, it’s one of the general rules we can use to identify Old English words. But there are exceptions because mistakes were sometimes made. And that’s what happened with *delight*. It was borrowed from French in the 1200s, and was typically spelled ‘d-e-l-i-t.’ But English writers apparently thought it was related to the Old English word *light* – ‘l-i-g-h-t.’ A lot of words with the /ite/ sound are spelled that way in English – *light*, *fight*, *night*, *might*, *tight*, and so on. So it was probably natural to spell the word *delight* the same way. So *delight* picked up its modern GH even though it is a French loanword that never had the sound typically represented by GH.

Mistakes in the mid-1500s also gave the words *crumb* and *crumble* their modern B’s. *Crumb* is an Old English word. So it’s not a loanword. It was *cruma* in Old English. There was no ‘b’ sound in it. And the process of breaking something into crumbs was to *kremelyd*. Again, no ‘b’ sound. But at the current point in our story in 1547 we have the first recorded use of the word *crumble* spelled with a B, and a couple of decades later, we have the first recorded use of the word *crumb* with a B at the end. So where did that B come from? Again, it’s not a loanword, so

there is no distant root word with that sound. But English did have the Old English word *dumb* which was spelled with a B on the end. That was because the word *dumb* was pronounced /doomb/ in Old English. There was also the Old English word *thumb*, which never had a ‘b’ sound at the end, but it apparently picked up its letter B based on its similarity to the word *dumb*. Again, both *dumb* and *thumb* were routinely spelled with a B in the 1500s. So it’s possible that those spelling influenced the spelling of the word *crumb*.

Even though the word *crumb* received a new B in its spelling, the B remained silent in the pronunciation of the word. But notice what happened with the related word *crumble*. In that case, the B started to be pronounced. So this was the same phenomenon we saw earlier in a word like *language*, which acquired a ‘w’ sound after the letter U was added to the word. And we saw the same thing happen with the word *controller*, which became *comptroller* when the letters MP were added to the middle of the word. Sometimes, the new spellings were misinterpreted by readers. They assumed that words should be pronounced like they were spelled. So it was only natural that people would start to pronounce some of those new letters that were being added to words to reflect their ancient roots.

In fact, these types of pronunciation changes tend to mask just how common the new spellings were in the 1500s. I mean, in words like *debt* and *doubt*, the B sticks out like a sore thumb. So it’s easy to see that those words picked up an additional letter over time. But in words where that new letter came to be pronounced, the spelling looks normal today, and we don’t even realize that a change was made at some point in the past.

For example, there were a lot of Latin words that had the prefix ‘ad-’, which meant ‘to or toward.’ Those words often lost the ‘d’ sound when they passed through French, but English writers put the D’s back in many of those words during the 1400s and 1500s, and *amonest* became modern *admonish*, *avocat* became modern *advocate*, *avis* became modern *advice*, *aventure* became modern *adventure*, and *aorn* became modern *adorn*. Again, the modern pronunciations hides the fact that a silent D was added to those words in early Modern English because the D isn’t silent anymore.

Of course as we’ve seen, this process was a bit haphazard and mistakes were often made. *Avauntage* got a new D under the assumption that it also originally had the ‘ad-’ prefix in Latin. And *avauntage* became *advantage*. Similarly, *avauncen* got a new D for the same reason, and it came to be pronounced as *advance*. But neither of those words had the ‘ad-’ prefix in Latin. They actually had the ‘ab-’ prefix with a B. So if the scholars had gotten it correct, those words would probably be pronounced ‘abvantage’ and ‘abvance’ today. But they got the prefix wrong, and that mistake gave us the modern pronunciations.

Similarly, the word *amyrel* was derived from the Arabic word *amir*. But English writers were so prone to converting the initial sound from ‘a’ to ‘ad-’ in loanwords that the word *amyrel* also got a new D. And that gave us the word *admiral*. Again, that D was a mistake.

