THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 163: AN ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 163: An Elementary Education. In this episode, we're going to continue our look at the Elizabethan period, and we're going to move the story into the second half of Elizabeth's reign. The period of the 1580s marked a sea change in the overall history of English. For the first time, many writers and scholars began to write about the beauty and sophistication of English. They argued that it was no longer a rustic vernacular, but was instead every bit the equal of Latin and Greek. That was really a new idea, and it had significant ramifications for the English language and English literature. It led to a more formalized study of English, and it encouraged those who wanted to standardize the language. And it soon led to the first English grammar book and then the first English dictionary. And as we'll see, it also contributed to a poetic form of English prose that would soon dominate the stages of London. So this time, we'll look at how English became self-confident and how it contributed to the way we write the language everyday.

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

Now I want to begin this episode by taking you back to an earlier episode – specifically Episode 147 which I titled 'A Rude and Rusty Language." That episode was set in the early 1500s – so about 70 or 80 years before the current point in our overall story. In that episode, I mentioned a short poem by a writer named John Skelton which was composed in the year 1504. In that poem, Skelton expressed the general opinion of most scholars at the time about the state of English. He described it with terms like 'rude' and 'rusty,' by which he meant 'rustic.' He said that it was so ugly and dull that it was impossible to write ornately in English. Now that may seem a little harsh today, but most English scholars in the 1500s had a bit of an inferiority complex when it came to their native language. They revered Latin, which was the language they studied from an early age in school. Latin had been formalized with a fixed grammar and fixed spellings. It was orderly and systematic and expressive. By contrast, English was perceived as a haphazard mess. It was a local vernacular, and it didn't have fixed spellings or a formal systematic grammar, at least not fixed to the point where it could be taught in schools. And it wasn't taught in schools. There was also regional variation and class variation in the way people spoke English. It was functional as a local vernacular, but if you really wanted to express yourself with grace and elocution, you had to look elsewhere.

But as we saw in subsequent episodes, English changed quite a bit in the decades that followed those comments by John Skelton. Over the course of the 1500s, English borrowed heavily from Latin and Greek, and those new loanwords were combined with the French loanwords that had been borrowed a few centuries earlier. By the late 1500s, English had three distinct registers to choose from. It had simple and basic Old English words. It has a slightly more elevated group of words from French that had been around since the Middle English period. And it had this new group of Latin and Greek words that provided an ever higher register of technical and specialized terms. And by the current point in our overall story in the early 1580s, the general attitude toward English was starting to change. And a new type of English prose was starting to emerge.

One of the writers who led the way with this new style was a man named John Lyly. Lyly came from a prominent family. His grandfather was William Lily, and that name may not mean much to you today, but if you were alive in the 1500s, you would have probably known that name because William Lily had composed the standard textbook on Latin grammar that was used in schools throughout England. Henry VIII had mandated its use. Remember that Latin grammar was basically what you studied in school, so almost every student was familiar with that book. Even Shakespeare alluded to the book and quoted from it in several different plays.

Well, William Lily may have been synonymous with Latin grammar, but his grandson John Lyly became synonymous with a new type of English literature, and he also influenced Shakespeare.

In 1579, John Lyly composed an original work of English prose called 'Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit." It's the story of an Athenian man named Euphues who falls in love with his friend's fiancé and pursues her, losing both her and his friend along the way, though he reconciles with the friend in the end. The following year, he composed a follow-up work called 'Euphues and his England.' So if you listened to the last episode where I discussed Francis Drake's voyage around the world, these two works by John Lyly would have been composed during that same time period.

Well, these two works proved to be very popular, going through more than thirty editions over the following fifty years. In fact, Lyly was probably the most well-known and successful writer of the 1580s, and his fame exceeded that of Shakespeare in Shakespeare's own time.

Those two novels also gave us the first recorded use of several common phrases and expressions. The first book contains an early version of phrase 'miserly loves company.' Lily writes, "In miserie Euphues, it is a great comfort to haue a companion." It also contains an early version of the phrase 'all's fair in love and war.' He writes, "Anye impietie may lawfully be committed in loue, which is lawlesse." The second book contains an early version of the phrase 'like two peas in a pod.' Lyly writes, 'As like as one pease is to an other.' It also contains an early version of the phrase 'a marriage made in heaven' or 'a match made in heaven.' He writes, "Mariages are made in heauen, though consumated in yearth." And the book also contains an early version of the phrase 'Your eyes are bigger than your belly' or 'bigger than your stomach.' Lyly writes, "Thou art like the Epicure whose belly is sooner filled then his eye."

Now those two novels were not only popular and contained early versions of some common phrases, they also represented a new and innovative approach to writing. Lyly's style combined poetry and prose, and it was so distinctive that those two novels even produced a word to describe it. The writing style became known as ***Euphuism***. Now you're probably saying, "So what?" But this style reflected a fundamental change in the way writers were using the English language during this period.

When we think of Elizabethan English, I think a lot of us tend to think of Shakespeare, and we imagine that everyone spoke like the characters in Shakespeare's plays. We imagine that they spoke in that very affected, poetic style. In actuality, common speech was much more basic and

simple than that. Other than the pronunciation and a few grammatical differences, it wasn't all that different from the language we speak today.

But John Lyly introduced a literary style that combined poetry and prose. Technically, it wasn't poetry. It was ordinary speech. But it incorporated a lot of poetic elements. His style often used contrasting statements that were balanced against each other and connected through the use of alliteration. So let me give you an example from his first book to illustrate this approach. In this passage, notice how Lyly includes contrasting ideas, but links them together by repeating the same sounds at the beginning of each pair:

> "Descend into thine owne conscience, and consider with thyselfe, the great difference betweene staring and slarke blynde, witte and wisedome, loue and lust: be merry, but with modestie: be sober, but not too sullen: be valyaunt, but not too venterous."

