

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 167:
THE RHYTHM OF ENGLISH**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 167: The Rhythm of English. In this episode, we’re going to look at a fascinating aspect of English – the feel and rhythm of the language. It’s something you probably don’t think about when you speak, especially if you are a native speaker. But all languages have their own rhythm and cadence, and English is no exception. And that rhythm has actually shaped the language over time. It also shaped the structure of English poetry. And during the Elizabethan period, it shaped the way drama was composed. So this time, we’ll look at the beginning of Modern English drama through the patterns of sound in ordinary speech.

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 this time, we’re going to look at the way English words are pronounced, but not in the usual way. We’re not going to focus on specific vowel or consonant sounds. Instead, we’re going to focus on the peaks and valleys of speech – the way we pronounce some syllables more strongly than others. The technical term for that extra emphasis we put on some syllables is stress.

Believe or not, this topic helps to explain why Shakespeare’s language is so challenging to many modern speakers. And that’s because Shakespeare and other Elizabethan writers wrote their poems and their plays to fit a certain stress pattern or rhythm in the language. And that rhythm determined the way words were put together, and it helps to explain why the language of those plays is so different from the language of modern drama.

So let’s begin by considering how stress patterns create a certain rhythm and cadence when we speak. As I noted, every language has its own natural rhythm. Some languages tend to be spoken in a relatively flat way. In those languages, speakers don’t tend to change the stress or pitch of their voice very much when they speak. But other languages like English have much greater variation from syllable to syllable. English has peaks and valleys. When we speak, our voice tends to go up and down as we make our way through a sentence. We stress certain syllables – and leave others unstressed, sometimes barely pronouncing them at all. That gives English a ‘sing-songy’ rhythm compared to other languages. It’s something that we don’t usually notice in everyday speech, unless we are speaking to someone with a different accent because the stress patterns can vary a little bit between accents.

For example, an American might say *controversy* (/KAHN-tro-versy/) and *advertisement* (/AD-ver-tiz-ment/) with the stress on the first syllable, but a speaker from England might say /kun-TRAH-veh-see/ and /ad-VER-tis-ment/ with the stress on the second syllable. Sometimes, those stress patterns are reversed. An American might say *filet* (/fi-LAY/) and *debris* (/de-BREE/) and *garage* (/geh-RADJ/) with the stress on the second syllable, whereas a Brit might say /FIL-et/ and /DEH-bree/ and /GAR-ij/ with the stress on the first syllable.

When we encounter these differences, it's a reminder that stress is a fundamental part of the English language. Whenever we pronounce a multi-syllable word, we stress at least one syllable and make it stand out above the others – and the word doesn't sound right if we put the stress in the wrong place. We say /SY-luh-bul/ – not /sy-LA-bul/.

But this up-and-down stress pattern isn't limited to multi-syllable words. It also occurs with single-syllable words. As we speak, some single-syllable words are stressed and others are unstressed. Generally speaking, we tend to stress what linguists call the 'content words' in a sentence. Those are nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. But we don't stress what are called 'function words.' Those are words like the articles – *a*, *an*, and *the*, and conjunctions like *and* and *but*, and forms of the verb 'to be,' and certain other common words.

Consider a sentence like "I am going to the store." When I say that, I actually put an extra emphasis on the word *I*, the first part of *going*, the word *to*, and the word *store*. Listen again, "I am GOING TO THE STORE." The words and syllables in between include *am* and *the*, and they are not stressed.

Well, that is just a natural part of English, and it has been that way since at least the early Middle English period and probably before that. But again, not all languages work that way. For example, Spanish and French are much flatter languages. They're not spoken with the same kinds of peaks and valleys as English. The stress in those languages is much more even across the syllables. They have more of a 'rat-a-tat-tat' kind of rhythm. In French, there may be a slight increase in the stress in the final syllable of the word, but again, it tends to be slight.

To illustrate the difference between French and English, I want to play a clip from a YouTube channel hosted by Dylane Moreau. She is a native French speaker and teaches the pronunciation of French through her channel called 'The Perfect French with Dylane.' In one of her episodes, she discusses the differences between French and English stress. You can find a link to the full video under this episode (Episode 167) at the website for the podcast – historyofenglishpodcast.com. So here is Dylane discussing the difference between French and English stress:

[CLIP]

I love the description of English stress patterns as a roller coaster, because that visual image can help us to understand what's really going on when we speak. So before we go any further, we should take a moment and consider how these stress patterns developed within English because that's also part of this story.

Now I've touched on this history in earlier episodes, but now is a good time to revisit it. In Old English, words were usually stressed on the first syllable. That didn't apply to prefixes though. Prefixes were not stressed. But otherwise, the stress was almost always on the first syllable. So when we come across a multi-syllable word that goes back to Old English, it is still typically stressed on the first syllable like *father*, *mother*, *finger*, *butter*, *Sunday*, *Monday*, *witness*, and

so on. By the way, that stress pattern is older than English. It goes back to the original Proto-Germanic language, and it still common throughout the Germanic languages.

But after the Norman Conquest, that stress pattern became more complicated. English began to borrow a lot of words from French and Latin where the stress was usually placed on a syllable in the middle or at the end of the word. Latin words were usually stressed on the next to last syllable or the syllable before that. And French words were stressed on the last syllable. As I noted a moment ago, some of that final stress in French has been worn down over the centuries, but it was much stronger in Old French. So when words were borrowed from French and Latin, the stress patterns were different from those normally found in English.

But the natural rhythm of English was so strong that speakers usually modified the stress patterns in those old loanwords to fit the English model. To put it a different way, those words were often ‘Anglicized’ by moving the stress forward to the first syllable, especially for nouns and adjectives. Words like *story*, *city*, *message*, *baron* and *button* are all French loanwords with the stress on the first syllable today, but they originally has their stress on the final syllable. They happen to be very old loanwords from deep in the Middle English period. So they had lots of time to adjust to the normal speech patterns of English.