There were also a lot of Latin words with the /ahl/ sound that passed into French, where the sound evolved from /ahl/ spelled A-L to /au/ spelled A-U. And then English borrowed a lot of those words with the French /au/ sound. But in the 1400s and 1500s, English writers started to put the original Latin letter L back into those words. So the spelling switched from A-U to A-L, and then the pronunciation changed within English to reflect that spelling change. So English borrowed the word *faute* from French, then the L was put back in, and it became *fault*. English borrowed the word *assaut*, and again, the Latin L was revived, and it became *assault*. *Default* got its L and became *default*. *Caudron* got its L and became *cauldron*.

Another interesting example is the fish known as *salmon*. The name began as the Latin word *salmonem*, but once again, it lost its L in French. English borrowed the word as *samoun* (/SAH-moon/). But again, the Latin L was eventually added back in. But in this case, the L remained silent, which is why *salmon* is pronounced without the L today in most cases. Even though it's not considered to be a standard pronunciation, some people do pronounce the word as /SAL-mon/ today. And if history is a guide (and it often is), it seems very likely that /SAL-mon/ will become more and more common over time because most of those silent L's from the 1500s were gradually pronounced over time.

By the way, I should note that words like *verdict* and *perfect* received their modern C's and their modern 'c' or 'k' sounds through this same process. Both words lost their C's in French and they passed into English as *verdit* and *perfit* (or *parfit*). In the 1500s, English writers and printers put the C's back in, and that eventually produced the modern pronunciations of *verdict* and *perfect*.

So as you can see, this process revived a lot of old letters that had been lost over time. That's why I called them 'zombie letters' in the title of the episode. They were brought back to life, and then they wreaked havoc on English spelling and pronunciation.

But so far, I've only focused on one particular scenario – Latin words that passed through French and lost a specific sound and letter, and then were borrowed into English where the letter was revived. This scenario happened a lot in the 1500s because it was a period in which there was a lot of borrowing directly from Latin. So English suddenly had a lot of Latin words juxtaposed beside earlier French loanwords, and writers and printers were trying to reconcile the differences between those two versions of the same root word.

Well, English scholars weren't just borrowing from Latin during this period; they were also borrowing directly from Greek. And those Greek loanwords had experienced their own sound changes over the centuries. And that also impacted English spelling during the 1500s. So let's turn our attention for a moment to those Greek loanwords.

As we know, the ancient Romans were heavily influenced by the Greeks, and they borrowed a lot of words from the Greeks. Those words passed into Latin, and then later, a lot of those words passed into French, and then were borrowed into English. So when we look at what happened to these words, we're basically adding an extra step to the beginning of the process that we looked at earlier. And the reason why that's important is because Greek words often experienced a sound change when they were borrowed into Latin because the sounds of Latin were a little

different from those of Greek. So again, we're just adding an extra layer of complication when we look at these early Greek loanwords that passed into Latin and then eventually made their way into English.

One of the reasons why many Greek words were pronounced differently by the Romans is because ancient Greek was a very aspirated language. And by that, I mean that ancient Greek had a lot of consonant sounds that were pronounced with a breathy quality. The original Indo-European language also had a lot of consonants that were pronounced that way. But Latin didn't have as many of those pronunciations, and English doesn't either.

So when the Romans borrowed words from Greek that had that breathy quality, they just pronounced in the normal Latin manner without the aspiration. But when Roman scribes spelled those Greek words, they felt the need to indicate that the word had come from Greek where the sound was a little different. And they usually did that putting a letter H after the breathy consonant. And the reason why they used an H is because the 'h' sound is just a slight breathy sound. The difference between *old* and *hold* is that slight /h/ sound at the beginning of *hold*. And we represent that sound with the letter H. So the Romans used that H to mark those aspirated or breathy Greek consonants.

And notice the parallel between what the Romans scribes did in the classical era and what the English writers and printers did in the 1500s. In both cases, the writers and scribes lived at a time when lots of words were pouring into their respective languages from the outside. And in that environment, it was important to keep track of where those words were coming from and the sounds that may have been altered through that borrowing.