That's a good example of the type of word play and alliteration that was associated with Lyly's novels. Now obviously, alliteration and repeating concepts had been around for many centuries. They were poetic devices. But again, this wasn't poetry. It was prose. It was supposed to be a type of normal speech. Lyly just incorporated these poetic concepts into his writings. And it contributed to a new type of literature that was a blend of poetry and prose. It was refined and wordy; it used lots of metaphors and similes. It relied on those types of contrasting statements, and it incorporated lots of references to nature and Greek literature. And to meet the demands of that type of writing, the vocabulary was drawn from every register of English speech. This new type of literature stretched the traditional boundaries of English, and it showed that the language could be as artistic and refined as Latin or French or any other European language.

Another prominent poet and writer of the period was Sir Philip Sidney. He had access to the royal court, and his works also combined poetry and prose. They were also very popular with readers. Around the current point in our overall story in the year 1581, he wrote one of the first works of literary criticism in English called 'Defense of Posie,' which meant 'a defense of poetry' or 'an apology for poetry.' It was an argument in favor of poetry. With the arrival of the printing press, people had started to lose interest in poetry. They wanted books about history, and learning, and medicine, and other topics. And they wanted works of fiction, but they wanted them in prose or plain English. And the Puritans were also starting to criticize poetry. So Sydney wrote this essay in defense of poetry. And in the work, he not only defended the literary form, he also defended the use of English in writing poetry. He said that its mixed vocabulary and lack of rigid grammatical rules made it perfect for poetry. Here wrote:

> "Whereto our language giveth us great occasion, being indeed capable of any excellent exercising of it. I knowe some will say it is a mingled language: And why not, so much the better, taking the best of both the other? Another will say, it wanteth Grammer. Nay truly it hath that praise that it wants not Grammar; for Grammer it might have, but it needs it not, being so easie in it selfe, and so voyd of those combersome differences of Cases, Genders, Moods, & Tenses, which I thinke was a peece of the Tower of Babilons curse, that a man should be put to

> schoole to learn his mother tongue. But for the uttering sweetly and properly the conceit of the minde, which is the end of speech, that hath it equally with any other tongue in the world."

Now that's a pretty remarkable statement, and it shows how attitudes about English were changing around this time. A few decades earlier, John Skelton had claimed that English was a rude and rustic language far inferior to classical languages like Latin and Greek. Now, Philip Sidney argued the opposite – that English was every bit the equal of any language in the world. And he was merely the first of many writers who were starting to express the same sentiment.

At almost the exact same time that Philip Sidney was composing the passage I just read, another writer named George Pettie was expressing his support for English. Pettie wrote romances that were really modernized versions of classic tales. And in the same year (1581), he prepared a translation of an Italian text called 'Civile Conversation.' In the preface, he explained why he prepared an English translation, and he responded to critics who felt that the text couldn't be properly rendered in English. He wrote:

> "There are some others yet who wyll set lyght by my labours, because I write in Englysh: and those are some nice Trauaylours, who returne home with such quaesie stomackes, that nothyng wyll downe with them but Frenche, Italian, or Spanishe, and though a woorke be but meanely written in one of those tongues, and finely translated into our Language, yet they wyll not sticke farre to preferre the Originall before the Translation. . ."

He then said that the critics think only Latin-based languages have the sophistication and eloquence that are required to communicate some of those ideas. He wrote, "they thinke that impossible to be doone in our Tongue: for they count it barren, they count it barbarous, they count it vnworthy to be accounted of."

But then he said that an English translation can actually be superior to the original because readers can better understand the ideas and concepts if they are expressed in the readers' native language.

He also said that the large number of loanwords in English had made the language more sophisticated. Those words had enriched the language and made it more expressive – which allowed writers to translate works into English without sacrificing the original meaning. And then he concluded with the following statement:

> "But how hardly soever you deale with your tongue, how barbarous soever you count it, how litle soever you esteeme it, I durst my selfe undertake . . . to wryte in it as copiouslye for varietie, as compendiously for brevitie, as choycely for woordes, as pithily for sentences, as pleasauntly for figures, and every way as eloquently, as any writer should do in any vulgar tongue whatsoever."

So here, George Pettie joined the chorus of voices who were defending the capabilities of English and were arguing that it was every bit the equal of any Latin-based language.

Many writers were expressing that sentiment in the early 1580s, but one of the most revered persons who expressed that view was a prominent schoolmaster named Richard Mulcaster. Now unless you have a particular interest in this aspect of history, you may have never heard of Richard Mulcaster, but he was a very important figure in the development of Modern English, and his ideas shaped the way the English language is written today – for good or bad. In his defense of English, he argued that its traditions should be respected, and he rejected the notion that English should be radically reformed. He also opposed the attempts to make English spelling purely phonetic. He said that phonetic spelling wasn't practical, and that English merely needed to be tweaked and refined. That notion – that English was fine the way it was – helps to explain why English spelling was never completely reformed to make it more phonetic, and Mulcaster's ideas were partially responsible for the spelling system we have today. But before we explore his ideas, we need to consider his background for a moment.

He was the headmaster of a prominent grammar school in London called the Merchant Taylors' School. As I noted earlier, grammar schools primarily taught Latin and taught in Latin. Some also taught a little bit of Greek, but they didn't teach English. In fact, English wasn't even permitted to be spoken in many of them. The students were almost always boys, and they were eligible to attend those schools from around the age of seven to the age of ten.

But there was a level of schooling prior to grammar school. Those earlier schools were called petty schools, and they taught students as young as five. Some of them taught both boys and girls. These preliminary or 'petty' schools were we might call 'elementary' schools today. The school room could be the teacher's home, or a local church, or some other specific location. The primary purpose of those petty schools was to teach students the alphabet. They would learn the shape and sound of each letter. Then they might advance to some simple writing. They would learn to write the individual letters, then write syllables, and then some simple words. And those petty schools were conducted in English.