While all of that was true for nouns and adjectives, the history was a little different with verbs. Verbs with two-syllables tended to retain the stress on the second syllable. And as a very general rule today, verbs in English with two syllables are usually stressed on the second syllable. And sometimes, English retains a word which can be used either way – as either a noun or a verb. And that stress difference allows us to distinguish them in speech, even though they appear identical when written down. So the noun has the stress on the first syllable, and the verb has the stress on the second syllable. That gives us the difference between *contract* (/KON-tract/) and *contract* (/kun-TRACT/), *record* (/REH-cord/) and *record* (/ree-CORD/), *conduct* (/CON-duct/) and *conduct* (/kun-DUCT/), *present* (/PREH-zent/) and *present* (/pre-ZENT/), *rebel* (/REH-bel/) and *rebel* (/ree-BELL/), and so on.

Of course, English continued to borrow words over the centuries. By the time of Early Modern English in the late 1400s and 1500s, English speakers were still borrowing words from French, but they were also borrowing heavily from Latin and Greek. Again, the primary stress in those words was often in the middle or end. And many of those later loanwords have retained their original stress patterns. So for example, more recent French loanwords often retain the stress on the final syllable. That includes words like *mirage*, *platoon*, *parole*, *police*, *machine*, *petite*, and so on. And many Greek and Latin loanwords retain their stress in the middle of the word. That includes words like *intelligent*, *sophisticated*, *democracy*, *subpoena*, and so on.

So the stress pattern in English words can vary depending on when the words entered the language. And that can create some interesting distinctions. For example, there are several cases where English borrowed a word from French twice – once in the Middle English period and then again in the Modern English period. And very often, the older version has the stress on the first syllable, and the more recent version retains the stress on the second syllable. That gave us the distinction between older *artist* and newer *artiste*, older *critic* and newer *critique*, older *human* and newer *humane*, and older *urban* and newer *urbane*.

The bottom line is that the location of the stressed syllable in a word today can vary quite a bit, even though there is still a general tendency to put the stress on the first syllable. But again, as we speak, we alternate between these stressed and unstressed syllables, and we tend to balance them out in order to produce a natural rhythm.

When I say that we ‘balance them out,’ I mean that we sometimes shift the stress around in a word to maintain that up-and-down rhythm. Consider a word like *charisma*. It’s a Greek word that English borrowed in the 1600s. It has three syllables, and the stress is in the middle (/ka-RIS-ma/). But notice what happens when we convert it into an adjective and add an extra unstressed syllable to the end. It doesn’t become /ka-RIS-ma-tic/, it becomes /KA-ris-MA-tic/. So in that four-syllable version, the stress is moved from the second syllable to the first and third. That gives us a more balanced stress pattern – up-down-up-down – /KA-ris-MA-tic/.

The same thing happens with a word like *install* (/in-STALL/). It’s a Latin word that was borrowed in the mid-1500s, and it retains its stress on second syllable. But when we convert it into a noun, the stress shifts around and becomes *installation* (/IN-sta-LAY-shun/). The stress shifts to the first and third syllables, with the primary stress on the third syllable. Again, that gives us a more balanced pattern – up-down-up-down – /IN-sta-LAY-shun/.

So English has this natural up-and-down stress pattern, and we have a tendency to spread out the peaks and valleys at somewhat regular intervals. And that pattern can alter the pronunciation of a word, either temporarily in a given sentence or permanently over time. But in the end, we are still left with that rhythm, which has been with us for at least a thousand years.

Now some of that discussion about English stress may seem familiar to you if you listened to the episodes I did about Middle English. In fact, I covered some of this same information way back in Episode 127 about Geoffrey Chaucer and the Canterbury Tales. And that’s because this idea of rhythm and stress was very important to poets. In fact, it is an essential part of poetry, and all poets applied certain rhythms to their poems. In poetry, it’s called the *meter* of the poem.

And that takes us to the fundamental concept of poetry. Poetry is ultimately about organizing language into certain repeating patterns. When we write a poem, we take some natural aspect of the language and we make it more regular and orderly. If we compose a poem that rhymes, we repeat certain sounds at the end of the lines in a regular fashion. And when we use alliteration, we repeat certain sounds at the beginning of words in a similar way. And when we recite the lines of the poem, we usually use some type of repeating rhythm in our speech. Again, it’s about repeating certain patterns and creating that rhythm. And in fact, the words *rhyme* and *rhythm* come from the same Greek root word – *rhythmos*. Those words came into English from French where much of the poetry rhymed and had a specific rhythm. The original root word was used to refer to both of those aspects of poetry before the two different pronunciations were eventually distinguished in their modern forms.

Well, as I discussed in prior episodes, Old English poets used alliteration. And then Middle English poets started to use rhyming verse under French influence. And both sets of poets also used a specific meter or rhythm when they composed their poems. So the words that they selected had to fit the specific rhythm and flow of the poem.

Poets used many different meters in the Middle Ages, but it was Geoffrey Chaucer who introduced a new type of meter to English poetry. That was the meter that we know today as iambic pentameter.

In that earlier episode about Chaucer, I described that particular poetic meter as a ‘heartbeat’ rhythm. It was basically ‘da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM.’ Each of those little beats – or ‘heartbeats’ if you will – is called an iamb. And there are five of them in this particular meter. So since each line of the poem has those five beats or five iambs, and that’s why it’s called iambic pentameter from the Latin and Greek root *penta* meaning ‘five.’

And now you can start to see why that particular meter or rhythm worked so well for English poetry. As we’ve seen, English is a roller coaster language going up and down with syllables that alternate between stressed and unstressed. So it was very easy to adapt normal English speech to that meter. It was an ideal poetic model for English.

Now Chaucer could have used four beats or six beats or some other number. And other poets did experiment with those options. But five beats seemed to work best. It allowed enough room to express an idea in a line of poetry without being too long or unwieldy.