So for example, the Greek 'r' sound was very aspirated. The sound was represented with the Greek letter rho. Well, when the Romans borrowed words from Greek with that sound, they tended to pronounce the sound with the normal Latin 'r' sound without the aspiration. But they wanted to preserve the Greek spelling as best they could, so they just placed an H after the R to indicate that the sound was breathier in Greek. That's how words like *rhythm* and *rhyme* originally got their RH spellings. But over time, people didn't really care about those Greek spellings. As words like that passed through Late Latin and French, scribes just spelled the words like they were pronounced, so the H was dropped over time. And when English borrowed some of these Greek words via French, the words usually came with a simple R at the beginning. But now, in the early Modern English period – when English scholars were studying Greek for the first time and when Greek words were pouring into English – those scholars and writers wanted to indicate which of those older loanwords also had Greek origins. Once again, the etymology became important. And those writers knew that those particular words had been spelled with an RH in earlier Latin, so in the late 1400s and 1500s, words like *rhythm*, *rhyme*, *rhetoric* and *rhinoceros* all regained their H and started to be spelled with their modern RH spellings in English. Today, when we spell the 'r' sound with RH, it usually indicates that the word is Greek in origin.

Now the same thing happened with the Greek ‘k’ sound. Ancient Greek had a regular ‘k’ sound, which they represented with the letter kappa – which is also the origin of our modern letter K. But Ancient Greek also a slightly different sound that was more aspirated or breathy – more like /x/. In later Greek, the sound shifted forward and became more of a fricative – more like /x/. The Greeks represented this breathy ‘k’ sound with the letter that the Greeks call chi (/xi/), but in English it’s usually called /kai/. At any rate, Latin didn’t have that aspirated or breathy sound, so when the Romans borrowed words with that sound, they just pronounced that sound as a regular ‘k’ sound – /k/. And you might remember that the Romans usually spelled the ‘k’ sound with letter C like we do with words like *car* and *cat*. But they also wanted to keep track of the original Greek sound and letter that the Greeks used in those words, so once again the Romans just added an H after the C. That H indicated that the sound was more aspirated or breathy in Greek. And that’s how words like *chronicle* and *Christ* and *chaos* originally got their CH spellings.

Again, those words passed through Late Latin and French, and since those languages just pronounced those words with a regular ‘k’ sound, the H was gradually dropped. And when English borrowed those words in the Middle English period, they came in with a simple letter C at the beginning. But again, in the 1500s, English writers recognized that words like that came from ancient Greek, so they recreated that older Latin spelling and they put the H back in those words.

During that later period, other Greek words were coming into English with a ‘k’ sound, and for the same reasons, English writers and printers chose to represent that sound in those words with a CH spelling, which was a way of marking the word as being Greek in origin. That why later loanwords like *chorus* and *chrome* and *chlorine* are spelled with a CH rather than a simple C or K. And again, today when we spell the ‘k’ sound in a word with CH, it usually indicates that the word is Greek in origin.

The same process also gave us the modern PH spelling for the ‘f’ sound. The ancient Greeks had two P sounds – one that was a regular ‘p’ sound much like in Modern English and one that was heavily aspirated. They represented the regular ‘p’ sound with the letter pi (/pee/) – or /pai/ as it’s called in English. That Greek letter is actually the origin of our modern letter P. But for the aspirated or breathy version of the ‘p’ sound, the Greek used a different letter called phi (/fee/) – or /fai/ as its pronounced in English. Well, this aspirated ‘p’ sound in Ancient Greek eventually shifted to an ‘f’ sound. And at the time when the Romans were borrowing a lot of Greek words, it appears that the breathy ‘p’ sound was undergoing that change within Greek. It was probably the case that some Greek dialects used the older ‘breathy P’ pronunciation and some used a pronunciation that was somewhere between a ‘p’ and an ‘f’ sound. Again, the sound was evolving within Greek itself.

Well, when the Romans borrowed words from Greek with that sound, they just pronounced it as an ‘f’ sound because apparently that was the closest sound in Latin. But again, they wanted to represent the Greek pronunciations and the Greek letter phi when they spelled those words. So since this letter was traditionally an aspirated ‘p’ sound – and was still probably pronounced that way in some Greek dialects – the Romans added an H after the P to indicate that breathy quality. And that produced a PH spelling for the ‘f’ sound in those loanwords borrowed from Greek.