Again, around the age of seven or eight – or maybe a little older – some of the boys might advance to a Latin grammar school. For girls, their formal education usually came to an end after the petty school unless they were taught at home or taught by a local tutor. And during this period, that was becoming increasingly common, but grammar schools were still mainly restricted to boys.

Well, Richard Mulcaster was the head master at one of those grammar schools in London, and he was a big fan of English. He came to resent the fact that English wasn't being taught in any meaningful way. As I noted earlier, there wasn't any formal way to teach English yet. There were no grammar books or other textbooks in English. Of course, every language has an inherent grammar, but those rules had not been formalized for English. For example, it was still common in the Elizabethan period to find scholars who used plural verb forms with singular nouns and vice versa. And spellings were still not fixed yet. So it was difficult to teach English without

fixed rules and without any textbooks. That reinforced the idea that English was inferior to Latin, which had been standardized. [*SOURCE: Spellbound, James Essinger, p. 234-5.*]

Well, Mulcaster thought a lot about that problem, and he concluded that English needed to be organized and structured in the same way as Latin. He soon became an advocate for revamped elementary schools where English could be taught to students at those earliest ages. Of course, that meant that an English curriculum had to be developed. And over the course of the 1580s, such a curriculum was developed. As we'll see, Mulcaster's work was mainly dedicated to reading, writing and spelling. Other scholars came along behind him and produced the first English grammar books. But in this episode, we're going to focus on Mulcaster's work – and specifically his contributions to modern spelling.

Mulcaster's ideas were set out in two books – one called Positions in 1581 and the second called The Elementarie in 1582. The second book is by far the more important of the two for our purposes, but let me make a couple of notes about that first book called Positions.

It's actual full title was 'Positions Wherein Those Primitive Circumstances Be Examined, Which Are Necessarie for the Training up of Children, Either for Skill in their Book, or Health in Their Body.' So you can see why most people just call it 'Positions' today. But that full title alludes to the scope of the book. Mulcaster thought that exercise and physical education were a fundamental part of a child's broader education. He thought that physical training contributed to mental health. That idea still exists to a certain extent today because most elementary schools still have physical education classes alongside the other classes.

Among the sports and physical activities that Mulcaster discussed in that first book in 1581 was the sport of football. Now I actually mentioned football in an earlier episode – Episode 122. I noted back then that we have a description of an earlier form of the game from the late 1100s. That game was called ***camp ball*** at the time. It was played in an open field or 'camp.' It didn't really have any fixed rules, and was often little more than a melee. It was disorganized and could include lots and lots players. Sometimes, almost an entire village would participate at the same time. It probably resembled rugby more than modern-day football or soccer. And it was considered a violent, uncivilized sport since a lot of players were seriously injured while playing it – some were even killed.

Well, Mulcaster encouraged children to participate in the sport, but he acknowledged that the sport was violent and needed to be better regulated for the benefit of schools. He wrote,

> ". . . as it now comonly vsed, with thronging of a rude multitude, with bursting of shinnes, & breaking of legges, it be neither ciuil, neither worthy the name of any traine to health. Wherin any man may euidently see the vse of the trayning maister. For if one stand by, which can iudge of the play, and is iudge ouer the parties, & hath authoritie to commaunde in the place, all those inconueniences haue bene, I know, & wilbe I am sure very lightly redressed, nay they will neuer entermedle in the matter, neither shall there be complaint, where there is no cause."

Now this is a fascinating provision because it is considered to be the first appeal for a coach – or what he called a 'training master' – to organize and instruct the teams. And it is also recommends the use of a referee to judge and regulate the game play. Mulcaster followed that provision with a call to reduce the number of participants on each side. He recommended "[s]ome smaller number with such ouerlooking, sorted into sides & standings." The terms 'sides and standings' seems to refer to teams and positions within each team.

So he essentially described the framework of the modern sport – converting it from a violent disorganized melee to the organized and regulated game that we have today. That was part of Mulcaster's overall mission in life – to bring order out of chaos both in the realms of sport and spelling.

In that first book, Mulcaster also recommended a particular voice exercise which he called 'loud speaking' because that's basically what it was. It was a way of working out the vocal tract by yelling or speaking very loudly. He claimed that is was good for a variety of conditions including weak stomach, poor digestion, faintness, phlegm and even hiccups. And I mention that because it was one of the first uses of the word ***hiccup*** in the English language. He spelled it 'h-i-k-u-p.' The ultimate history of the word is a little unclear, but it probably derived from an attempt to imitate the sound that person makes when they have the hiccups. Today, we usually spell the word 'h-i-c-c-u-p,' but you might also come across the spelling 'h-i-c-c-o-u-g-h.' So it looks like 'hic-cough.' And that spelling was apparently derived from the fact that people made a connection in their mind between a hiccup and a cough, probably because both actions originated in the torso and came out of the mouth. So given that spelling was still very loose at the time, people just spelled ***hiccup*** like 'hic-cough.' That was a common spelling in formal documents in the 1700s and 1800s, and there are still people who insist that should be the appropriate spelling. But it seems that 'h-i-c-c-u-p' is more common today. Of course, it is also more phonetic.

Well that's a good example of the looseness of spelling at the time. And in his second book, commonly known as the 'Elementarie,' Mulcaster focused on that problem. Again, that's a short version of the full title, which was actually 'The first part of the elementarie which entreateth chefelie of the right writing of our English tung.'

