THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 168: WITCHES, DEMONS AND FAIRIES

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 168: Witches, Demons and Fairies. In this episode, we're going to look at the Elizabethan fascination with witchcraft and mysterious creatures like fairies, elves and demons. Those subjects feature prominently in the literature of the period, and they reveal a lot about the world view of the people who lived in England in the late 1500s. There were great debates at the time about the world of magic and witchcraft, whether it was good or bad, whether or not it was consistent with the teachings of the Church, and whether it even existed at all. In this episode, we'll examine how that fascination with the supernatural shaped the literature of Elizabethan England and how it shaped the English language.

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 one quick note before we begin. As you may have noticed, ths is a very long episode – much longer than normal. And that's because there's a lot of information to cover, but I've chosen to maintain the discussion as a single episode because there is a common theme that runs through all of it. So given the length of the episode, I've structured it a little bit differently than normal. This is a story told in five parts – each of which is presented as a separate segment or chapter. We'll begin with a look at an influential text on conjuring and magic called The Discoverie of Witchcraft. Then we'll look at Christopher Marlowe's play about a deal with the devil called Doctor Faustus. Next, we'll examine the events that caused King James of Scotland to become obsessed with witchcraft, and how that led to a series of witch trials that continued well into the following century. From there, we'll take a look at Edmund Spencer's epic poem called The Faerie Queene. And lastly, we'll explore the earliest known play – or series of plays – composed by William Shakespeare. The plays were about an English king who lived in the prior century, but even they incorporated witches and black magic into the story to help them appeal to audiences at the time. As we go through this episode, each of those segments or chapters is preceded with a brief musical interlude, so feel free to start and stop at your convenience if the whole episode is little too long for you.

With that, let's pick up where we left off last time with the development of English drama during the late 1580s. In the last episode, we looked at the emergence of playwrights like Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe, and we explored how certain aspects of Roman drama were adapted to the English stage. One aspect of Roman plays that was carried over into English plays was the fascination with witches and ghosts. The tragedies of the great Roman playwright Seneca often featured supernatural elements, and since many of the stories involved murder and revenge, it was common to feature ghosts as prominent characters.

It's easy to see why English playwrights embraced that aspect of Roman drama. Ghosts, witches and fairies had been a prominent part of English folklore for centuries. Those beliefs predated Christianity, and after Christianity was introduced, they had existed alongside the new religion, and sometimes were even incorporated into the Christian world view that dominated Europe.

I touched on this issue in earlier episodes, specifically Episode 43 during the Anglo-Saxon period of the podcast. In that episode, we looked at words that go back to Old English like ***witch***, ***witchcraft***, and ***elf***. The Anglo-Saxons had many words for supernatural creatures like a ***mare***, which was an evil demon that came to people while sleeping, and is the source of the word ***nightmare***. They also had the word ***wiht***, which later evolved into the word ***wight*** ('w-i-g-h-t'). It could be used as a general term for a human, but it was also used to refer to unearthly or supernatural beings.

Old English also had the word ***puck***, which referred to a type of spirit that was evil or mischievous. The word ***puck*** was also used as the name of a specific creature that was believed to live in the countryside and often interfered with people's work and chores.

I also noted in that earlier episode that the first English laws again witchcraft were adopted during the reign of Alfred the Great in the late 800s. Some of those older, pagan beliefs were overtaken by the growing influence of Christianity, and the belief in those ancient mythological creatures was increasingly seen as un-Christian and was even associated with the devil.

If we are to believe Geoffrey Chaucer, people had largely lost interest in elves and fairies by the late 1300s. At the time, the French word ***fairy*** was a relatively new loanword, and it had a much broader sense than today, as the did the Old English word ***elf***. The two terms were somewhat interchangeable, and in the Canterbury Tales, Chaucer talked about the decline of such beliefs. In the opening lines of the Wife of Bath's Tale, he wrote the following:

In the olden days of King Arthur,
Of which the Britons speak with great honour,
All was this land was fulfilled with fairies.
The elf-queen, with her jolly company,
Danced full often on many a green mead;
This was the old opinion, as I read.
I speak of many hundred years ago;
But now no man can see the elves, you know.

Though Chaucer suggests that elves and fairies were the stuff of ancient myth, that was probably an exaggeration. Those beliefs persisted into the Elizabethan era, especially in the countryside. And in fact, the literature of that period suggests that those beliefs actually had a resurgence and became more vigorous over the course of the 1500s. During that period, writers began to use lots of new words to describe the supernatural creatures that supposedly lived in the natural world around them.

As I noted, the word ***fairy*** had been borrowed from French a couple of centuries earlier, but its use became much more widespread in the early modern period. It was originally used as a general term for enchantment or magic, then it gradually came to refer to a supernatural being in human form with magical powers. The word ***fairy*** had a very broad sense in Elizabethan England. It could refer to a goblin or gnome, or a figure with a human appearance, or a small elf that lived in wooded regions.

Fairies were sometimes depicted as demons or sinister creatures, and other times they were described a playful tricksters. Again, depending on the person, they could be seen as either helpful or evil. [*SOURCE: Darren Oldridge (2016) Fairies and the Devil in early modern England, The Seventeenth Century, 31:1, 1-15*.] The modern sense of the word ***fairy*** as a tiny, delicate, winged creature in female form hadn't really become common yet. That image really emerged after the Elizabethan period.

Another term that emerged in the 1400s and 1500s with a similar meaning was the word ***sprite***. It was derived form the French word ***esprit*** – or ***spirit***, and it could also refer to a small, mischievous creature. So it often had the same meaning as an elf or fairy.

In the north and in Scotland, people referred to similar types of fairies as ***brownies***. And again, that term is also first recorded in the 1500s.

Around the same time, the word ***pixie*** also started to appear in English documents. The origin of the word isn't entirely clear. Some scholars believe it had a Celtic or Norse origin, but the Oxford English Dictionary suggests that the word may go back to that Old English word ***puck*** that mentioned a moment ago. A ***puck*** was a magical creature that lived in the countryside. The OED indicates that the word ***pixie*** may have begun as 'puck-sy,' and the vowel sound simply shifted over time.

That word ***puck*** actually regained a certain currency in the Elizabethan period. It was traditionally the name of a specific spirit or fairy that lived in the countryside, and was thought to be benevolent and helpful. Well, another common name for that fairy was ***Robin Goodfellow***. Again, it's a name that was first recorded in the 1500s. And if you're a fan of Shakespeare, some of these name and terms are probably ringing a bell. Fairies feature prominently in Shakespeare's play called 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,' and the primary fairy in that play is called both Puck and Robin Goodfellow, interchangeably. Shakespeare's version of the fairy is based on the general folklore of rural England. Robin Goodfellow was a prankster, but he also helped people. He would sweep the floors at night and help with other household chores when people were away.

The name of Robin Goodfellow also contributed to another common term. In an earlier episode about Robin Hood, I mentioned that a common nickname for ***Robin*** was ***Hob***. And sometimes Robin Goodfellow was known simply as ***Hob***. In fact, the word ***hob*** was sometimes used as general term for a fairy or an elf. And in the mid-1500s, that name ***Hob*** was added to the word ***goblin*** to give us the term ***hobgoblin***, which was originally another name for Robin Goodfellow. Over time, the meaning of ***hobgoblin*** evolved, and it acquired a more sinister or terrifying sense.

The late 1500s also gave us the first use of the term ***will-o'-the-wisp***, which referred to ghostly lights found in swamps and bogs that were believed to be caused by fairies. Another term for those lights was a ***firedrake***, or a ***kit with the candlestick***. In the following century, a new term emerged for those ghostly lights. That term was a ***Jack-o'-lantern***, which of course would later be applied to lanterns or lights placed inside of pumpkins.

Now again, regardless of the term used, these supernatural creatures took various forms and were perceived in different ways. They were sometimes seen as playful and benevolent, but some people considered them to be sinister and evil. The same was true with respect to people who invoked fairies and supposedly had supernatural abilities and dabbled in the mystical arts. They were generally called ***witches***. Some of them were thought to practice helpful or good magic, sometimes called ***white magic***, and others were thought to practice harmful or evil magic, sometimes called ***black magic***.