Well, again, as those words passed through late Latin and French, the desire to mark those words as Greek words declined. And for the most part, those words just came to be spelled like they were pronounced – with just a simple letter F. And that’s how many of those words were spelled when they passed into Middle English as well. But in the early Modern era, those English writers and printers wanted to indicate that those words had a Greek origin, so once again, they went back and replaced the F with the old PH from classical Latin. So words like *physic*, *phoenix*, *pheasant*, *phlegm* and *pharmacy* all got their modern spelling with a PH to indicate their Greek origin. Some words like *philosophy* had retained their PH’s over the centuries, so there was no need to change the spelling in those words. And some words like *fantasy*, *frenzy* and *frantic* were given a new PH spelling, but the older spelling with the F eventually won out. However, *phantasy* spelled ‘p-h-a-n-t-a-s-y’ is still used sometimes, and it can still be found in many modern dictionaries. Again, when we come across a word in English where the ‘f’ sound is spelled with a PH, it usually indicates a word of Greek origin. And we can thank or blame the writers of early of Modern English for that.

Now there is one last Greek sound that also received a new H spelling in Latin and has survived until the modern day. And that’s the modern TH spelling. And this is a fascinating story in itself. So let’s look at what happened with TH. We begin with the fact that Ancient Greek had a regular ‘t’ sound, which they represented with their letter called tau. That’s also the early version of our modern letter T. And Ancient Greek also had a ‘th’ sound, which they represented with a letter called theta. Well, the reason why that is notable is because the ‘th’ sound is actually rare within the Indo-European language family. Greek had it, and obviously English has it. English actually has two slightly different versions of that sound – one voiced and voiceless. It’s the difference between the sound in *them* and *thimble*, which may not be noticeable until you reverse them and you get /them/ and /thimble/. Icelandic also has those two distinct sounds. The ‘th’ sound can be found in a few other dialects within Indo-European languages, but overall, it’s pretty rare. And Latin didn’t have the sound either.

So when Greek words with that sound were borrowed into Latin, the Romans just pronounced that ‘th’ sound with the nearest sound in Latin, which was the ‘t’ sound. This is also common in some Modern English dialects like those in Ireland where the ‘th’ sound is often pronounced as a simple ‘t’ sound. So within Latin, the Greek ‘th’ sound became a ‘t’ sound in those borrowed words. But when those words were written down, the Roman scribes wanted to indicate that the sound had been different in Greek and had been spelled with that Greek letter theta, as opposed to the regular ‘t’ letter tau. So once again, they put an H after the T to mark that Greek /th/ sound. So Latin ended up with a lot of Greek words that were spelled with a ‘TH’, but were pronounced with a simple ‘t’ sound.

And again, those words then passed through Late Latin and French, and those later scribes saw no need to preserve the H in those words. So very often, the H was dropped, and the words were spelled with a simple T since they were now pronounced that way. And that’s how many of those words passed into English in the Middle English period. Words like *theme*, *throne*, *ethic*, *authentic*, *panther* and *diphthong* passed into English as *teme*, *trone*, *etik*, *autentik*, *panter* and *diptonge* – all pronounced with a ‘t’ sound and spelled with a simple letter T.

But then, in the 1400s and 1500s, English writers and printers decided to mark those loanwords as Greek words by reviving the H that had been dropped, and they gave those words their TH spellings again. From there, one of two things happened. In some cases, the pronunciation stayed the same with the regular ‘t’ sound that had been around since the words first passed into Latin. So those words were now spelled with a TH, but pronounced with the ‘t’ sound. And that’s why the herb called *thyme* (‘t-h-y-m-e’) is pronounced /time/ and not /thyme/. It’s ultimately a Greek word that lost its ‘th’ sound in Latin because Latin didn’t have that sound, and then entered English spelled with a simple T as ‘t-y-m-e’, and then later had its H revived to reflect its Greek origin. But the pronunciation never changed from there. The same thing happened with names like *Thomas* (‘t-h-o-m-a-s’) and *Theresa* (‘t-h-e-r-e-s-a’) and *Esther* (‘e-s-t-h-e-r’). Those names were used in Greek and followed the same general path as a word like *thyme*. Their pronunciations changed within Latin, and then remained that way in English.