Now note that the full title refers to the 'first part of the elementary.' So as that title suggests, the book was intended to be the first in a series of books about elementary education in England. Mulcaster's goal was to outline a series of educational reforms having to do with reading, writing, drawing and music. But the other books were apparently never completed, so we are limited to this first book which focused on spelling. And as we'll see, this book proved to be very influential. [*SOURCE: English Pronunciation 1500-1700, Vol. 1, E.J. Dobson, p. 118.*]

Now the reason why this particular book is so important to the history of English spelling is because of the specific approach that Mulcaster advocated. He rejected the purely phonetic approach that scholars like John Hart had proposed. We recently looked at Hart's works on phonetic spelling, and as I noted in those episodes, his writings are important to us today because they indicate how words were pronounced at the time. But they're not really important in regard

to modern spelling because Hart's proposals were never really accepted. There were several problems with a purely phonetic spelling system. First, it required the use of new letters and accent marks to represent all of the sounds in English. We have far more sounds than we have letters. And writers and printers were reluctant to adopt new letters.

Also, not everyone spoke English the same way. There were lots of different accents and dialects, so a phonetic spelling system is really only phonetic in the dialect in which it is composed. So you either had to allow different spellings for each dialect, or you had to accept that the system was only phonetic for one particular dialect. And of course, pronunciations are always evolving and changing. So a phonetic spelling system that is implemented today won't be purely phonetic after a few years. It would have to be constantly updated.

Mulcaster pointed to those shortcomings, and he also noted the value in having a common spelling system that everyone used regardless of dialect. Even though the spoken language might vary from person to person, the written language would be universal and consistent across the board. Throughout Europe, people could write and communicate in a common Latin which had been standardized and was taught in schools. And the same thing could be done for English. So he rejected the purely phonetic approach to spelling, and he recommended a different approach. A more moderate approach. He said that the most important goal was to make English spellings consistent and fixed rather than letting every writer and printer use their own spellings. As long as spellings were fixed and consistent, they could be taught and learned. They didn't have to represent any particular pronunciation. So consistency was more important than phonetics. And as you can see, that idea is still with us today.

But if spellings were not based strictly on the way words were pronounced, then how were words supposed to be spelled? Well, Mulcaster said that teachers should consider tradition and custom. As I've noted before, English spellings were already starting to become fixed by this point. Some common words had acquired normal spellings in the documents issued by the government Chancery in the 1400s. And that process had been reinforced by printers who had adopted some of those spellings and had established their own traditions over the prior century. So by the 1580s, there was an emerging tradition in which many words had common spellings.

Well Mulcaster said that those customs should be respected when deciding which spellings should be used going forward. He said that English spellings should be based on "sound, reason and custom." In other words, it should be a combination of phonetics, custom and general logic or reason. So this was ultimately a moderate approach in which all of those factors would be taken into consideration. He didn't want a radical change. He simply wanted to update and standardize the existing system. [*SOURCE: The History of English Spelling, Christopher Upward and George Davidson, p. 296.*]

So let's take a closer look at Mulcaster's book 'The Elementarie' and see exactly what he had to say about spelling, and also see how it impacted the way we spell words today.

After criticizing the phonetic approach to spelling, and emphasizing the important role of custom and tradition, he listed the letters of the alphabet and commented on the use and pronunciations of several of them. His alphabet is notable because it consisted of 24 letters – not 26 like today. As I noted a couple of episodes back, the letter J had not been adopted yet. It evolved out of the letter I, but it didn't really emerge as a distinct letter until the early 1600s.

Also, as I've noted before, the letters U and V were not distinct yet. They were just two different ways of writing the same letter. So the letter could be used to spell both the vowels sounds of the letter like /oo/ and /uh/, as well as the consonant sound /v/. The different shapes were not used to distinguish those two sounds until the early 1600s, so Mulcaster's list only has one letter for those sounds, not the two separate versions we use today.

I should also mention that he followed the common spelling convention at the time which did distinguish between the two different shapes based on their placement in a word. I've mentioned this before – and it sounds a little weird to us today – but the angular V-shaped letter was used at the beginning of words, and the curvy U-shaped letter was used in the middle. Neither version was common at the end of words. So the word ***verb*** was spelled with the angular V-shaped version of the letter at the front, just like we do today. But, the word ***adverb*** was spelled with the curvy-U-shaped version of the letter since it was the middle of the word. It would have looked like 'a-d-u-e-r-b' to modern eyes. So again, there was a distinction in the way the two shapes were used, but it had nothing to do with the sounds they represented.

Now in addition to his list of letters, Mulcaster also mentioned the common forms of punctuation used in English at the time, specifically the comma, colon, period and parenthesis. And I mentioned that because, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, that is the first recorded use of the term ***parenthesis*** in an English document, and it is also the first recorded use of the word ***period*** in reference to the modern punctuation mark at the end of a sentence. Of course, the word ***period*** is still the standard term in American English, whereas most of the rest of the English-speaking world uses the term ***full stop***. ***Period*** is actually the older, more accepted term dating from its use in this particular text. The term ***full stop*** isn't actually found in an English document until the middle of the following century, and when it first appeared, it was used alongside the word ***period*** as an alternate term for the punctuation mark. So this is a case where American English actually retains the older term for the punctuation mark.

Now the specific letters of Mulcaster's alphabet are important because he thought that they were sufficient to spell words in English. He rejected the notion that English needed to borrow Greek letters or revive Old English letters. Of course, those who wanted a strictly phonetic spelling system often recommended the expansion of the alphabet because English has more sounds that it has letters. For example, as we know, each vowel letter has both a short and a long sound. So letter A has the short /æ/ sound of ***hat*** and the long /ei/ sound of ***hate***. And letter I has the short /i/ sound of ***bit*** and long /ai/ sound of ***bite***. But Mulcaster said that the 24 letters of his alphabet were sufficient to represent all of the sounds of English. He pointed out that other languages also had more sounds than letters, and they had found ways to use the same basic alphabet to represent all of the sounds in those languages, so he said that English should be able to do the same thing. [*The Elementarie, p. 93.*]

Mulcaster also rejected the suggestion that English use accent marks to indicate the difference between long vowels and short vowels, something that French was starting to experiment with around this same time. Mulcaster referred to those markings as 'new faces' and 'verie strange lineaments.' [*The Elementarie, p. 96.*] He specifically said that those marks were difficult to write – and that they were "cumbersom to the hand in penning."