Those who practiced good magic offered a variety of helpful services. It was thought that they could do things like help someone find a lost or stolen object, get rids of rats, help crops grow, and even help people fall in love with a special type of love potion. But most importantly, they were seen as healers of both people and livestock. If someone became sick – or if their animals became sick – they would often turn to one of those local healers. Their treatments were usually a blend of spiritual and herbal remedies, and they were often the primary medical providers in some parts of the countryside. As we saw in an earlier episode, modern research has shown that some of those herbal remedies were actually quite effective, so that probably encouraged the notion that those healers has special powers. Also, the trained doctors of the period were still relying on bloodletting and the old Greek idea of balancing the humors. So the herbal remedies used by those healers were probably more effective at treating some illnesses than the treatments used by the doctors. And on top of that, doctors were relatively rare in the countryside. So for most people, there was no real alternative to those traditional healers. [*SOURCE: The Elizabethan Underworld, Gamini Salgado, p. 74-5*.]

Those healers were thought to practice a type of good magic. And men and women who practiced good magic were known by a variety of terms like a ***cunning man*** or a ***cunning woman***, or a ***wise man*** or ***wise woman***. Many people thought that those conjurors consulted with fairies to do their work.

This more positive aspect of witchcraft is also reflected in the language. We have several terms with positive connotations that come from witchcraft. You might find someone charming, or enchanting, or entrancing, or fascinating. ***Charming*** comes from the use of charms in magic, ***enchanting*** comes from the use of ritualistic chanting, ***entrancing*** comes from the use of a trance as part of a magic spell, and ***fascinating*** comes form the Latin word ***fascinatio***, which meant 'to put someone under a spell.' ***Charming*** and ***enchanting*** were older terms from Middle English, but ***entrance*** and ***fascinate*** appeared during the Elizabethan period.

So witchcraft was sometimes seen as a benevolent force. But of course, the same supernatural powers could be used to cause harm. It was believed that some practitioners consulted with demons and the even the devil himself. They levied curses, and brought about plague and sickness. They caused livestock to die and crops to fail. They caused drought, and also brought about destructive storms. Of course, those people were called ***witches***, and that is the way many of us think of the term today. Originally, the word ***witch*** could include those who practiced any kind of magic, either good or bad. But the Church tended to see all witchcraft as evil, and that shaped how people saw witches and how they used the term ***witch*** over time.

Some people were so concerned about conjuring demons or the devil with their words that they wouldn't even utter the word ***devil***. It was during the late 1500s that some people started to substitute the surname ***Dickens*** for the word ***devil*** in many common expressions, which gave us modern expressions like 'What the dickens!,' and 'Go to the dickens,' and 'To scare the dickens out of someone.'

This dual aspect of witchcraft – the good and the bad – is reflected in a major law against the practice that was adopted in 1563 early in Elizabeth's reign. It didn't prohibit all witchcraft. It only prohibited witchcraft that caused death or other harm. So the law wasn't really concerned about those who used witchcraft for good; it was only concerned about those who misused it to cause suffering.

But not everyone believed in sorcery and witchcraft at the time. In fact, in 1584, a writer and politician named Reginald Scot sought to debunk the whole idea of witchcraft – and magic in general. He composed a book called the 'Discoverie of Witchcraft,' and it's a fascinating text for a period generally marked by superstition and a widespread belief in various kinds of magic.

The book proved to be very popular and was widely read in the late 1500s and 1600s. There would soon be major debates over the nature of witchcraft, and the text was widely referenced in those debates. In fact, it was even banned by later authorities when witch hunts became common. Nevertheless, the book remained an important text about supernatural beliefs and practices because it was so thorough and comprehensive. Many scholars think that Shakespeare used it as a source for many of his plays that featured fairies and witches, like A Midsummer Night's Dream and Macbeth. [*SOURCE: https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/witchcraft-magic-and-religion*]

Reginald Scot a Protestant, and the book reflects his world view. He dismissed magic and superstition, and he said that most actions attributed to witches were actually caused by God or by natural forces. If someone was sick and suddenly recovered, he said that thanks should be given to God, not to a witch's potion or charm. And when people experienced pain and suffering, it was the result of God's orderly plan and not the evil workings of a witch or fairy. He said that only God could work miracles, and that the Devil encouraged people to believe in false spirits to deceive them and to divert them from the teachings of God. [*SOURCE, The Discoverie of Witchcraft, Reginald Scot, Book 1, Chapter 2*.] So he didn't deny the existence of miracles, he just denied that witches or fairies were the source.

Scot said that some people claimed to be witches and claimed to have supernatural abilities, but in reality, they fell into one of two groups. They were either frauds who intentionally deceived people, or they were men and women who truly thought they were witches but suffered from mental illness or what he called 'melancholie' brought on by humors that were out of balance. [*SOURCE, The Discoverie of Witchcraft, Reginald Scot, Book 3, Chapter 11*.] He also said that people should not be accused of witchcraft out of fear or out of retribution for some unpleasant event. He said that such accusations were false. He also argued that witch confessions obtained through torture were invalid because the confessions were coerced. So as you can see, Scot's book took a very modern, skeptical approach to the whole notion of magic and witchcraft. [*SOURCE: Ibid, Book 3, Chapter 7*.]

But for our purposes, one of the most fascinating aspects of the book was the terms he used and the terms he introduced. First of all, Scot didn't really make much of the distinction between bad witches and good witches – or ***wise women*** as they were commonly known as the time. He wrote, ". . . at this daie it is indifferent to saie in the English toong; She is a witch; or, She is a wise woman." [*SOURCE: Ibid, Book 5, Chapter 9*.] So that suggests that the traditional distinction between good and bad witches had eroded over time.

He then gave a long list of the various terms that were used to refer to a witch. Some of them had been around since the Middle English period, like ***enchanter***, ***soothsayer***, ***diviner***, ***calker*** and ***conjuror***. He also included the word ***juggler***, which has a very specific sense today as someone who tosses objects in the air, but at the time, it had a broader sense as someone who performs magical or incredible feats. So ***juggler*** had a secondary meaning as a magician or a witch.

Scot also said that a witch was sometimes called an ***ob***, which was apparently a Hebrew word for a spirit. And he said that the word was sometimes translated with the Greek word ***python***. Now today, we think of a ***python*** as a kind of snake, but a different sense of the word as a witch or sorceress had developed in ancient Greek, and that word was sometimes used in English as well.

A ***python*** was typically a woman who had become possessed by a spirit that lived in her abdomen or belly. Well, closely related to that same idea was the Latin term ***ventriloquist***. Scot actually gave us the first use of the word ***ventriloquy*** in English, but again, it referred to a type of demonic possession. It was said that a possessed person – or ***ventriloquist*** – spoke as if they were speaking from their belly, not from their mouth. Again, the sense of that word evolved over time so that today if refers to a person who projects their voice onto another person, or object, or usually a dummy. [*SOURCE: Ibid, Book 7, Chapter 1*.]

With respect to spirits and creatures of various types, Scot mentioned familiar terms like ***satyr***, ***nymph*** and ***imp***, but he also included less common terms like a ***faun***, which was a rural spirit, and a ***silen***, which was a woodland creature, and an ***incubus***, which was a spirit that descended upon a woman in her sleep. He also referred to a ***changeling***, which was a spirit that changed its appearance, and a ***Tom tumbler***, which was a type of evil spirit.

He also used the word ***bug*** to refer to an evil spirit. At the time, ***bug*** was a common term for a scary or frightening spirit. Now today, we think of the word ***bug*** as a small insect or insect-like creature, but that sense of the word ***bug*** isn't found in any documents until about a decade after Scot's book. So during the 1580s, a ***bug*** was still an evil spirit, not an insect. It isn't entirely clear how the modern word ***bug*** came about, but one theory is that it is ultimately the same word. The idea is that the sense of the word ***bug*** as something scary or frightening was extended to small insects which often scared people.

Now all of those terms that I just discussed are found in documents prior to Scot's book, though some of them were apparently very recent loanwords at the time. But Scot also gave us the very first recorded use of several other terms. For example, he referred to an astrologer as a ***figure-caster***, and a witch or conjuror as a ***miracle monger***.