Chaucer used that natural iambic pentameter meter for the Canterbury Tales, and we hear it in those famous opening lines of the Prologue to the poem. Remember, ‘da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM - da-DUM.’

Whan that Aprill, with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote
And bathed every veyne in swich licour,
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;

That meter eventually became the standard meter used in English poetry in the Elizabethan period. And of course, it was Shakespeare’s usual meter. We hear it in his famous Sonnet 18:

Shall I comPARE thee TO a SUMmer’s DAY?
Thou ART more LOVEly AND more TEMperATE.
Rough WINDS do SHAKE the DARling BUDS of MAY,
And SUMmer’s LEASE hath ALL too SHORT a DATE.

And it was also the standard meter of his plays. We might not think about his plays as poetry. But for the most part, they were. And they tended to follow this same rhythm, though Shakespeare occasionally dropped the unstressed syllable at the beginning of the line or added an unstressed syllable to the end. Think about maybe the most well-known soliloquy in all of Shakespeare’s

plays – the famous line from Hamlet, “To be or not be, that is the question.” Well, you might not realize it when you hear it performed, but it’s actually poetry, and it fits the same iambic pentameter rhythm. Shakespeare just added an extra unstressed syllable to the end, which was a common modification:

To BE, or NOT to BE, that IS the QUEStion:
WheTHER 'tis NObler IN the MIND to SUFfer
The SLINGS and ARrows OF outRAgeous FORTune,
and so on.

Now no Shakespearean actor would recite the lines that rigidly, but they were written to follow that specific poetic meter. And in doing that, Shakespeare was really following in the footsteps of two poets who preceded him and who he probably knew personally. Those poets were Christopher Marlow and Thomas Kyd. And it was their work that really made that particular rhythm the preferred meter for English poetry. And it was their work that Shakespeare followed soon after he arrived in London from Stratford-upon-Avon.

Now given that both Chaucer and Shakespeare used this particular poetic meter, it would be tempting to think that there was a direct line between the two of them. But that wasn’t really the case at all. In fact, in the years after Chaucer, iambic pentameter largely fell out of use. And English poetry in general experienced a noticeable decline.

You may have noticed that since I talked about Chaucer about forty episodes back, I haven’t had a lot to say about English poetry. I mean, we’ve explored all kinds of other literature – legal documents, religious texts, Bible translations, medical books, spelling and pronunciation guides, proverb collections, books about thievery and cheating slang, mathematical texts, and a variety of other documents. But I haven’t spent much time on poetry.

Of course, there were poets composing in English during that period, and some of them are notable to scholars of the 15th and 16th centuries, but few of those poets really stand out. And in much the same way that the language has peaks and valleys, so does the production of great poetry. And the period from the early-1400s to the mid-1500s is generally considered to be a bit of a valley.

There are different theories about the cause of that decline during that period. For example, some scholars link it to the disruptions caused by the Wars of the Roses because most poets came from the upper classes and that long-term conflict disrupted the lives of many people who were a part of the nobility and the gentry.

Another major factor was the rediscovery of all of those Latin and Greek works from the classical period during the Renaissance. Latin and Greek became the standard to be emulated – and the standard by which other works were compared. And that led to a bit of an inferiority complex when it came to English as we’ve seen in earlier episodes.

In the grammar schools and universities of England, teachers taught those classical texts, and they even encouraged students to act out plays from the Roman period. Students could learn Latin by memorizing and acting out the lines of those plays. Through that process, students learned the meter and rhythm of classical poetry, which was very different from the meters used in English. And that was because ancient Greek and Latin didn't have the same up-and-down rhythm as English.

For example, Latin syllables had very precise lengths. Each vowel was pronounced as either a long vowel or a short vowel, and in Latin poetry, the terms 'long' and 'short' literally meant that the long vowels were pronounced twice as long as the short vowels. Latin words also varied in stress or pitch, but it was syllable length that really mattered when it came to poetry. That meant that a Roman poet composing a line of poetry had to choose words with syllable lengths that fit very specific patterns of the line. So whereas English poetry had more of a heartbeat rhythm that varied based on emphasis or stress, Latin poetry had a completely different rhythm based long and short syllables – kind of like morse code.

In fact, most epic poetry from Greece and Rome used a very specific sequence of long and short syllables. Modern scholars have a fancy name for it. They call it dactylic hexameter. Now you don't really need to know that term, but you should know that it was the specific meter used in Greek poems like the Iliad and the Odyssey, and some of the most well-known Roman poems like Virgil's Aeneid and Ovid's Metamorphosis. It was basically the default meter for classical poetry. And, as I said, it was very different from the heartbeat rhythm of English. It was busier and more complicated – in part because Latin and Greek words tended to be longer multi-syllable words made up of those long and short syllables.

Now let me illustrate that old classical meter for you because it is actually an important part of our story. Here's another YouTube clip, this time from Johan Winge featuring a reading from Virgil's Aeneid in this traditional Latin meter. Again, there is a link to this clip at the website for the podcast. And as I play this clip, notice the specific rhythm, which was the rhythm of epic poetry in the classical world:

[CLIP]

So as you can hear, that classical rhythm was very different from the 'de-DUM de-DUM' rhythm of English.'

Despite the differences, English students in the early and mid-1500s were required to learn that classical rhythm when they studied the poetry of Greece and Rome. And when English poets tried to translate those words into English, they tried to maintain that complicated classical meter. But they found it to be almost impossible to make English words fit that specific rhythm. The syllables in English are not that precise. Now some syllables are longer than others, but the length can vary, and the longer syllables are not necessarily twice as long as the short syllables. Also, English doesn't have as many multi-syllable words as Latin and Greek. So it was difficult to come up with English words that accurately translated the original text while maintaining that

specific meter. The early attempts to translate those poems into English were clumsy and awkward and artificial.