Now that's an interesting statement because it shows that his primary concern was with the writing of words by hand, not the way they were printing with the printing press. To that end, he said that penmanship should also be a factor in deciding how words should be spelled. Spellings should make writing easy, not more difficult. [*The Elementarie, p. 97.*]

He then noted that the spellings of his day sometimes used too few letters, and sometimes used too many letters. By way of example, he said that words like ***fetch*** and ***scratch*** were often spelled with too few letters. He said that writers in his day spelled ***fetch*** 'f-e-c-h,' and they spelled ***scratch*** 's-c-r-a-c-h.' So neither word had a T at the time. Both of those spellings make sense phonetically, but Mulcaster said that they should both be spelled with a T as 'f-e-t-c-h' and 's-c-r-a-t-c-h,' respectively. And he said that those words should have a T in them to reflect the earlier forms of those words. [*The Elementarie, p. 105.*] An earlier form of ***fetch*** in Middle English was actually fet – 'f-e-t.' And an earlier version of ***scratch*** was 'scrat' – 's-c-r-a-t.' So he says that those T's should be reinserted to reflect the earlier forms of those words, and of course, those are the standard spellings that we use today. So that was a case where Mulcaster emphasized the use of tradition over the emerging custom.

As I noted, he also criticized what he considered to by too many letters in certain words. By way of example, he noted the common practice of marking a short vowel sound by doubling the consonant letters after the vowel. Now this is a technique that developed in the early Middle English period and was still common in the Elizabethan era. I first discussed the idea of doubling the consonant after a short vowel way back in Episode 88. It was the technique used by the writer Orm in his early Middle English text called the Ormulum. We still use that technique today in the middle of words. It is the difference between ***hopping*** with its 'short O' sound and its double P's, and ***hoping*** with its 'long O' sound and its single P. It's also marks the difference between ***latter*** with its 'short A' sound and its double T's, and ***later*** with its 'long A' sound and its single T. Again, we do this all the time today. And notice that the double consonant letters are in the middle of those words. That's normally where we find them today – where the two syllables meet. And today, they mark the difference between ***dinner*** and ***diner***, ***tapping*** and ***taping***, ***written*** and ***write***, and so on.

But in the Elizabethan period, those double letters were also used at the end of words – even short simple one-syllable words. So a word like ***bad*** with its 'short A' sound was often spelled 'b-a-d-d,' and a word like ***bed*** with its 'short E' sound was often spelled 'b-e-d-d.' Well, Mulcaster objected to the use of those doubled consonants at the end of a word. He was OK with their use in the middle of words where two syllables met, but he said that they were unnecessary at the end of words. That was partly because we normally assume the vowel is short in that context unless there is some indication otherwise. [*The Elementarie, p. 105.*] So a single consonant letter was sufficient at the end of words. It's a basic idea that is still with us today. ***Bed***

has a single D at the end, but ***bedding*** has double D's in the middle. ***Ham*** has a single M at the end, but ***hammer*** has double M's in the middle. ***Ban*** had a single N at the end, but ***banner*** has double N's in the middle.

However, Mulcaster did make a couple exceptions to his rule. He said there were two situations where it was OK to double the consonant at the end of a word to indicate a short vowel sound, and again, these two exceptions were based on common practice at the time.

One of those exceptions was the letter L. He said that the L was often doubled at the end of a word when it followed a short vowel sound. Of course, we still do that today in words like ***still***, ***hill***, ***bell***, ***ball***, ***full***, and so on. By closely observing the practice, Mulcaster concluded that the use of double L's often reflected the way the words were pronounced. He said that the combination of the vowel and the following 'l 'sound had two different pronunciations in English. He said sometimes "the vowells sound hard vpon the l," but other times, "the vowell sit not so hard." So the strength of the vowel sound varied. When it was pronounced 'strong' – to use his term – the spelling usually ended with double L's. He said that retaining the double L's in those words "semeth most agreable both to reason and vse." But then he added that when the 'l' sound was pronounced more lightly at the end of words, a single L would suffice. [*The Elementarie, p. 121.*]

Now what he is getting at there is the idea of stress. When we pronounce a word with more than one syllable, some syllables are stressed or pronounced more strongly than others. In English, we have a tendency to stress the first syllable in a multi-syllable word – /SY-llable/, not /sy-LAB-el/. And that's what we do with words like ***rival***, ***devil***, ***evil***, ***funnel***, ***double***, ***simple***, and so on. All of those words end with a 'l' sound. And since we stress the first syllable in those words, the 'l' sound at the end is in an unstressed syllable – so it is pronounced a little bit softer or lighter. And Mulcaster said in that environment, a single letter L was sufficient. And it still is today. Of course, it is sometimes spelled 'l-e,' or 'e-l,' or 'a-l' or 'i-l' – but it's still just a single L.

But in simple, one syllable words, that single syllable is always stressed. And that's where Mulcaster said the vowels 'sound hard upon the L.' So that's where he recommended using the double L's based on the spelling custom of his day. And we still use those double L's in most one syllable words where the 'l' sound follows a short vowel. That explains the double L's in words like ***small***, ***bell***, ***tell***, ***hill***, ***still***, ***doll***, ***full***, ***skull*** and so on.

Of course, keep in mind that those double L's are marking a short vowel sound, so where the vowel sound is long or where the vowel sound is a diphthong – so two vowel sounds pushed together – we don't have to double the L. So that explains why we only have a single L at the end of words like ***feel***, ***steal***, ***toil***, ***boil***, ***tool***, ***school***, and so on. The vowel sound in those words is either a long vowel sound or a diphthong.