But in most cases, the ‘t’ sound in those Greek loanwords shifted back the original ‘th’ sound after the new spellings were introduced in the 1400s and 1500s. And that’s because English already had the ‘th’ sound. So when readers encountered those new spellings with TH, they just started to pronounce the words that way. So in essence, English reversed the sound change that Latin had introduced. So words like *theme*, *throne*, *ethic*, *authentic*, *panther*, *diphthong*, *theater*, *theology* and many more got their modern pronunciations thanks to the revival of that H after the T in early modern English.

By the way, we still have evidence of that history in certain names like *Elizabeth*, *Catherine*, *Dorothy* and *Theodore*. All of those names were used in some form in ancient Greece. And today, they are all spelled with a ‘TH’ and pronounced with a ‘th’ sound. But when they originally entered English from Latin and French, they were pronounced with a simple ‘t’ sound. And that helps to explain the nicknames that we have for those names in Modern English. *Elizabeth* is often shortened to *Betty* or *Betsy*, not /Bethy/ or /Bethsy/, because the name *Elizabeth* was originally pronounced more like /Elizabet/ in English. *Catherine* was originally more like /Cat-erine/ – similar to /Katarina/ as it’s rendered in some other European languages. And that’s why *Catherine* is often shortened to *Kate* with the ‘t’ sound.

We see essentially the same process at work with the names *Dorothy* and *Theodore*. They’re both Greek names, and interestingly, *Dorothy* is just the reverse of *Theodore*. The Greek word *doron* mean ‘gift,’ and *theos* meant ‘God.’ So *Dorothea* mean ‘gift of God.’ And *Theodora* meant ‘God’s gift.’ So both names are formed from the same two root words. Again, both names passed through Latin, and they lost their ‘th’ sounds along the way. English initially took them as Dorothee (/Dor-o-tay/) and Theodore (/Tay-o-dore/), which explains how we got the nicknames *Dot* for *Dorothy* and *Ted* for *Theodore*. The nicknames use the original English ‘t’ sound in those words, whereas *Dorothy* and *Theodore* have regained their original ‘th’ sounds within English thanks to the spelling change.

But of course, as we know, mistakes were sometimes made. Again, the writers and printers of the 1500s didn’t have access to etymology dictionaries, so they sometimes mixed up Latin and Greek words. That’s what happened with the Latin name *Anthony*. It is often spelled with a TH today because early modern writers and printers thought it was ultimately a Greek name, but it’s not.



It's a Latin name. As such, it was pronounced /Antony/ with a 't' sound, and was spelled with a letter T in the middle. There was never an H. But when the H was mistakenly added in under the assumption that the name was Greek, it created the spelling 'A-n-t-h-o-n-y.' And over time, some English speakers began pronouncing the name as /Anthony/ to reflect that spelling. That was especially true in North America. Britain tended to retain the traditional pronunciation as /Antony/. Again, that's also why the nickname *Tony* has a 't' sound. It's based on the original version of the name with the 't' sound.

The same mistake and over-correction also gave the Latin words *author* and *authority* their modern TH spellings, and eventually, their modern 'th' pronunciations. They're actually Latin words – not Greek words. And they were originally pronounced more like /autor/ and /authority/.

Another word that got its modern TH though this same kind of mistake was name of the English river the Thames. Of course, it's spelled 'T-h-a-m-e-s,' even though it's pronounced with a simple 't' sound. The word has Celtic roots, and it has been around since Old English. It had always been pronounced with a simple 't' sound at the front, but in late Middle English, it started to pick up the modern TH spelling, presumably because it resembled some of the Greek words that were coming into English at the time like the Greek word *teme* which became *theme* after the spelling was changed. So the *Thames* got a TH as well, but the pronunciation didn't change to reflect the new spelling. The name was probably too common and too familiar to English speakers for the pronunciation to be altered by a spelling change.