So for all of those reasons, English poetry experienced a decline from the mid-1400s through mid-1500s. English poets were busy trying to make a square peg fit into a round hole, and it just didn't work.

When English students were exposed to those ancient Roman plays in school, it was designed to help them learn Latin. But it also had an unintended side effect. It exposed them to a type of drama that was very different from the traditional English drama.

The Romans had taken most of their ideas about drama from the Greeks. In fact, the word *drama* is a Greek word. Today, we think of *drama* as something serious, but originally, it referred to any kind of play or similar performance. It's a sense that we still have in a term like 'the dramatic arts.'

Most classical plays were one of two types – either *comedy* or *tragedy*. Again, both of those terms originated in Greek. Of course, *comedy* referred to a type of play that had humorous or comedic elements. The plots often involved trickery with the trickster himself often being tricked at some point in the story.

Meanwhile, tragedy was a very different type of drama. The plots were much darker – often involving the fall of a great prince or other prominent political leader. The stories often featured murder and revenge. Ghosts were also prominent characters. And there was no mixing of genres. So there was never any comedy in a Roman tragedy. Most of the surviving Roman tragedies were written by a playwright named Seneca, so these are sometimes called 'Senecan tragedies.'

Again, English students were exposed to those ancient forms of drama in the early and mid 1500s, but they weren't necessarily captivated by them. Though Roman tragedy might sound intriguing, there wasn't much action. Most of the murders, and suicides, and battles, and other action took place off stage. The actors merely described what had happened. The plays featured long monologues and soliloquies. They used very formal poetic language. The stories tended to take place in one location at one time, so there was very little shifting from one setting to another. Again, not really what we would think of as a play or theatrical performance today.

That classical tradition was very different from the native English plays which I've discussed in prior episodes. The English tradition came out of the Church with the miracle plays and morality plays performed in the Middle Ages. Those were simple, amateur productions, often produced as light entertainment at festivals, and usually telling a story from the Bible or teaching some moral lesson. Then during the early Tudor era, performers at the courts of nobles started to perform plays and skits in between other forms of entertainment at banquets and other gatherings. Those were called interludes, and were really the first secular plays in England. They tended to be short light-hearted productions with simple plots and stock characters. Then people started to perform interludes around the country at guildhalls, and inn-yards, and churches, but again, they were largely amateur productions.

By the mid-1500s, students who had been exposed to Roman drama in schools were starting to think about how to present that classical form of drama to audiences in England. English audiences were accustomed to more action on the stage and back-and-forth dialogue in English, not long-winded monologues in Latin. And as we've seen, it was difficult to translate those Roman plays into English while preserving that complicated Latin meter of long and short syllables.

Then, in the 1540s, there was a breakthrough. And for the first time, some of those Roman classics started to be presented in a way that was more natural to the English language.

The innovation came from an English poet and nobleman named Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey. He is generally known to history as simply 'Surrey.' He was actually the first cousin of Anne Boleyn, and in the early 1540s, he translated parts of Virgil's Aeneid into English. That was the epic poem that was being recited in that complicated Latin meter that I played for you a few minutes ago. Well, Surrey knew that the meter didn't really work for English, so he decided to get rid of it. And he returned to the natural heartbeat rhythm of English. He went back and adopted the iambic pentameter rhythm that Chaucer had used for the Canterbury Tales. That was the 'de-DUM-de-DUM-de-DUM-de-DUM-de-DUM' rhythm. As we saw, it fit the natural rhythm of English speech.

Surrey also did something else that was innovative in his translation. He didn't try to make the lines rhyme with each other, and didn't bother using alliteration. So the translation resembled natural speech, but it was still poetry because it used that specific rhythm or meter. That approach became known as 'blank verse,' and it was a huge innovation because that combination of iambic pentameter and unrhymed blank verse became the foundation of most Elizabethan drama.

By the way, Surrey and his friend, Sir Thomas Wyatt, were also the first English poets to write sonnets, which was a type of short structured poem that had originated in Italy. The two of them are sometimes called the 'Fathers of the English Sonnet.' The poems of Surrey and Wyatt were published in an important collection in the mid-1500s [*Tottel's Miscellany*], which proved to be very popular.

Around that same time, young playwrights started to adapt the Roman form of drama to English. They wrote English plays in the style of those classical Roman plays. The first two English comedies on the Roman model were composed in the 1540s and 1550s. They were called *Ralph Roister Doister* and *Gammer Gurton's Needle*. The details of those plays aren't really important to our story, but they show that English playwrights had started to present Roman-style comedies with English characters in an English setting – speaking English.

Those were the earliest English comedies based on the Roman model, and then about a decade later in 1561, we have the first English tragedy on the Roman model. It was called *Gorboduc*. The play was based on the story of an obscure king called Gorboduc from the mythological history of England. The story comes from the same tradition that gave us the original King Arthur legend. Well, this particular play was about a rivalry between the king's two sons. In a nutshell, Gorboduc tries to divide his kingdom between his two sons, but the younger son ends

up killing the elder son. Then Gorboduc's wife – the queen – kills the younger son to avenge the death of the elder son. Then the people rise up and kill the king and queen and the country falls into civil war. So we have the fall of great nobles, alongside murder, violence, vengeance – all the stuff of Roman tragedy.

But at the time, Gorboduc didn't really have much of impact on audiences. Again, it was written on the model of Roman plays, so most of the action took place offstage, and it contained long, lyrical passages of poetry. The French called those types of long speeches *tirades* from the Italian word *tirata* meaning a volley or bombardment. The word *tirade* was later borrowed into English in the 1800s, but it points to one of the problems with these early Roman-style plays. They were long on words and short on action. Nevertheless, Gorboduc is important to our story. In addition to being the first English tragedy and inspiring Shakespeare, it was important for two other reasons. First, it was the first English play to be composed in the blank verse that Surrey had used a couple of decades earlier. So the dialogue didn't rhyme. And second, the play was also composed in iambic pentameter – that natural 'heartbeat' rhythm of English. Thanks to those innovations, it provided a model for most the Elizabethan drama that was to come.