So in summary, Mulcaster said to use double L's after a short vowel sound where the syllable is stressed, and to use a single L after a short vowel sound where the syllable is unstressed, and to use a single L after a long vowel sound or a diphthong. And those are basically the same rules we

use today in Modern English. Of course, there are always a few exceptions, but that's the general rule which works over 95% of the time.

I should note that despite those general rules, Mulcaster did sometimes deviate from them in his spellings. He spelled words like ***vowel***, ***plural***, ***original*** and ***pencil*** with double L's at the end, even though his general rules suggested that only one L was needed. His explanation for deviating from those rules was based on the common practice of scribes. At the time, the more cursive scripts from Italy were becoming common throughout England as I noted in a prior episode. And those scripts featured a more flowing style of handwriting, and apparently, scribes had a tendency to finish words ending in an L with an extra little L or flourish at the end. Mulcaster said, "It is the swiftnesse of the pen sure, which can hardlie staie vpon the single ending l, that causeth this dubling." [*The Elementarie, p. 121.*] So that apparently explains why he occasionally added an extra L to some of his spellings, but that practice fell out of use, and if we ignore that practice, his general observations about the use final L are essentially the same rules that we use today.

So the use of double L's at the end of some words was an exception to the general rule that words not end in double consonants. But remember, there was one other exception to that rule, and that was the letter S. And Mulcaster essentially applied the same rules to the S that he did with the L. The S was to be doubled after a short vowel in a stressed syllable. He wrote, "When the vowell sitteth hard vpon the s, in the end, s, is dubled frenchlike," which was a reference to the fact that French also often doubled the S at the end of words. [*The Elementarie, p. 122.*] And he gave examples like ***pass***, ***grass***, ***bliss*** and ***cross***, as well as multi-syllable words like ***finesse*** and ***discuss*** which have the stress on the final syllable.

By the way, notice the difference between ***discuss*** and ***discus*** – as in a small round object that you throw. Interestingly, Mulcaster gave us the first recorded use of the word ***discus*** in English, at least according to the Oxford English Dictionary. He used it for the first time in his first book called 'Positions' which I mentioned earlier in the episode. That was the text where he talked about football, and in the same section, he also talked about the use of the discus when exercising. Well, notice that ***discus*** is spelled with a single S at the end, whereas ***discuss*** is spelled with double S's at the end. And that's because ***discus*** puts the stress on the first syllable, so a single S is fine at the end. But ***discuss*** puts the stress on the final syllable, and since it is pronounced 'strong' – to use Mulcaster's term – the word needs to have double S's at the end. So you can see how these ideas have become ingrained in our spelling system over time, and it shows that our spellings aren't quite as random and haphazard as you might have thought.

Of course, just like with the use of double L's at the end of words, these general rules for the use of double S's work most of the time, but not always. The most common exceptions tend to be simple often-used words like ***as***, ***is***, ***yes*** and ***us.*** But in most cases, we use a double S where it follows a short vowel and appears in a stressed syllable.

Now I should note that Mulcaster did something very interesting when he spelled words with double S's at the end like ***glass***, ***grass*** and ***kiss***. He actually spelled them with an E on the end, so 's-s-e.' ***Glass*** was 'g-l-a-s-s-e,' and ***kiss*** was 'k-i-s-s-e.' Obviously, that E never really became

standard, but why did he do that? Well, he explained why, and it had to do with the fact that the letter S actually had two different shapes at the time.

You have probably seen this before in old documents, but older forms of English had the modern S and also an elongated S which is sometimes called the 'long S.' The long S looked like someone took a lowercase S, and stretched it vertically. It was basically a vertical line with a little curve at the top and bottom. And sometimes, scribes and printers used a version of the letter with a little cross mark in the middle of the vertical line. It actually looked almost identical to a lowercase F, especially when that little cross mark was added. The cross mark on the S would go up to the vertical line and stop, whereas the cross mark on the F would go all the way through the line. So it was very easy to confuse it with an F, which is why it ultimately fell out of use.

Well, the spelling convention at the time used the long S everywhere in a given word except at the very end. At the end of a word, the modern S was used. Well that was no problem, except when you tried to put double S's at the end of a word. Using that spelling convention, you had to write the long S followed by a short modern S. So even though the two letters were supposed to be the same, they looked completely different next to each other.

Mulcaster recognized this problem, and he said that the double S's should be written identically. So rather than completely changing the spelling convention, he said that a silent E should be added to the end so that the second S wasn't actually the last letter. That way they could both be written as long S's.

Again, when the long S fell out of use, the silent E became unnecessary at the end. So today, we just use the double S's at the end.

So Mulcaster made these two exceptions for the double L's and double S's at the end of words. But in modern spelling, there are two other situations where we sometimes end a word with a double consonant. And that is where we end a word with a double Z or zed, as in ***buzz***, ***fuzz***, ***fizz***, ***jazz***, and so on, and where we end a word with a double F, as in ***off***, ***stiff***, ***staff***, ***stuff***, ***tariff***, ***sheriff*** and so on. Again, those letters are also used to mark a short vowel sound, though Mulcaster doesn't mention their use in his text.

The use of the double Z can be explained as a later development which emerged out of the use of the double S. As I've noted before, the letter Z was rarely used in Old and Middle English, so the /z/ sound was usually represented with the letter S. And we still do that a lot in Modern English. Think about words like ***is***, and ***was***, and ***has***, which are spelled with an S but pronounced with 'z' sound at the end. Earlier in his book, Mulcaster even mentioned that words ***buzzing*** and ***dizzy*** were spelled with double S's at the time. But of course, the letter Z became more common over the following centuries, and today we spell those words with double Z's. So that probably explains why double Z's came to be used in much the same way as double S's at the end of words.