For spirits or creatures, he gave us the first use of the word ***spoorne*** for a type of phantom, and the first use of ***bell beggar*** for a type of goblin, and the first use of the term '***the man in the oak***' for a type of ghost that lived in the woods. He was also the first to record word ***hellwain*** for a supernatural appearance in the night sky. The word ***urchin*** was an older term for a hedgehog, but Scot's book is the first to use the term to refer to a goblin or elf, apparently from the notion that such creatures sometimes took the form of a hedgehog. From that sense of the word ***urchin*** as a small creature, it was later extended to a mischievous child, and then sometimes to any small child, especially one considered to be poor or crude by those of higher classes.

The prevalence of all of those terms for supernatural creatures gives us a sense of the fascination that people in Elizabethan England had for the spirit world.

Scot's book also provided the first recorded use of the term ***loving cup*** to refer to a love potion concocted by a witch or conjuror. And it gave us the term ***eye-bite*** meaning to 'cast an evil eye' on someone.

And believe it or not, he was the first known writer to use the word ***Hispanic*** in an English document. He used it in his discussion about the forced confessions obtained from accused witches, which he compared to the torture of the Spanish Inquisition, but he called it the 'Hispanicall inquisition.' And according to the Oxford English Dictionary, that is first recorded use of the term ***Hispanic*** in English.

Now one other quick note about Reginald Scot's book. After dismissing the belief in witchcraft and related supernatural ideas, he then described how certain people employed tricks to deceive people. Though the discussion was intended to reveal what he considered to be frauds and cheats, it was really one of the first textbooks on the art of magic, and the tricks he described are still performed by modern magicians on stages all over world.

Again, he didn't call it ***magic***. It called it ***juggling***, using that older and broader sense of the word ***juggle*** as a magical or incredible feat. For example, he described the sleight of hand used in card magic like the use of false shuffles and the way a card player manipulates the deck to control the location of certain cards in the deck. He described how people made coins and little balls disappear in their hands through misdirection, and he described an early version of 'cups and balls' where the conjuror makes balls appear and disappear under various cups through misdirection and sleight of hand. He also described how to make a coin appear to pass through a table or disappear into a handkerchief. He described how conjurors used boxes with false bottoms to create an illusion in which one type of grain in the box appeared to change into a completely different type of grain. And he even described how to use a fake blade to give the appearance of passing a knife through a persons arm or tongue. Throughout the discussion, Scot emphasized that these were merely tricks, and not actual magic or witchcraft. As I noted, these types of tricks were mainly used by individuals to deceive or defraud people at the time. They weren't generally used as entertainment. People didn't go to the theaters to watch magic shows yet. But many of those people did go to the theater to watch a play about magic and about a magician who tapped into the dark arts. That play was written by Christopher Marlowe, and in the next chapter, we'll explore his first dramatic version of the Faust legend presented in English.

[BREAK]

Philip Henslow was a businessman and an entrepreneur in the late 1500s. He was what we might call a 'jack of all trades' today, at least when it came to business. He had his hand in a little bit of everything. He was involved in the cloth industry as a dyer and starch manufacturer. He was also a timber merchant, and buyer and seller of properties, and a pawnbroker and a money lender. Oh yeah, he was also a brothel owner. But in 1587, he decided to try his hand at a new industry – the burgeoning theater scene around London. In that year, three years after Reginald Scot's book on witchcraft that we just explored, Henslowe purchased a piece of property on the south bank of the Thames across the river from the main part of the city of London. The property contained rose gardens and was called The Little Rose, but Henslowe decided to build a theater on the property. It was constructed in 1587, and when it was completed, Henslowe called it – appropriately enough – The Rose. [*SOURCE: Globe: Life in Shakespeare's London, Catharine Arnold, p. 3; Shakespeare: A Life, Park Honan, p. 103*.]

Henslowe's new theater, the Rose, would prove to be one of the most important theaters in Elizabethan England. And Henslowe would prove to be one of the most important theater owners because of something he did at the time which survives to this day. Henslowe kept meticulous records of the theater's business activity, and those records are a gold mine for scholars of Elizabethan drama, and especially for scholars of William Shakespeare.

Henslowe's records are often referred to as his 'diary' because they were really a vast collection of notes and records of things that he found interesting. In keeping with our theme, his records included the recipe for a concoction that supposedly cured deafness, and even included notes on casting spells. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare, Bill Bryson, p. 69*.] So Henslowe apparently had an interest in conjuring. But the most important part of his so-called 'diary' were the day-to-day business records of the Rose theater. They show which plays were performed at the theater on which dates, as well as the amount of money that each play generated. Those records not only help modern scholars to determine when many of the plays of that period were written and performed, but they also indicate how popular each play was at the time.

Unfortunately, the records begin in 1592 – five years after the theater was built. So we don't have records for those first few years. But some of that missing information can be pieced together from other sources.

Thanks to Henslowe's business records, we know that many of Shakespeare's earliest plays were performed at the Rose. And we also know that Henslowe had a close connection with Christopher Marlowe because his plays were also performed there.

In the last episode, we looked at Marlowe's play called Tamburlaine. Well, his next major play was probably completed shortly after the Rose theater was opened. The play was called 'The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus,' but it is more commonly known as simply 'Doctor Faustus.' The play was Marlowe's version of the well-known story of Faust and his deal with the Devil, only it wasn't well-known at the time. Marlowe's play was actually the first dramatic version of the story in English.

The play may have been staged as early as 1589. The exact date of the play is a matter of some dispute. The first official record of the play's performance was at the Rose Theater in the early 1590s, but as I noted, we don't have records from the Rose in the late 1580s. However, there is a separate reference to the play which appears to place it around the year 1589. That reference comes from an anti-theater crusader named William Prynne. Several years later, he wrote that he had heard from several people that the play had been performed at a public house called the Belsavage Inn. Well, the Belsavage Inn was closed in 1589, so that suggests that the play had been composed prior to that date, assuming Prynne's account is accurate. [*SOURCE: Christopher Marlowe: Poet and Spy, Park Honan, p. 198-9.*]

At any rate, this particular play called Doctor Faustus was the follow-up to Tamburlaine. The story of Faust was based on a German legend about a doctor named Johann Faust who was a conjuror and necromancer. A necromancer was someone who claimed to be able to communicate with the dead. This German doctor lived a few decades earlier in the early 1500s, and after his death, a legend arose that he had made a pact with the Devil. A German version of the legend was published in 1587, and soon afterwards, it was translated into English, and Marlowe apparently based his play on that English translation. So this was really a brand-new story at the time, and few of the theater-goes would have been familiar with it.

Marlowe's version of the story was a tragedy, but it was somewhat unique in that it didn't involve the fall of a great political leader. Instead, it involved the fall of a doctor who became enthralled with the occult. In the story, Faustus sells his soul to the devil in exchange for supernatural powers and abilities, but he pays the ultimate price when the term of the deal expires and he is eternally damned. The play mixed tragedy and farce, and much like Tamburlaine that we looked at last time, it featured Marlowe's eloquent language, and an iambic pentameter meter with unrhymed or 'blank' verse. That was quickly becoming the standard structure of English drama.

So let me give you a quick synopsis of the play. The play begins by introducing Faustus. Marlowe includes the following lines:

To patient judgments we appeal our plaud,
And speak for Faustus in his infancy.

I mention that passage because it contains the word ***plaud*** in the line, "To patient judgments we appeal our plaud." That word is the root of several other words like ***applaud***, ***applause***, and ***plaudit***, and it's a fascinating little word as it relates to the history of the theater. All of those words were brand new to English in the late 1500s, and the version that Marlowe used here – ***plaud*** – is first recorded in this particular play.

The Latin root word was ***plaudere***, and it meant 'to clap.' It's an interesting word because even the Romans clapped their hands to express approval at the end of a performance. And that sense of the word has survived in words like ***applaud*** and ***applause***.

Now, audiences would often applaud on their own, but sometimes, they would have to be encouraged to do so by the performers. That led to the word ***plaudit***, which was originally an appeal for applause, but has come to mean 'a round of applause' or an expression of approval, but audiences also used applause to show disapproval. If they didn't like a performance, they would interrupt it by clapping, and they would continue clapping until the actor left the stage. It was like booing or hissing today. Well, when that happened, that act of disapproval was called ***explaudo*** – literally 'to clap off' as in 'to clap off the stage.' But the word entered English in the mid-1500s not as ***explaudo***, but ***explode***.