Now, by this point, you're probably getting tired of all of these examples. But I wanted you to see how extensive these new spellings were around the current point in our overall story in the mid-1500s. And in doing so, I wanted to push back against a common perception. A lot of people with an interest in the history of English know that some of the weird spellings we have today were caused by scholars in the past who added letters to words based on etymology. But I think there is a perception that it only affected a small number of words. There is a notion that these spelling anomalies were caused by a few random scholars who were infatuated with Latin and thought that English words ought to resemble Latin, so they played around with the spellings. In reality, the phenomenon was much more widespread than that. We find these spellings scattered among documents in the late Middle Ages composed by many different scribes; and we find them flourishing in the early modern era among both writers and printers. It wasn't just a handful of scholars in their ivory towers. And we find these spelling changes in lots and lots of words. In many cases, the spelling changes are hidden from modern view today because the pronunciations have evolved over time to incorporate the spelling changes. In other words, this was a widespread phenomenon, and it was reaching its peak around the current point in our overall story in the mid-1500s.

But not everyone liked what they were seeing, and what they were reading, in those English documents. There was growing effort to make English spelling more phonetic, and to push-back against these spellings based on etymology.

Earlier in the episode, I mentioned a man named John Hart. He was the English scholar who wrote about English spelling and pronunciation, and his writings indicate that the word *language*

had not yet acquired its ‘w’ sound in the mid-1500s. Well, I should tell you a little more about John Hart because his writings provide the first detailed and systematic study of English spelling and phonetics. And he is also important because he was a spelling reformer in an era just before English spelling started to be standardized .

Hart argued that English spelling should be strictly phonetic, and he made his position very clear in the title of his first book published in 1551. It was called ‘The Opening of the Unreasonable Writing of Our English Tounge.’ Given the date of that work, and how detailed it is, he was probably working on it around the time that Edward VI inherited the throne from his father in 1547, and in fact, the book is dedicated to the young king. But it turned out to be essentially the first draft of larger work.

In the years after he composed that first book, he set about revising and expanding it, and eighteen years later in 1569, he published what is generally considered to be the definitive version of his research and recommendations. It was called ‘An Orthographie.’ *Orthography* is a fancy word that refers to the ‘study of spelling.’ And I’m going to talk about that particular book in more detail in a future episode because it was released a couple of decades later in our story. But again, the earlier version was composed around the current point in the mid-1500s. And in both of Hart’s books, he took aim at these spellings based on the etymology of words.

He specifically criticized the use of a B in the word *doubt*, and the use of the MP in the word *count* that I talked about earlier. He also objected to spelling of the word *authority* with a TH. Remember that *authority* was a Latin word that picked up an H after the T under the mistaken assumption that it was a Greek word. Hart noted that the word was pronounced as /authority/, and that it should be spelled with a simple T – not TH. Of course, we know that the TH was retained, and the pronunciation of that word evolved over time based on that spelling.

Hart also criticized other spellings that were common at the time, but have since fallen out of use like the word *fruit* being spelled ‘f-r-u-c-t’ based on its Latin root *fructus*, and the word *condemned* being spelled with a P as ‘c-o-n-d-e-m-p-n-e-d.’ That P came from its Latin root *condempnare*.

By arguing against these Latin and Greek based spellings – and by arguing in favor of phonetic spellings – Hart was essentially taking a stand against the growing influence of those classical languages. He wasn’t really concerned about roots of English words or representing those roots in writing by reviving long-lost letters. He just wanted a simple language that people could use – a simple spelling system that people could read and write with ease. And in that sense, he was foreshadowing that other debate that about to get underway concerning all of those Latin and Greek words that were pouring into English – the so-called ‘inkhorn debate.’

So next time, we’ll finally spend a little time on that debate, and we’ll also trace out the major events during the reign of Edward VI, including several developments that impacted the story of English.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.