But why we do we also sometimes double an F at the end of words? Well, that's harder to explain. It's really the only other consonant letter that we routinely double at the end of many

words. I have never really come across a specific explanation for the use of those double F's at the end of words, but I do have a theory. And it's just a theory. It may have something to do with the striking resemblance between that long S and the letter F. I mentioned that the long S was the most commonly used form of the S at the time. It was used everywhere except at the end of words. But its appearance was so similar to the letter F that it was eventually abandoned. Well, my theory is that the letter F received the same general treatment as the letter S because the two looked almost identical at the time. The letters so closely resembled each other than scribes and printers just applied the same spelling conventions to both. But again, whatever the reason, the letter F is often doubled in this same fashion at the end of words.

And I should note that we sometimes even add an extra E to the end of those double F's, the same way Mulcaster added an E to the end of his double S's. Think about the word ***giraffe***. It has a silent E at the end. Also the word ***gaff*** when used in the sense of an iron hook is spelled 'g-a-f-f,' but the word ***gaffe*** in the sense of a clumsy remark is spelled 'g-a-f-f-e.' So even today, an extra E is occasionally added to the end of words like that where it doesn't really serve a purpose otherwise.

And speaking of extra E's at the end of a word, that brings us to the most notable spelling convention that Mulcaster wrote about. He is the first known scholar in English to advocate the use of silent E's at the end words to indicate a long vowel sound. And this is one of the most pervasive – and most frustrating – spelling conventions in Modern English.

Remember that Mulcaster said that English didn't need to add any new letters, and it didn't need to introduce accent marks, because the sounds of the letters could be distinguished using the existing letters. We've seen how he encouraged the idea of marking a short vowel by following it with a doubled consonant in certain situations. But in most cases, that wasn't necessary at the end of a word because we generally assume that the vowel is pronounced as a short vowel unless there is some indication otherwise.

Of course, one way to indicate that a vowel is pronounced long is to double the vowel. That's what we often do with the letters E and O. So words like ***seem***, ***feet***, ***street***, ***cheek***, ***root***, ***tooth***, ***moon***, ***soon*** and ***boot*** all have doubled vowel letters to indicate that the vowel is pronounced as a long vowel. That's an old technique.

But that technique didn't work very well with some letters like I and U. And the reason why scribes didn't like to double the I and the U should be obvious if you listened to the episode I did about those letters a couple of episodes back. Those letters were a problem because they tended to get in lost in the Gothic script that was used by many printers. And two I's beside each other looked like a U. If you spelled the word ***bite*** as 'b-i-i-t,' it looked like ***but*** – 'b-u-t.' Of course, the same problem happened if you doubled the U. It looked like the letter W. So if you tried to spell a word like ***swung***, it looked like 's-u-u-u-u-n-g.' It would be a nightmare. So writers and printers looked for other ways to indicate when an I or a U was being pronounced as a long vowel.

One technique was to add a silent E to the end. So where the long vowel was followed by a consonant, you could just add a silent E at the end of the word to indicate that the vowel was pronounced as a long vowel. That technique was ultimately applied to all of the vowel letters, and it gave us the distinction between ***hat*** and ***hate***, ***bit*** and ***bite***, and ***hop*** and ***hope***, and so on. Now this spelling convention had started to emerge in the early Modern English period. In fact, I discussed how it evolved in some detail back in Episode 89, and I would recommend going back and listening to that episode if you're interested in how some of these spelling conventions for vowel sounds arose.

Well, in the Elizabethan period, silent E's were a common feature at the end of words. Many of them lingered from the remnants of old inflectional endings that had eroded and stropped being pronounced over time. And I've mentioned before how printers used the silent E's to stretch or shorten a line of text to justify the margins. And we just saw how Mulcaster used the silent E to ensure that the double S's at the end of words had a consistent shape. So the silent E was an extremely common feature of early Modern English, and its use was somewhat random and inconsistent. Its function varied; and sometimes it didn't really have a function at all. Since it was such a common feature, scribes and printers had been finding ways to put it to use. Mulcaster recognized the flexibility of the letter, and he wrote that the letter E was "a letter of maruellous vse in the writing of our tung, and therefor it semeth to be recommended vnto vs speciallie aboue anie other letter, as a chefe gouernour in the right of our writing."

Mulcaster proposed that the silent E be regulated and used in specific situations like where words ended in double S's as I mentioned earlier. And he also proposed that it be used to distinguish a long vowel from a short vowel. This was part of his plan to ensure that spellings were fixed and regular, and he is the first scholar to formally propose the use of the silent E in that way as a standard feature of the language.

He called it the 'qualifying' E, and to illustrate its use, he gave specific examples like ***mad*** versus ***made*** and ***strip*** versus ***stripe***. [*The Elementarie, p. 111.*] And within another century or so, this silent E to mark a long vowel had become a standard feature of the language.

Now as Mulcaster approached the end of the text, he renewed his call for fixed spellings which could be taught by teachers and learned by students. And to that end, he made a very notable suggestion. He wrote the following, "It were a thing verie praiseworthie in my opinion . . . if som one well learned and as laborious a man, wold gather all the words which we vse in our English tung, whether naturall or incorporate, out of all professions, as well learned as not, into one dictionarie . . ."

That was a call for something that English didn't yet have – a dictionary of all of the words used in English. Of course, there were dictionaries that listed English words and their foreign equivalents, and those were used for translating documents into English or from English into other languages, but no one had prepared a collection all of the words used in English, together with their English definitions. It would take another couple of decades for such a dictionary to actually be produced, and of course, once those dictionaries started to be produced, they further standardized English spellings.

Now Mulcaster didn't prepare a dictionary himself, but he realized the importance of having a resource that could be used to illustrate how words should be spelled. So the last part of his book was a list of about 8,000 commonly used words listed in alphabetical order. The words were spelled in accordance with his recommendations. And again, his recommendations were based on custom and tradition, so they weren't brand new or unusual, they were just the ones he selected and encouraged.