So the word ***explode*** was originally a theatrical term for a show of disapproval, and it is cognate with words like ***applaud*** and ***applause***. Of course, a clap involves a sudden burst of noise, and that secondary sense of the word ***explode*** appeared in Late Latin and also become the more common meaning of the word in English as well.

Now after being introduced to the character of Doctor Faustus, we find out that he is a skilled physician, but he is frustrated with the limitations of his profession. He has acquired all of the medical knowledge that is available, but he wishes for more. He dreams of being able to defy death by making people live eternally, and even being able to raise them from the dead.

He reads the Bible and agonizes over the notion that ultimate consequence of sin is death. He rejects that notion, and exlaims:

Ay, we must die an everlasting death.
What doctrine call you this, Che sera, sera,
What will be, shall be? Divinity, adieu!

That passage contains one of the first recorded uses of the phrase 'Que sera sera' in an English document. Though the phrase sounds like it came from another country, it was apparently coined within England. It is actually an attempt to render the common English phrase "what must be must be" into Spanish or Italian. The resulting phrase – 'Que sera sera' – was used as the motto of the Russell family, which was a prominent noble family in England. And that appears to be how the phrase passed into more general usage, no doubt encouraged by Marlowe's use of the phrase here in Doctor Faustus.

Having expressed his frustration with traditional science and religion, Faustus says:

Philosophy is odious and obscure;
Both law and physic are for petty wits;
Divinity is basest of the three,
Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible, and vile:
'Tis magic, magic, that hath ravish'd me.

I should note that that is standard iambic pentameter. And it's also an attack on the traditional teachings of the Church. It was edgy stuff in the late 1500s, but Faustus isn't really presented as a sympathetic character. He is too consumed with his own ego and passions.

The following couple of lines contain the first use of the word ***concise*** in the English language when Faustus says that he confounded the pastors of the Church with his "concise syllogisms," which meant his 'concise and logical arguments.'

Faustus decides that magic is the only skill that will satisfy his desire for knowledge, wealth and power. With the assistance of two other magicians, he utters a long passage in Latin and summons the demon named Mephastophilis. By the way, Mephastophilis was the name coined in the German version of the story, and Marlowe's play introduced the name and demon to English audiences. When Mephastophilis appears, Faustus is frightened by his appearance, and commands him to go away and come back in a less threatening form, which the demon does. He then reappears in the form of a friar.

During the ensuing conversation, Faustus offers to sell his soul to Lucifer if Mephastophilis will do his bidding for twenty-four years:

Having thee ever to attend on me,
To give me whatsoever I shall ask,
To tell me whatsoever I demand,
To slay mine enemies, and aid my friends,
And always be obedient to my will.

Now, a quick grammatical note there. Faustus says that Mephastophilis will slay "mine enemies" and aid "my friends." So he uses ***mine*** in the first instance and ***my*** in the second. Today, we would say ***my*** in both cases. We don't really use the word ***mine*** that way before a noun. But during the Elizabethan period, the pronouns ***my*** and ***mine*** worked like the articles ***a*** and ***an***. The form that was used depended on the initial sound of the noun that followed it. So today, we use ***a*** before a word that begins with a consonant, like 'a car,' but we use ***an*** before a word that begins with a vowel, like 'an apple.' Well, ***my*** and ***mine*** once worked the same way. ***My*** was used before a consonant, and ***mine*** was used before a vowel. That's why Faustus refers to "my friends" and "mine enemies." Of course, we don't really used the word ***mine*** that way anymore. Today, ***mine*** has been restricted to a possessive pronoun that is typically used by itself in place of a noun at the end of sentence, like when we say 'That hat is mine.' By the way, the change to the modern form with the use of the word ***my*** before a vowel began in the north of England, and during the late 1500s, it was spreading into the south. Shakespeare used both ***my*** and ***mine*** before vowels, and by the late 1700s, ***my*** was standard form before both vowels and consonants.

So returning to the play, Lucifer accepts the offer of Doctor Faustus. The doctor's soul will belong to the devil in exchange for twenty-four years of magical powers to be carried out by Mephastophilis at the doctor's command. That type of pact between Faustus and the devil is sometimes referred to today as a 'Faustian bargain.' The phrase is also used more broadly to refer to someone who collaborates with or forms an alliance with an evil person or regime.

Faustus's first demand is for a wife, but Mephastophilis informs him that there is not reason to limit himself to a single wife. The demon spirit will bring several women to Faustus each morning, and the doctor may have his choice. The demon says, "She whom thine eye shall like, thy heart shall have."

Again, notice the pronoun forms – "thine eye" and "thy heart." ***Thine*** and ***thy*** worked the same way as ***mine*** and ***my. Thine*** was used before words beginning with a vowel, thus "thine eye." And ***thy*** was used before words beginning with a consonant, thus "thy heart." Of course, today those pronouns have been replaced with the generic word ***your***, except in poetry and few other limited situations.

Also note that that particular line is perfect iambic pentameter – de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM. "She whom thine eye shall like, thy heart shall have."

The demon then gives Faustus a book of spells and incantations. In return, the doctor says, "Thanks, Mephastophilis." That is one of the first – if not THE first – recorded use of the word ***thanks*** to mean 'Thank you' as an expression of gratitude.

Faustus is repeatedly visited by a good angel and a bad angel that each try to influence his decisions with the good angel trying to convince Faustus to repent.

After these events, Faustus travels to Rome and makes his way into the Pope's private chamber where the Pope is joined by several friars. Faustus takes the opportunity to play practical jokes. He makes himself invisible and snatches cups and plates from the men in the room. Then he swats the Pope's ears. Rather than using his powers to acquire knowledge and help the world, Faustus spends his time playing tricks on people and impressing them with his magical abilities.

His knowledge of the world and the universe makes him famous, and he is invited to meet the Holy Roman Emperor where Faustus again displays his magical abilities and entertains the Emperor.

At this point, Faustus starts to worry about what he has done, and he ponders his fate. He realizes that time is quickly passing, and his powers will soon come to an end.

The scene then shifts to Faustus and a couple of scholars debating who was the most beautiful woman to ever live. The scholars suggest Helen of Troy, whose beauty and abduction led to the Trojan War. Faustus raises Helen from the dead, and they all agree that she was indeed beautiful.

Faustus is increasingly plagued by regret for selling his soul, and Mephastophilis declares him to be a traitor to Lucipher. Faustus then reaffirms the bargain, and asks the demon to return Helen of Troy so that she may become his lover. He secretly believes that her kiss will save his soul. We then have what is probably the most famous passage of the entire play. Upon Helen's entrance, Faustus says:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships,
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?
Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss.

It is this passage that has led to Helen of Troy being referred to as the 'face that launched a thousand ships' because her abduction caused the Greeks to sail to Troy to fight the Trojan War. Bu unfortunately for Faustus, Helen cannot save his soul.

On the night before his final day, Faustus asks his scholarly friends to pray for him. He has decided that it is too late to repent. And in his final hour, he realizes the gravity of what is about to happen and he curses his fate. Thunder and lightning fill the air, and horrible demons appear. They seize Faustus and drag him off the stage to hell. And with that, the story of Doctor Faustus comes to a close.

If Elizabethan audiences expected the doctor to repent and save himself with a happy ending, that's not what happened. The final scene was apparently quite dramatic in the way it was presented on stage. Earlier in this discussion, I mentioned a passage about the play composed by William Prynne several years later that helps to date the play. He said that the play was performed at the Belsavage Inn, which was closed in 1589. Well, Prynne was a Puritan and a strong opponent of the theater, and in that same passage, he claimed that actual devils appeared on stage during the performance of the play, and the spectacle was so frightening, that it literally drove several people mad. Of course, that was certainly an exaggeration, but it points to the lasting impact of the play on audiences during this period.

The play secured Marlowe's reputation as the greatest playwright of the period – up to this point in our story, anyway.