The following decade was the 1570s, and that was the decade when the first permanent theaters started to be built around London – literally 'around' London. They weren't actually built within the city limits because city officials worried that they would encourage the spread of plague, and also because they tended to attract a rough crowd – like thieves, con-men, drunkards, sex workers, and the like.

I mentioned the building of those first permanent theaters in earlier episodes. And that was another important development because once those theaters were built, drama became a business. The theaters needed paying customers, and to attract those customers, the plays had to appeal to the common people of London. So the stories needed more action, compelling characters and more sophisticated plots.

Permanent theaters also allowed longer plays to be performed, which was perfect for tragedies, but that meant that theaters needed professional actors who could deliver the performances that those types of plays demanded. So acting evolved from an amateur pastime to a profession. And of course, those theaters needed writers who could compose those plays.

To keep the audiences engaged, theaters didn't want to repeat the same plays over and over. They wanted to include as much variety as possible. That meant that they typically performed a different play each day of the week. So by the 1580s, there was a considerable demand for playwrights. And for the first time in a long time, people started to make a living by writing poetry – for the theater. And they didn't have to be a scholar or a noble. They just needed to be able to come up with interesting stories and compose dialogue that would capture the attention of the audience.

Audiences weren't really interested in the stiff, overly wordy drama of the Roman period. But the Roman model did give those young writers a way to incorporate structure and order into their plays. The Roman model also showed that the language of drama could be an art form in itself.

And the playwrights soon discovered that audiences loved wordplay and poetic verse, as long as it was composed in the natural rhythm of English and not in the complicated meters of Latin poetry. [SOURCE: *A History of English Literature*, William Vaughn Moody and Robert Morss Lovett, p. 97-9.]

And that brings us back to the current point in our overall story of English in the late 1580s. In the last episode, we looked at the arrival of the Spanish Armada along the coast of England. The Armada was gathered in 1587, and the attempted invasion of England took place in 1588. Well, during that period, there was a great deal of anxiety in the air. People in England were concerned by the Spanish threat. Mary Queen of Scots had recently been executed, and it was increasingly clear that Elizabeth was going to die without any children. So there was also concern about her successor and the potential for civil war.

That anxiety seems to be reflected in the plays that were being written and produced during that period. Audiences wanted serious dramas, not the lighthearted interludes and comedies that were the usual fare. And it was around the time of the threat from the Spanish Armada that one of the most popular plays of the Elizabethan era was composed. It was called the Spanish Tragedy, and it was written by a young playwright named Thomas Kyd.

Kyd was a commoner. He had been born in London, and he had attended the Merchant Taylor's School in London. That was the school where Richard Mulcaster was the headmaster. I talked about Mulcaster back in Episode 163. He was the schoolmaster who wrote about elementary education and may have been the source of many of the spelling conventions we have today. He was also a fierce advocate of English. His students included the poet Edmund Spenser, who I'll talk about next time, and this young playwright named Thomas Kyd.

But it appears that Kyd's education never extended beyond the Merchant Taylor's School. There is no evidence that he attended a university. In that regard, he shares the same basic pedigree as William Shakespeare, who may have arrived in London around the same time that Kyd was composing this particular play.

The Spanish Tragedy was unique in many ways, and it is often cited as one of the plays that marked the beginning of the modern English theater. The play was a tragedy with many of the themes found in the Roman tragedies, especially the theme of revenge which permeates the play. Kyd also composed the play in blank verse like that earlier play *Gordoduc*. So the verses didn't rhyme, and they were written in that same iambic pentameter meter that worked so well for English. But it wasn't really the language of the poem that stood out. It was the story and the presentation. Kyd was a good poet, but he was a great dramatist. He identified the shortcomings of Roman plays, and modified them for the English stage. He knew how to thrill audiences and keep them captivated.

For one thing, Kyd didn't set his story in the distant past in Rome or Greece or even in ancient Britain. Instead, he set it during the time period in which he wrote, specifically in the early 1580s in Spain. The plot arose out of an actual battle that had been fought between Spanish and Portuguese forces earlier in the decade called the Battle of Alcantara. So the play had a very

contemporary feel at the time. And people in England obviously had an interest in Spain during that period.

The play included a series of murders and suicides, but unlike Roman plays where that type of action was described by messengers, Kyd actually had his actors present those very dramatic scenes on the stage. Audiences were not accustomed to seeing that type of action performed in front of them, and they loved every minute of it.

The story itself was also clever and complex, with fully developed characters, sub-plots, and plot twists. Again, that was not the type of stuff found in Roman plays.

And returning to language, not only did the characters speak in the pleasing rhythm of iambic pentameter, they also spoke in a plain type of English that audiences could understand and follow. It wasn't the heavy, formal rhetoric of Roman plays. [*SOURCE: A Literary History of England, Albert C. Baugh, ed., p. 463.*]

The plot of the Spanish Tragedy is bit complicated, but it begins with the ghost of a courtier who had been killed in the recent battle against the Portuguese. His death is suspicious, so the King and Queen of Hell send him back to land of the living. And he is accompanied by a character called Revenge, who is the literal personification of revenge. The two characters are present throughout the play and comment on the events taking place on stage. Again, that was a technique borrowed from classical tragedy.

The main part of the plot involved a Portugese prince named Balthazar, who is captured in battle and brought back to Spain to be ransomed, but he is allowed to move freely once he is Spain, and he and his friend Lorenzo are soon up to no good. Balthazar falls in love with Lorenzo's sister named Bel-Imperia, but she is already in a relationship with another man, so Balthazar and Lorenzo arrange the murder of the boyfriend. After the murder, the boyfriend's mother goes mad, and his father vows revenge.