It was basically a spelling guide, and some scholars think it played foundational role in the way words are spelled today. Of the thousands of words that he included, over half were spelled the same way we spell them today. And if we were to adjust for the fact that U and V were not yet distinct letters, and the fact that the letter J didn't exist yet, then that percentage would be even higher. [*SOURCE: The Fight for English, David Crystal, p. 33.*]

Now modern scholars disagree as to how this list influenced later spellings. The impact was not immediate. It took over a century for spellings to fall in line with the list. Mulcaster's book was primarily aimed at teachers, so it's possible that the list was used in some classrooms. It is also possible that some printers maintained a copy of the book for reference. But the biggest factor was a scholar named Edmund Coote who composed his own book based on Mulcaster's ideas. Coote's book was called The English School-Maister, and it was published 14 years later in 1596. That particular book was very popular. It went through over 50 editions and was still being published in the mid-1700s. It was also an actual spelling book designed to teach students how to spell in the classroom, and Coote's spellings were loosely based on Mulcaster's spellings. [*SOURCE: A History of English Spelling, D.G. Scragg, p. 62.*]

There are some scholars who think that Mulcaster's list wasn't much of a factor at all. They simply believe that Mulcaster was ahead of the curve, and since he relied on custom and practice, he was able to anticipate where spellings were headed and which conventions were likely to be accepted over time.

Whether Mulcaster was the ultimate source of modern spellings or merely a sage who could see into the future, his book remains one of the important works on spelling in Early Modern English.

The book is also notable for another reason. It reflected that growing idea that English was the equal of any other language in Europe – and maybe even superior. And Mulcaster provided one of the most passionate expressions of that idea at the end of his book. He wrote, "For the generall penning in the English tung, I must nedes saie this much, that in som points of handling by the tung, there is none more excellent then ours is." [*The Elementarie, p. 268.*]

And in comparing English to the supposedly superior language of Latin, he was equally assertive. He wrote, "I loue Rome, but London better, I fauor Italie, but England more, I honor the Latin, but I worship the English." [*The Elementarie, p. 268.*]

And he offered this final assessment about the state of English in his time. He wrote, "I take this present period of our English tung to be the verie height thereof, bycause I find it so excellentlie well fined, both for the bodie of the tung it self, and for the customarie writing thereof, as either foren workmanship can giue it glosse, or as homewrought hanling can giue it grace. When the age of our peple, which now vse the tung so well, is dead and departed there will another succede, and with the peple the tung will alter and change. Which change in the full haurest thereof maie proue comparable to this, but sure for this which we now vse, it semeth euen now to be at the best for substance, and the brauest for circumstance, and whatsoeuer shall becom of the English state, the English tung cannot proue fairer, then it is at this daie." [*The Elementarie, p. 159.*]

Now in retrospect, that is a remarkable statement. English was no longer a rude and rustic language. In Mulcaster's opinion, it was the equal of any other language, and it had never been stronger or more expressive than it was in his day. And even as the language evolved in the future, Mulcaster said that it may never again reach the height that it had achieved in his time. It was almost as if he anticipated the appearance of a writer like William Shakespeare who would soon exploit the language in ways that are still revered to this day.

I should mention that Mulcaster was himself apparently a fan of plays.He oversaw the performance of plays by his students at his school, and occasionally, they even performed before the queen at the royal court. He was no Shakespeare, but he did apparently have a penchant for the theater.

Now speaking of William Shakespeare, we find one of the first references to him in the historical record in the same year that Mulcaster's Elementarie was published. At the very end of that year (1582), he and his fiancé, Anne Hathaway, traveled to the city of Worcester to obtain a marriage license and get married. The license was issued on November 27, and the ceremony probably took place a few days later, though the exact location is unknown. William was 18 years old at the time, and Anne was 26 or 27. She was also pregnant and gave birth to a girl named Susanna in May of the following year.[*SOURCE: Shakespeare A Life, Park Honan, p. 90*.]

What Shakespeare did in the decade after his marriage to Anne Hathaway is a bit of a mystery. The official record is largely silent until he popped up in London around the end of the decade.

During his first few years in London, he composed several of his history plays – and also one of the earliest comedies called Love's Labour's Lost. And that comedy features an interesting character named Holofernes. Holofernes is an overbearing and snobbish schoolmaster who criticizes everyone's speech and pronunciation – what we would call a 'pedant' today. In fact, the play contains one of the first recorded uses of the word ***pedant*** in the English language. And Shakespeare mocks the schoolmaster for his pedantry.

Now there is no way to know for certain, but many scholars think that Shakespearre's schoolmaster was actually based on Richard Mulcaster, who was one of the most well-known schoolmasters at the time and also had close connections to the royal court.

Shakespeare's representation of the snobbish schoolmaster may be based on his own personal experience with schoolmasters. Very little is known about his education, which apparently didn't exceed grammar school. It might also reflect a perceived rivalry with Mulcaster, who was a revered schoolmaster in the queen's favor and organized his own plays before the court. And maybe there was no connection between Holofernes and Mulcaster at all, but if there was, Shakespeare's depiction was a bit unfair. Unlike Shakespeare's schoolmaster, who insisted that every word be pronounced as it is spelled, like ***debt*** as /de-bt/ and ***doubt*** as /dou-bt/, Mulcaster had no such expectations. In fact, Mulcaster's approach was not nearly as rigid or harsh as those who favored phonetic spellings to match pronunciations. Mulcaster allowed custom and tradition to govern the language, even if those customs and traditions were not always logical or consistent. And that loose, flexible approach may ultimately explain why our modern spelling system is so inconsistent today. If he had actually been more like Shakespeare's Holofernes, English spelling might make a lot more sense today.

Next time, we'll continue to make our way through the 1580s, and we'll turn our attention to the horizon. Beyond the western shore, England looked to establish its first colony in North America, and to the south, the Spanish Armada gathered to pose the greatest threat to Elizabeth's reign. So next time, we'll explore those developments, and as always, we'll see how they impacted the English language.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.