Marlowe was part of a new breed of writers around London in the late 1500s. They were highly educated men having graduated from Cambridge or Oxford, and they were making their living solely as writers. Prior to this point, writing had tended to be more of a pastime, but now people could make a living at it, especially those who wrote plays for the new theaters that were always looking for fresh dramas. Later scholars referred to those young educated writers as the University Wits. In addition to Marlowe, they included Thomas Nashe, George Peele, and a man named Robert Greene who was one of the first professional writers in London.

Around the time that Marlowe was composing Doctor Faustus, Greene published a story called Pandosta: The Triumph of Time. It proved to be one of Greene's more popular works, and Shakespeare later reworked the story for his play called The Winter's Tale. But Robert Greene was a troubled soul by his own admission. He left his wife and spent his final years in London womanizing and drinking himself to death while living in misery and squalor. He also became bitter and jealous of other writers who were having more success than him. He was dealing with his own personal demons during this period, and it was around this time that he turned his attention to the thieves and cheats that he was hanging around with. He wrote a series of books about the tricks and deceptions used by thieves and vagabonds on the streets of London. After that, he spent his time composing plays, some of which were influenced by Marlowe's

Tamburlaine and Doctor Faustus. And as we'll see a little later in the episode, he also gave us the first reference to William Shakespeare as an actor and playwright in London. But for now, he was among a group of writers who were re-defining English literature in the late 1580s. [*SOURCE: William Shakespeare: A Biography, A.L. Rowse, p. 96-7.*]

[BREAK]

In 1589, Christopher Marlowe's new play Doctor Faustus was likely being performed for audiences for the first time. It was the year after the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and it was a time of great patriotism in England. The new nationalist sentiment was also mixed with concern about the future. The conflict with Spain was still not fully resolved, and there was an acceptance that Queen Elizabeth was 56 years old and was not going to produce an heir. That raised the prospect of a succession crisis. By that point, it was generally accepted that if Elizabeth died, the throne would pass to her cousin James VI – the king of the Scots. He was the Protestant son of the late Mary Queen of Scots.

Of course, if we jump ahead in the story, we know that James did eventually succeed Elizabeth as the English monarch becoming James I of England in 1603. He is probably most famous today for the bible translation that he commissioned, known today as the King James Bible. Of course, that translation had a tremendous impact on the language we speak. But before James came to the throne of England, he was well-known for something else – his obsession with witches. In fact, the witch trials that became common throughout Britain and North America in the 1600s largely stemmed from James's desire to eliminate witchcraft from his realm. And his obsession with witches really began with certain events that took place in this year – 1589.

With James emerging as the likely heir to the English throne, he needed to find a wife and start producing heirs of his own. Of course, kings and queens didn't really marry for love. Their marriages were political arrangements designed to forge alliances with other powers. And James and his advisors had found the perfect match in Denmark. The king of Denmark was Frederick II, and his daughter was named Anne. Like Scotland and England, Denmark was a Protestant country, and James saw the benefit of forging a closer alliance with the Scandinavian country by marrying the king's daughter. The terms were negotiated, and in late August of 1589, Anne and her entourage set sail from Denmark on their way to Scotland. But three weeks later, the ships had still not arrived. James soon learned that the ships had been caught in a storm in the North Sea, and it wasn't clear if the ships had survived the storm. Of course, there was no internet at the time, so news traveled very slowly. It wasn't until October that James finally received word that the ships had survived the storm, and had been forced to return to Denmark, thereby delaying the marriage ceremony. Winter was approaching, and that was a time of the year when sailing in the North Sea was the most treacherous, so that meant that the marriage would be delayed until the following spring. [*SOURCE: Witches: James I and the English Witch-Hunts, Tracy Borman, p. 29-30.*]

Well James wasn't the most patient king, so he decided to sail to Denmark to meet Anne – and to get married there instead. He left for Copenhagen in November, and managed to make it to Denmark without a problem. The couple met and were married four days later.

James didn't want to risk sailing back across the sea that late in the season, so he decided to spend the winter in Denmark and to make his return to Scotland in the spring. It was during that time that he met several prominent people in and around the Danish court who sparked his interest in the dangers of witchcraft.

A few months later, James and Anne set sail for Scotland, but once again, the fleet was battered by violent storms. One of the ships was lost on the voyage, and the king and his new queen barely made it Scotland alive.

After returning to Scotland, James became convinced that the storms had been caused by witches to prevent the royal marriage and to eliminate him as a Christian crusader against witchcraft.

In the months that followed, authorities in both Scotland and Denmark rounded up numerous people who accused of plotting against the king through conjuring and the dark arts. Though Scotland had laws against witchcraft at the time, those laws had rarely been used or enforced. But now, James used every bit of his power and authority as king to crack down on what he considered to be the greatest threat to his reign. [*SOURCE: Witches: James I and the English Witch-Hunts, Tracy Borman, p. 31.*]

Over the next few months, numerous men and women were accused of witchcraft and plotting against the king. In and around the town of North Berwick on the east coast of Scotland, about seventy people were accused of conjuring the storms that had battered the king's fleet. Most of those accused were women, but some men were accused as well. Many of them were tortured and forced to confess. It still isn't clear exactly how many people were found guilty and executed, but some of the records of the so-called 'North Berwick Witch Trials' survive, and they detail the fate of several of the people who were found guilty and either strangled or burned at the stake. It also seems likely that several died from the torture they endured during their interrogations. James actually presided over the interrogation of one of the accused witches named Agnes Sampson. Her forced confession also led to her execution. [*SOURCE: Witches: James I and the English Witch-Hunts, Tracy Borman, p. 33-4.*]

Shortly after the trials, James commissioned a pamphlet called Newes from Scotland that detailed the accusations against the witches and helped to spread a general fear of witchcraft across the Britain. [*SOURCE: Witches: James I and the English Witch-Hunts, Tracy Borman, p. 36.*] The old distinction between good witches and bad witches gradually disappeared, and witchcraft was increasingly seen as the sole domain of those who were allied with the Devil.

You will notice that James's view of witchcraft was very different from that of Reginald Scot, whose book on witchcraft we examined at the beginning of the episode. Scot argued that witchcraft was just superstition, and that people accused of witchcraft were innocent people forced to confess under the pain of torture. Well, James was aware of Scot's book, and he strongly disagreed with it. In the years after the North Berwick Witch Trials, James composed his own book on the evils of witchcraft called Demonologie. It was published in 1597, and in the Preface of the book, he took direct aim at Scot's book. James wrote, "The fearful abounding at this time, in this country, of these detestable slaves of the Devil, the witches or enchanters, has

moved me to dispatch in the post, this following treatise of mine . . . to resolve the doubting hearts of many both that such assaults of Satan are most certainly practiced . . .against the damnable opinions of two principally in our age. Whereof, the one called Scot, an Englishman, is not ashamed in public to deny that there can be such a thing as witchcraft. . ." [*SOURCE: The Demonology of King James I, Donald Tyson, p. 45*.]

Six years later, James succeeded Elizabeth and became the King of England. One of his earliest acts as king was to order his officials to gather all of the copies of Scot's book that they could find and burn them. [*SOURCE The Demonology of King James I, Donald Tyson, p. 47.*]

He also replaced the law against witchcraft that had been adopted early in Elizabeth's reign with a new law. As I noted earlier in the episode, Elizabeth's statute only punished witches if it was determined that they had caused harm. But under James's statute, the practice of witchcraft itself was made illegal. And the law even extended to the British colonies in North America. The Salem Witch Trials conducted in Massachusetts in the late 1600s were carried out under James's statute. And the statute remained in effect until 1736. [*SOURCE: The Demonology of King James I, Donald Tyson, p. 6.*]

James had written a book about witchcraft, and his obsession also influenced other writers during his reign. When he became the king of England, the most prominent playwright was William Shakespeare. And shortly afterwards, Shakespeare composed Macbeth, partly as a tribute to James. The play was set in Scotland and featured characters that were believed to be James's distant ancestors. But some of the play's most memorable characters are the witches who foretell Macbeth's future. And some scholars believe that those passages contain allusions to the North Berwick Witch Trials.

But before we delve any further into Shakespeare and witches, we need to turn our attention to fairies and one of the most important epic poems composed in the entire Elizabethan era. In the next part of the episode, we'll examine The Faerie Queen by Edmund Spencer.