Meanwhile, a forced marriage is arranged between Balthazar and Bel-Imperia. The father of the murdered boyfriend is a government official, and he is asked to produce a short play for the wedding. He writes the play and asks Balthazar and his buddy Lorenzo to play certain parts in the production. So we now have a play within a play. And in the storyline of this wedding play, the characters played by Balthazar and Lorenzo are supposed to be stabbed to death on stage. Of course, fake knives are to be used in the scene, but the father gets his revenge by replacing the fake knives with real knives, and Balthazar and Lorenzo are actually stabbed to death during the play. So he gets his revenge.

And of course, that's just a quick synopsis. There is a lot more action, and sub-plots, and blood and murder. And again, audiences loved it. It was one of the most popular plays of the entire Elizabethan era. And it wasn't just the audiences who loved it. Kyd's fellow playwrights did too. Many of them imitated it in their own plays over the following decades.

There are many aspects of *The Spanish Tragedy* that appear in Shakespeare's later play *Hamlet*. Both plays feature a prominent character named Horatio, both involve vengeance for the murder of a close family member. Both have a ghost that returns to encourage the revenge theme. Both feature a play within a play and both have prominent characters who suffer from madness or pretend to be mad. So Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, which appeared about a decade later, may have been inspired by the *Spanish Tragedy*. There is even some speculation that Kyd wrote his own version of *Hamlet* around this same time, well before Shakespeare's version. There are references to a play called *Hamlet* around the time of the *Spanish Tragedy*, but that earlier play didn't survive, and the authorship is disputed. For various reasons, some scholars think Kyd wrote it. But regardless, there is little doubt that Shakespeare was influenced by Kyd, and especially *The Spanish Tragedy*. And he was not alone in that regard. [*SOURCE: A Literary History of England, Albert C. Baugh, ed., p. 465.*]

As I noted, *The Spanish Tragedy* was composed in iambic pentameter. And it was also composed in blank verse, meaning that it didn't rhyme. The poetry itself was a little stiff. Each line adhered closely to the required structure, with very little variation, so the passages could be a bit monotonous for some listeners, but the action and plot made up for any weakness in the verse.

Though Kyd's poetry was average, he had a close friend who took essentially the same dramatic structure and turned it into a literary work of art. And that friend was Christopher Marlowe, who is the other important figure in this story. Through his compositions, the blank verse that had been used up to that point was converted into what became known as Marlowe's 'mighty line.'

Marlowe was a fascinating character. He was outspoken, he was an atheist in a very religious era, he was gay, he was also an incredible playwright, and he was almost certainly a government spy. Unlike Thomas Kyd, Marlowe had a university education. He attended Cambridge and received his bachelor's degree from there. He then spent three years working toward a master's degree, but he spent a lot of that time abroad in France.

When it came time for Cambridge to award him a master's degree, the university officials refused on the grounds that Marlowe had spent too much time out of the country, and due to his extended absence, he had not met the requirements for the degree. But then, the university received a letter from Queen Elizabeth's Privy Council. The letter demanded that Cambridge grant the degree to Marlowe because, during his time on the continent, he had "behaved himself orderly and discreetly, whereby he had done her Majesty good service and deserved to be rewarded for his faithful dealing." The letter then went on to state, "it was not her Majesty's pleasure that anyone employed as he had been in matters touching the benefit of his country should be defamed by those who are ignorant in the affairs he went about." The implication was clear. Marlowe had been a government agent while his was abroad. At the time, there was a lot of concern about English students who were traveling to France and were being influenced by pro-Catholic and anti-Protestant groups there. Some of the students returned home to foster opposition to the government. So it appears that Marlowe was a government agent sent to spy on other English students to discern if any of them were engaged in plots to undermine the government back home. And for his service, the government ensured that he received his

master's degree from Cambridge. [*SOURCE: Globe: Life in Shakespeare's London, Catharine Arnold, p. 104-5.*]

Marlowe received his degree in 1587, around the same time that Kyd was completing *The Spanish Tragedy*, and around the same time that the Spanish Armada was being assembled for its invasion of England.

Marlowe immediately turned his attention to the burgeoning theater scene around London, and he soon joined the acting troupe known as the Admiral's Men. And in an environment where there was a constant demand for new plays, he went to work as a playwright. In fact, it is likely that he had already completed his first play called 'Dido, Queen of Carthage' by that point. Unfortunately, only the title of that play has survived. But around this same time, he completed a follow-up play that was performed late in 1587.

That follow-up play was called 'Tamburlaine the Great' – commonly known as simply 'Tamburlaine.' It was loosely based on the story of the Central Asian ruler Timur, who conquered a large portion of South Asia in the 1300s. The real-life Timur was part of a long line of central Asian conquerors stretching back to Atilla the Hun and Ghengis Khan. Timur's empire eventually stretched from modern-day India to Turkey.

The play is a story about Timur's rise to power and his conquest of other countries and the humiliation of their rulers. It is a succession of battles, assassinations, suicides and conquests. The version that Marlowe completed around this time in 1587 was Part I, and he then continued the story with Part II the following year.

What distinguished *Tamburlaine* from its predecessors was its language. Some scholars consider it to be the first Elizabethan play to qualify as a major work of literature. It's really an epic poem as much as a play. The play was composed in iambic pentameter – the natural meter of English. And it was also composed in blank verse, so it didn't rely on rhyming verse. So both Kyd's play and Marlowe's play used that combination, and that structure became the standard structure for playwrights going forward in Elizabethan England.

Marlowe's approach was similar to Kyd's, but Marlowe's language was more elaborate, more powerful, and more enthralling. As I noted earlier, he transformed the simple blank verse that had been used previously into what later writers called 'Marlowe's mighty line.'