[BREAK]

When James of Scotland returned from Denmark in 1590, he became obsessed with those who practiced black magic. And in that same year, we actually find the first recorded use of the term 'black magic' in an English document. That document was an epic poem composed by one of the most revered poets of the Elizabethan era. His name was Edmund Spenser, and the poem was called The Faerie Queen.

Many scholars consider Spenser to be the first major poet of consequence to emerge since Geoffrey Chaucer a couple of centuries earlier. And that connection to Chaucer is notable because Spenser admired Chaucer, and he sought to revive the Middle English lexicon that Chaucer had used in the 1300s.

The first thing to know about Edmund Spenser is that he attended the Merchant Taylor's School. In the last episode, I noted that Thomas Kyd who wrote The Spanish Tragedy was also a student

there. That was the school run by Richard Mulcaster, who I discussed back in Episode 163. Mulcaster was a strong advocate of English, and he thought that English was every bit the equal of Latin or Greek or any other European language. He also thought that students should be taught in English, not Latin. It appears that Mulcaster's views rubbed off on Spenser because Spenser's poetic approach was very different from most of his contemporaries.

At the time, there was a general agreement that the English word stock wasn't broad enough to compose elegant poetry because poets needed words that could fit the specific meter of the poem, and the English lexicon at the time wasn't as large as it is today. So most poets solved that problem by using words from other languages – either ancient languages like Latin or Greek, or contemporary languages like French, Spanish or Italian. Christopher Marlowe is a good example of someone who used that approach.

Well, rather than looking across the Channel for words, Edmund Spenser decided to look back in time. As a fan of Chaucer's work, he realized that Chaucer had used many words and many grammatical constructions that were no longer common in the language. So Spenser decided to tap into that older Middle English vocabulary. Those older words were sometimes called 'Chaucerisms,' and they tended to give Spenser's poetry a distinctly medieval feel. The result was a unique approach which was both admired and criticized. It was criticized because some readers struggled with the older, antiquated terms. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see the contrast between Spenser's distinctly English poetry and the more Latinate poetry composed by his contemporaries.

Spenser's first major poem using that approach was a poem called The Shepherd's Calendar, which was published about a decade earlier in 1579. The poem was part of a trend at the time called pastoral poetry. Those types of poems were usually set in the countryside and featured shepherds. They emphasized the innocence and purity of rural life. Spenser's poem was called a 'calendar' because it consisted of twelve separate poems – one for each month of the year. The speakers were shepherds, and the series of poems illustrated the course of life from youth to old age. The poems dealt with issues like religion, politics and poetry itself.

In the poem, he used words like ***unnethes*** for 'scarcely,' ***corbe*** for 'crooked,' ***sithe*** for 'time', ***breme*** for 'chilled,' ***tottie*** for 'wavering,' and so on. Again, those were all older words that had largely disappeared or were in the process of disappearing in the Elizabethan period.

Spenser also liked to make up new words. He apparently coined the word ***bellibone*** in the poem, which meant 'a fair maid.' And he apparently made up the word ***cosset*** for a lamb, though he may have been inspired by words in Old English or French that resembled the word ***cosset***.

The Shepherdes Calendar also gave us the first recorded use of several words that are very common today. For example, it included the first use of the word ***drizzle***, apparently derived from the Middle English word ***drese*** meaning 'to fall.' He also gave us the initial use of the word ***curdle***. Previously, the verb was simply ***curd***, as in the milk 'curded.' But Spenser rendered it as ***curdled***. He actually used it in reference to a winter which he said "cruddles the blood." So in

that sense, I guess that we can say he gave us an early version of term ***blood curdling***, as in a 'blood curdling scream.'

And speaking of blood, he also gave us the first use of the term ***lifeblood*** in the poem. Speaking of the cold winter, he wrote, "My life bloud friesing with vnkindly cold."

And even though Spenser was renowned for using older English words, he sometimes used loanwords. And his poems sometimes contain the first recorded instance of such loanwords. For example, the Shepherdes Calendar gave us the first recorded use of the Latin word ***obsolete***.

It also contained the first English use of the word ***ode*** meaning a lyrical poem. Though the Shepherdes Calendar isn't really a musical poem, it included the first use of the words ***violin*** and ***tambourine*** from Italian and French, respectively. And I don't mean to sound sarcastic, but Spenser also gave us the first use of the word ***sarcasm*** as well, a word inherited from Latin and Greek. The poem also contains the first recorded use of the Greek word ***catastrophe*** in an English document.

Now after composing the Shepherdes Calendar, Spenser turned to politics, and he acquired a position as the secretary to the Lord Deputy of Ireland, so he headed there a short time later. He eventually acquired an estate in Ireland, and this is where Spenser's story becomes 'problematic' as many people say today. Spenser was very much a part of the English effort to colonize Ireland and to build settlements and plantations there. He was also involved in putting down rebellions. And it was during that time that he became close friends with Sir Walter Raleigh.

I noted in an earlier episode that Raleigh largely gave up on his efforts to build a settlement on Roanoke Island in North America after the disappearance of the settlement that became known as the Lost Colony. After that, Raleigh retreated to his estate in Ireland. And it was there that Edmund Spencer delighted Raleigh with an early draft of his next great poem called The Faerie Queen. At Raleigh's insistence, Spenser returned to London with the first three parts of the long, epic poem. And those parts were published in 1590 – the same year that the North Berwick Witch Trials began in Scotland. [*SOURCE: The Literature of England, Ed., George B. Woods, et al., p. 387.*]

The poem remains one of the most highly regarded of the Elizabethan era, but it is also challenging. As I noted, Spencer occasionally used older terms that are no longer common in the language. And the structure of poem is very ambitious – some would say a little too ambitious. The poem has the structure of an epic medieval romance. It is set in the time of King Arthur. But the characters in the poem are also allegories representing various vices and virtues. According to Spenser, the original idea was that the queen of the fairies would hold a feast for twelve days, and each day, a stranger would appear to ask for help against some menacing force – like a monster, or a dragon, or a tyrant. And each time, a knight would be directed to help the stranger, thus beginning each adventure. Each knight was supposed to represent a specific virtue, and each opponent was to represent a specific vice. There was originally supposed to be twelve parts, which he called 'books.' But Spenser only completed the first six. The six virtues that he covered in those books were Holiness, Temperance, Chastity, Friendship, Justice and Courtesy.

[*SOURCE: A History of English Literature, William Allan Neilson and Ashley Horace Thorndike, p. 101-2.*]

So as you read the poem, you have to interpret the older antiquated terms, while following the adventure, and at the same time, grasping the secondary morality play that is being presented. Again, the first three parts – or 'books' – were published in 1590, and the second three were published six years later in a new edition that included all six parts.

The poem is set in a land of monsters, witches, wizards and fairies, and in that regard it reflects the Elizabethan fascination with those supernatural creatures. It was also dedicated to Queen Elizabeth, who is clearly represented in the poem as the Faerie Queen herself.

Now since the entire poem is very long and consists of six distinct stories or 'books,' I don't have time to go through the whole thing. But the first book is probably the most widely read, and is highly regarded for its structure, so I'm going to give you a quick overview of that section.

Book One is centered around the virtue of Holiness, represented by the central figure of the story, the Red Cross Knight. Now I am going to read the opening three stanzas of the poem which describes the knight as he rides along in pursuit of his mission. We find out that he has been dispatched by Gloriana, the Queen of Fairy Land. He is accompanied by a beautiful maiden named Una, and they are traveling to her native kingdom which is being plagued by a dragon. Una's parents are being held captive in a castle tower by the dragon, and the knight's mission is to defeat the dragon and liberate the kingdom.

Now in presenting these passages, I'm going to do something a little different. First, I'm going to read them using a contemporary Modern English pronunciation, then I'm going to play a clip of the same passages in Early Modern English reflecting the style of pronunciation that would have been used at the time. That clip comes from Alex Foreman. Alex is a linguist who does readings in Early Modern English, and he has given me permission to use his version. I thought you might enjoy hearing his take on the opening of the poem. So here is the beginning of the Faerie Queen, first in contemporary Modern English pronunciation:

A gentle knight was pricking on the plaine,
Ycladd in mightie armes and silver shielde,
Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,
The cruel markes of many'a bloudy fielde;
Yet armes till that time did he never wield:
His angry steede did chide his foming bitt,
As much disdayning to the curbe to yield:
Full jolly knight he seemd, and faire did sitt,
As one for knightly giusts [jousts] and fierce encounters fitt.

But on his brest a bloudie Crosse he bore,
The deare remembrance of his dying Lord,
For whose sweete sake that glorious badge he wore,

And dead as living ever him ador'd:
Upon his shield the like was also scor'd,
For soveraine hope, which in his helpe he had:
Right faithfull true he was in deede and word,
But of his cheere did seeme too solemne sad;
Yet nothing did he dread, but ever was ydrad.

Upon a great adventure he was bond,
That greatest Gloriana to him gave,
That greatest Glorious Queene of Faerie lond,
To winne him worship, and her grace to have,
Which of all earthly things he most did crave;
And ever as he rode, his hart did earne
To prove his puissance in battell brave
Upon his foe, and his new force to learne;
Upon his foe, a Dragon horrible and stearne.

Now here is Alex’s version of the same passage in Early Modern English pronunciaiton:

A gentle knight was pricking on the plaine,
Ycladd in mightie armes and silver shielde,
Wherein old dints of deepe wounds did remaine,
The cruel markes of many'a bloudy fielde;
Yet armes till that time did he never wield:
His angry steede did chide his foming bitt,
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Upon his shield the like was also scor'd,
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Which of all earthly things he most did crave;
And ever as he rode, his hart did earne

To prove his puissance in battell brave
Upon his foe, and his new force to learne;
Upon his foe, a Dragon horrible and stearne.

I hope you enjoyed that reading. If you want to hear Alex doing more readings – including those of Shakespeare, Marlowe, Spenser and others – check out his Patreon, which his patreon.com/azforeman.

Now in those opening passages, it says that the knight was ***ycladd*** in mighty arms, rather than 'clad' in mighty arms. And the passage also uses the word ***ydrad*** rather than 'dreaded.' Both of those words are rendered in an older form with the Middle English prefix 'y-.' It was the type of structure that one would have heard during the time of Chaucer. Again, it is those types of features that makes the poem sound and feel more medieval that it really is.

So the Red Cross Knight and the maiden Una are on the way to her kingdom to defeat the dragon. They are accompanied by a dwarf who travels with them. By the way, in the poem, Una represents Truth and the True Church.

Along the way, they become lost and encounter a monster named Error. The monster attacks the Red Cross Knight, but the knight eventually kills the creature.

They then meet an old hermit named Archimago, who is secretly an evil wizard. The name Archimago is a blend of two Latin root words which basically means 'arch magician.' Well, the wizard disguised as a hermit offers the travelers a place to sleep for the night, and while they are sleeping, he begins to work his magic. Amid his magic books, he seeks his charms and retrieves several sprites and other demons. Archimago chooses two of them to do his bidding. One of the demons takes the form of Una, and tries to seduce the knight, but despite the temptation, the knight rejects the advances.

The demons then return with a new deception. They awaken the knight and tell him to come see what his companion is doing. They create the false image that Una is lying with another man, which angers the jealous knight and causes him to abandon Una the next morning. The passage reads:

All in amaze he suddenly upstart
With sword in hand, and with the old man went
Who soone him brought into a secret part
Where that false couple were full closely ment
In wanton lust and leud embracement:
Which when he saw, he burnt with gealous fire,
The eye of reason was with rage yblent,
And would have slaine them in his furious ire,
But hardly was restreined of that aged sire.

Returning to his bed in torment great,
And bitter anguish of his guiltie sight,
He could not rest, but did his stout heart eat,
And wast his inward gall with deepe despight,
Yrkesome of life, and too long lingring night.
At last faire Hesperus in highest skie
Had spent his lampe and brought forth dawning light,
Then up he rose, and clad him hastily;
The Dwarfe him brought his steed: so both away do fly.

Now what stands out about those passages is how distinctly English they are compared with say, Christopher Marlowe's plays. There are no recent loanwords in that entire passage. Every word would have been common during the time of Chaucer two centuries earlier. The one slight exception is the word ***embracement***, which is just the noun form of the word ***embrace***. ***Embracement*** isn't found in Middle English, but ***embrace*** was. In fact, it was very common during that period, going back to at least the early 1300s. So it wasn't really a new word either.

The passage also uses the word ***yblent***, which was a very old way of saying 'blinded.' It's used in the line, "The eye of reason was with rage yblent," meaning that the knight was blinded with rage.

Now after the passages I just read, the Red Cross Knight continues on his journey and meets a beautiful maiden named Duessa. But the knight doesn't realize that she is a witch in disguise. She represents Falsehood in the poem. The knight is attracted to Duessa, and as they rest under a tree, the knight breaks off a branch to weave a garland for her, but blood starts to drip from the broken branch. The tree then starts to speak in a human voice. The tree says that it was once a man who had fallen in love with a damsel, but he saw her in her true form as a witch, and the witch had turned him into a tree. Before the knight realizes that the tree is describing Duessa, she pretends to faint. The knight revives her with a kiss and they leave together.

After several more adventures, the knight drinks from a fountain, but he doesn't realize that the fountain is cursed and it causes anyone who drinks from it to lose their strength. At that point, a giant appears and attacks the knight, who is unable to defend himself. Duessa convinces the giant to spare the knight's life by making him a slave, and by Duessa further agreeing to become the giant's mistress.

Meanwhile, the dwarf who accompanied the knight flees and soon comes upon the original damsel Una who has been looking for the Red Cross Knight. The dwarf tells her everything that has happened. On their way to rescue the Red Cross Knight from the giant, they encounter another knight. This knight wears shining armor covered with gold and jewels. We soon find out this is Arthur – rendered as Prince Arthur here, but eventually to become King Arthur.

Together, the companions find the castle where the Red Cross Knight is being held. Arthur slays the giant, and they manage to free the Red Cross Knight from captivity. Duessa is revealed to be a witch, and when her robe is taken away, she reverts to her natural witch form. Spenser writes,

"Her wrizled skin as rough, as maple rind." That word ***wrizled*** appears to be a word that Spenser made up. It is generally believed to be a portmanteau or blend of the words ***wrinkled*** and ***grizzled*** – thus ***wrizled***.

It is at this point that Arthur reveals his name, though being only a prince at this point, his companions don't recognize him as the king he will one day become. Arthur says that he had been visited by the Faerie Queen in a dream and had fallen in love with her. He has come to Faerie Land to find her, and then he leaves to continue his search for her.

Meanwhile, the Red Cross Knight and Una return to their original mission and leave for Una's kingdom to defeat the dragon. The knight is still weak and recovers at a castle called the House of Holiness. There he is shown a vision of the future, and he learns that he will one be known as St. George, the patron saint of England.

The knight and Una finally reach her kingdom, and the knight battles the dragon. At one point, the knight is nearly killed, but as he falls, he comes to rest in a spring called the Well of Life. It restores his powers. In the passage, Spenser compares it to the "german Spau." Now that's a reference to a town in the eastern part of modern-day Belgium called Spa which is famous for its natural mineral springs. The springs were thought to have healing properties, and the town had been a popular destination for centuries. That's why Spenser mentioned it here, and as you might have guessed, the name of that Belgium town is also the source of the modern word ***spa***, meaning a place that offers natural health treatments or beauty treatments. In the US, we also use the word ***spa*** for a hot tub, again from the same source referring to natural mineral springs. Well, Spenser's reference to the springs in that passage is one of the first recorded uses of the word ***spa*** in the English language.

Now returning to the story, the Red Cross Knight recovers in the spring waters of the Well of Life, and he is finally able to defeat and kill the dragon. Afterwards there are great celebrations throughout the kingdom, and the story concludes with the marriage of the knight and Una.
And that is an abridged look at Book One of six separate books of the entire poem. Again, it is an epic poem, and the subsequent books also contain witches, fairies and the like.

Now Spenser's use of older, antiquated terms didn't really catch on. In the end, writers – and speaker in general – preferred to use Latinate and Greek loanwords to supplement the lexicon. And Spenser himself was also forced to use such words on occasion. In fact, he provides the first recorded use of several such words in the English language.