Now to a certain extent, the power of Marlowe's verse is subjective. It's like saying one piece of music or one piece of art is better than another. But I want to show you some specific ways that Marlowe crafted his lines that caused them to really stand out. And I'm going to take a somewhat random provision from Act II, Scene IV of *Tamburlaine*. It doesn't have the most elevated language, but it is typical of the type of line that Marlowe wrote.

In the scene, we hear from the Persian king Mycetes, who is a narcissist and ineffective king. His forces are being attacked, but he hides at camp deciding what to do. He utters the following lines, and notice how the iambic pentameter meter blends perfectly with the normal rhythm of English.

Accurs'd be he that first invented war!
They knew not, ah, they knew not, simple men,
How those were hit by pelting cannon-shot
Stand staggering like a quivering aspen-leaf
Fearing the force of Boreas' boisterous blasts!

Now that is a pretty straightforward passage. We have a king lamenting the horrors of war and the trauma experienced by soldiers in battle. Now let me read those first four lines again, with an emphasis on the iambic pentameter stress pattern:

AcCURS'D be HE that FIRST inVENTed WAR!
They KNEW not, AH, they KNEW not, SIMple MEN,
How THOSE were HIT by PELTing CANnon-SHOT
Stand STAG-ring LIKE a QUIV-ring Aspen-LEAF

Again, all the stress patterns in the words match the meter perfectly. We have to condense 'stagger-ing' to 'stag-ring' and 'quiv-er-ing' to 'quiv-ring,' but that wasn't unusual because it is common to pronounce those words with two syllables in normal speech. But in each case, we have the five heartbeat rhythm where each beat begins with an unstressed syllable and ends with a stressed syllable – 'de-DUM, de DUM.'

But then the next line begins with the word *fearing*. Notice that the stress is reversed in that word. *Fearing* has the stress on the first syllable, not the second. 'FEAR-ing' – not 'fear-ING.' But that's the opposite of what we would normally expect with iambic pentameter. Each beat is supposed to have the stress on the second syllable, not the first – 'de-DUM' not 'DUM-de.' So the word *fearing* at the front of that next line seems a little out of place. But that was an intentional technique that Marlowe often used. He would occasionally break up the monotonous rhythm of the lines by including an action verb at the front of the line. When it was recited during the play, that verb would tend to stand out or 'pop' because it would break up the natural rhythm of the dialogue.

So if I read those last three lines again, I think you can hear how that stress change makes the word stand out and emphasizes the fear of the soldiers in the heat of battle:

How THOSE were HIT by PELTing CANnon-SHOT
Stand STAG-ring LIKE a QUIV-ring ASpen-LEAF
FEARing the FORCE of BOREas' BOISterous BLASTS!

So I hope you can hear that. Again, Marlowe often did that with verbs at the beginning of the line to emphasize a certain mood or action.

That last line is also very interesting. It contains a nice bit of alliteration, even though Marlowe doesn't generally use alliteration in the play. But we hear the repeating 'f' sounds at the beginning of the line, followed by the repeating 'b' sounds at the end:

Fearing the force of Boreas' boisterous blasts!

By the way, Boreas was the Greek god of winter and the northern wind. So that explains the reference to 'Boreas' Boisterous Blasts.' Marlowe often referred to people and places from Greek and Latin literature, much more so than Shakespeare did in later years. Some scholars attribute the difference to the fact that Marlowe had a university education, whereas Shakespeare only had a basic grammar school education. So Marlowe would have been much more familiar with those names and places from classical mythology and literature.

Also, note that Marlowe used the word *boisterous* in that passage. It was a relatively new word in the language at the time, but what's interesting about it is the fact that it is a three-syllable word. Prior to this point, poets shied away from using long multi-syllable words in iambic pentameter because it was difficult to make those long words fit the rhythm of the line. The stress had to be in the right place, and the word itself had to be positioned in the right place in the line. So most poets tended to stick with simple one or two-syllable words. But Marlowe often relied on longer words, especially Latinate and Greek words. In fact, that really distinguished his plays from earlier plays, and was a large part of what became known as his 'mighty line.'

Those word choices gave his lines more variety and vigor. In fact, the next line contains a four-syllable word – *lamentable*. He also used other four-syllable words like *contemptuous*, *honourable*, *magnificent*, and *insufficient*. He even used five-syllable words in a few instances like *opportunity*, *Babylonian*, and *Macedonian*. Those words took up half the syllables in the line. And in one passage, he even used the compound term *general-lieutenant* (or /lef-tenant), which consisted of six syllables. Again, each line was normally limited to ten syllables, so Marlowe was really stretching the limits of the language in each line of text. Of course, that made his plays very popular, and it was a technique that writers like Shakespeare emulated.

Not only did Marlowe pull words from all registers of English, he also coined many new words and used words that were relatively new to the language. For example, Tamburlaine contains a very early use of the Latin word *excruciate* – a nice four-syllable word that perfectly fits the heartbeat rhythm of the poem – /ex-CRU-si-ATE/.

And according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the play also gives us the first recorded uses of the words *astounding*, *ceaseless*, *symbolize*, *musketeer*, *unrelenting* and *blood-raw* meaning lightly cooked meat. The poem also contains the first recorded use of the word *equal* as a verb in a great little rhyming couplet:

Let earth and heauen his timelesse death deplore
For both their worths wil equal him no more.

And believe it or not, the play also gives us the first recorded use of the word *investor*, but it wasn't used in its modern sense and someone who spends money to make money. It was used in the sense of a person who invests or installs someone into a high office or honor. The financial sense of the term *invest* didn't emerge until the following century.

The fact that Tamburlaine contains those new words and new uses of existing words points to Marlowe's innovative use of words and language. We don't really find the first use of new words in Kyd's play, *The Spanish Tragedy*, but we do in Marlowe's plays.

Finally, Marlowe also took advantage of the fact that English grammar was still a little bit loose and flexible. Back in Episode 164, I mentioned that some scholars have described the grammar of the Elizabethan period as a 'half-way house' between the grammar of Middle English and the grammar of modern contemporary English. As a result, there were often two different ways of saying the same thing, and that flexibility was great for poets who needed to come up with words to fit the specific meter of a line. Let me give you an example from *Tamburlaine*. In this passage, the Persian king Mycetes has been defeated, and his brother Cosroe had succeeded him, but then Cosroe himself is stabbed and killed, uttering the following lines as he dies:

My bloodless body waxeth chill and cold,
And with my blood my life slides through my wound;
My soul begins to take her flight to hell,
And summons all my senses to depart:

Again, each line is perfect iambic pentameter, but note that in the first line, Marlowe used the verb *waxeth* with the older '-eth' verb ending that was disappearing around this time. He wrote "My bloodless body waxeth chill and cold." Well, that older '-eth' ending required an extra syllable, which satisfied the rhythm of the line. But in the following lines, the verbs used the modern '-s' ending, which didn't require an extra syllable. He wrote, "my life slides," "my soul begins," "and summons all my senses." So poets like Marlowe sometimes alternated between those verb endings to satisfy the meter of the line. And that's why some of those older grammatical forms like the '-eth' verb ending lingered on much longer in poetry and plays than they did in common speech.

Immediately after the passage I just read, the dying Cosroe utters the following lines:

The heat and moisture, which did feed each other,
For want of nourishment to feed them both,
Are dry and cold; and now doth ghastly Death
With greedy talents gripe my bleeding heart,

So here we have examples of what I have called 'meaningless do' in prior episodes. That's the older use of the words like *do*, and *did*, and *doth* in lines I just read like "which did feed each other," instead of "which fed each other," and "now doth ghastly Death . . . gripe my bleeding heart," rather than "now ghastly Death grips my bleeding heart." Again, poets like Marlowe could craft their lines using the words *do* or *did* or *doth* in that way if they needed an extra

syllable in the line. But if they didn't need that syllable, then they could word it the other way without *do* or *did* or *doth*.

The point is that poets like Marlowe often stretched the language to its limits to create lines that had a natural rhythm within the confines of ten alternating stressed and unstressed syllables.

Works like Tamburlaine were really the culmination of a half-century of work to give English poetry a somewhat standard meter that fit the natural rhythm of the language, and a meter that was also capable of expressing both intimacy and grandeur with words from every register of English. Marlowe transformed the stiff and cold blank verse of earlier poets into something that had life and power and beauty. His lines ebbed and flowed, were loose and flexible, and they popped on the stage when talented actors recited them. As the great linguist Albert C. Baugh once wrote, “. . . Marlowe taught the difference between living and life.” [*SOURCE: A Literary History of England, Albert C. Baugh, ed., p. 508-9.*]

Now Marlowe's contemporaries reacted to his plays with a blend of admiration and jealousy. Though Marlowe himself was outspoken and controversial, no one could deny his talents. And other playwrights quickly followed the model that he had established. By combining this new type of dramatic language with the new action-packed story lines, English theaters had a combustible mix on their hands. And those theaters were soon packed to the gills as people crammed in to see those new plays and to hear the new type of language that was being used on the stage.

With Marlowe and Kyd, the stage was set for Shakespeare, both literally and figuratively. You will have noticed that I have only mentioned Shakespeare in passing in this episode, and that's because we still have no record of him in London at this point, even though later evidence will suggest that he arrived there around this time in the late 1580s. And it is very clear that he was a fan of Marlowe. In fact, Shakespeare quoted one of Marlowe's lines in his play called 'As You Like It,' and it appears to be the only time Shakespeare acknowledged one of his contemporaries in that way.

As we'll see in upcoming episodes, Shakespeare also adopted the same basic structure used by Marlowe and Kyd. Most of Shakespeare's plays are composed in blank verse, so they don't bother with rhyming, and they use iambic pentameter. But Shakespeare's plays are really a combination of poetry and regular speech. He actually shifted back and forth between them depending on the context of the dialogue.

As we'll see, Shakespeare often played fast and loose with iambic pentameter. He often broke from the rigid structure of the meter and added more variation to his lines. That helped his dialogue to remain fresh and not seem so repetitive.

But he also shifted in and out of the meter altogether, meaning that his passages were sometimes clearly intended as poetry and sometimes were not. For example, in *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo sometimes speaks in prose or regular speech, but when he thinks of Juliet, he shifts into iambic pentameter because poetry was the preferred format to express love.

But, SOFT! what LIGHT through YONder WINDow BREAKS?
It IS the EAST, and JUL-yet IS the SUN.
a-RISE, fair SUN, and KILL the ENvious MOON,
Who IS alREADY SICK and PALE with GRIEF

Again, that's iambic pentameter.

Also, Shakespeare's plays often feature characters who are mad or who pretend to be insane. In periods of sanity, they often speak in verse or poetry, but when they go mad or pretend to be mad, they speak in common prose. Sometimes characters from the nobility speak in iambic pentameter when addressing other nobles, but they speak in common prose when addressing commoners or people from the lower classes. Shakespeare also used much more iambic pentameter in his tragedies, and much less in his comedies. So for Shakespeare, this poetic rhythm was just another tool in his massive literary toolbox. He used it when the scene warranted, but he was also willing to put it aside when he was finished with it. It's something that we don't tend to notice today, but audiences at the time would have appreciated that kind of language shift. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare's English, Keith Johnson, p. 206.*]

So with that, we really need to bring Shakespeare into our overall narrative, and next time, we'll finally be able to do that. As we move the story forward and venture into the 1590s, we'll encounter some of Christopher Marlowe's later plays, as well as the great Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser, whose epic poem the *Faerie Queen* was published around the turn of the decade. And we'll finally come across the first references to Shakespeare as an actor and playwright living in London in the early 1590s. Other evidence will also show his earliest plays that were being performed in theaters around that time. So next time, we'll explore those developments.

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