In Book One of the Faerie Queene, he used the word ***transfixt***, which is the first recorded use of any version of the word ***transfix*** in English. It's derived from a Latin root word. In later books of the poem, he provided the first recorded use of the Latin word ***pallid***, and a female version of the word ***creature*** as ***creatress***.

As I noted earlier, he gave us the first known use of the term ***black magic*** as well in Book Three. The word ***shine*** is an Old English word, but Spenser is the first known writer to use the adjective ***shiny***. He used it in a reference to "Sommers shinie day."

Now, in most cases, those types of words were already in use and Spenser was simply the first to document them, but there are a few words that Spenser apparently coined. The best example is the word ***blatant*** meaning obvious or conspicuous, but he didn't use the word that way. In the later books of the poem, he referred to a "blatant beast." He apparently made up the word to describe the monster, and in his usage, it meant 'loud or noisy.' It's possible that he intended it as a variation of the word ***bleating***, as when an animal cries out. At any rate, the modern meaning of the word ***blatant*** as 'glaringly obvious' appeared in the late 1800s.

In Book Two, Spenser introduces a character named Braggadocchio. He is a vain and dishonorable knight who steals a horse. To create the character's name, Spenser took the word ***brag*** and added an Italian ending to it. And over time, that character's name passed into general usage as the word ***braggadocio*** – a word for 'someone who boasts or brags a lot' or the boasting done by that person.

Earlier I mentioned a portmanteau that Spenser coined – the word ***wrizled***.. Well, in Book Two, he also coined another portmaneau – the word ***scruze*** which appears to be a blend of the words ***screw*** and ***squeeze***.

Now Spenser's poem and the language he used were very influential, and many scholars think the Faerie Queene was a major influence on Shakespeare's play, A Midsummer Night's Dream, which I mentioned earlier in the episode. It also features fairies. And some of those scholars think that Shakespeare helped to give us the modern notion of fairies by combining the smallness of the elves with the magical abilities of the fay or fairies presented in medieval romances. [*SOURCE: Keightley, Thomas. The Mythology of Fairies: The tales and legends of fairies from all over the world (p. 360). Kindle Edition*.]

And speaking of Shakespeare, as we move our narrative into the 1590s, we finally have a couple of important developments that relate to his overall story. In fact, shortly after the first three books of the Faerie Queene were published, we have the first recorded references to Shakespeare in London. In the final part of this episode, we'll look at that evidence and examine his earliest plays.

[BREAK]

Earlier in the episode, I introduced you to Philip Henslowe – the man who built the Rose Theater in 1587. As I noted, Henslowe is an important figure in the history of the Elizabethan theater because he kept detailed records of the Rose's business activity. I also mentioned that those records don't exist for the first few years. But in 1592 – a couple of years after the first part of the Faerie Queene was published – we finally get those earliest surviving records.

The first records appear for the month of February, and those records indicate the performance of a new Christopher Marlowe play called The Jew of Malta. It is noteworthy because it inspired Shakespeare's later play, The Merchant of Venice.

But then in the following month, we find an entry under the date of March 3. The entry indicates the performance of a play called ‘harey the vj.’ It was the theater’s most successful performance so far in the records, bringing in over three pounds of revenue. The entry also contains the letters ‘ne’ indicating that the play was new, presumably performed for the first time at the Rose.

That obscure entry in these financial records is actually quite important – because ‘harey the vj’ was almost certainly one of William Shakespeare’s history plays – known today as ‘Henry VI, Part One.’ It is the earliest record we have of any Shakespeare play.

Now I should note something that may be obvious, but ‘Harry’ was – and is – a common nickname for ‘Henry.’ So Henry VI would have likely been referred to as Harry VI by some people. In case you didn’t know, the current Prince Harry, son of King Charles, is actually named Henry – Henry Charles Albert David to be precise. So it’s still a common practice to refer to Henry as Harry.

If you’re a Shakespeare fan, you probably know that he actually composed three separate plays about Henry VI, known today as Parts One, Two and Three. The play referenced in Henslowe’s records is apparently the first part of the story – the play known as ‘Part One’ today.

I should note that there is some disagreement about the order in which Shakespeare composed those three parts. Some think they were written in chronological order – Part One, then Part Two and then Part Three. Others think Parts Two and Three were written first, and then Shakespeare went back and wrote Part One as a prequel. They also think that Part One may have been a collaboration between Shakespeare and one or more other writers. For reasons that we’ll explore in a moment, it is very likely that Parts Two and Three were being performed around the same time, so if Part One was ‘new’ as Henslowe indicated, then it may have been written as a prequel to piggy-back on the success of the other two parts. The modern labeling of the plays as One, Two and Three didn’t actually occur until after Shakespeare’s death when many of his plays were assembled into the first collection or ‘folio’ of his work. At any rate, it appears that Henslow’s entry in March of 1592 refers to Part One of Henry VI.

Now at first glance, it may seem odd that I am discussing a Shakespeare history play in an episode about witches and fairies, but a closer look at the plays reveals why, because during this period, even a play about a fifteenth century king contained a storyline involving witches.

Of course, the play is about the Henry VI – or at least, it is set during his lifetime. Many of the events actually take place around him. I discussed the major events during his life in earlier episodes of the podcast – specifically Episodes 135 through 138. Assuming you don’t remember very much about Henry, he was a tragic figure, and thus a good source for a tragedy about an English king. His reign encompassed much of the period known as the Wars of the Roses, and Shakespeare completed the period with his follow-up play Richard III.

Henry VI was the son of the great warrior king Henry V. His father had won the battle of Agincourt during the Hundred Years War against France. The victory turned the tide of the war in favor of the English in the early 1400s. But Henry V died a short time later of dysentery. His

son, now Henry VI, was only nine months old at the time, so a council had to run the country on his behalf. And Part One of the Shakespeare's play deals with that early period when Henry was just a child.

It was during that period that the French rallied around a young woman named Joan of Arc who inspired the French to many victories against the English. And this is where the supernatural elements come into play. In Shakespeare's version, the English authorities consider Joan to be a witch who uses sorcery to defeat the English.

In the play, Shakespeare refers to her as 'Pucelle,'which was a French word meaning 'virgin' or 'maiden.' 'La Pucelle' was a common term for her in French, but I'll just refer to by her more common English name Joan – or Joan or Arc.

Part One opens with the funeral of Henry V. From the outset, some of the English authorities suspect that witchcraft was the cause of his death. The Duke of Exeter says:

Or shall we think the subtle-witted French
Conjurers and sorcerers, that afraid of him
By magic verses have contrived his end?

The scene quickly shifts to France where a young maiden gains an audience with the French heir Charles. She is Joan of Arc, and she claims that she has received a vision from heaven ordering her to lead the French resistence to the English occupation. During a battle, Joan drives back the English forces, and the English commander Talbot curses her as witch. He says:

Here, here she comes. I'll have a bout with thee;
Devil or devil's dam, I'll conjure thee:
Blood will I draw on thee, thou art a witch,
And straightway give thy soul to him thou servest.

Notice that Talbot addresses Joan with the informal pronouns ***thee***, ***thou*** and ***thy*** instead of the more formal ***you***. Remember that in early Modern English, there was a difference in usage between those pronoun forms, which I'll discuss in more detail in future episodes. But if you were addressing a stranger, and you wanted to show contempt, you would use the informal pronouns ***thee***, ***thou*** and ***thy***, which is what Talbot does here. Shakespeare was always very careful about how his characters used those pronoun forms, and he sometimes shifted back and forth. Two characters might initially be on friendly terms and use ***you***, then they might get into an argument, and switch to ***thee*** and ***thou***. So that's something to take note of when reading or listening to Shakespeare.

Back to the story. Talbott and Joan fight each other until the French forces overwhelm the English. In retreat, Talbot once again refers to Joan as a witch. After the defeat, Talbott says that the French victory was "Contriv'd by art and baleful sorcery." He then says of the French, "Well, let them practice and converse with spirits: God is our fortress . . ."

Much of the middle part of the play concerns the ongoing war against the French, and the fractures within the English court that lead to the split between the Lancastrians and the Yorkists. These conflicts become more prominent over the course of the three parts of the play.

Part One concludes with Joan of Arc's defeat on the battlefield. And if we have any doubt that she is actually a witch in the story, Shakespeare puts it to rest in the final act. She uses her spells to conjure spirits who have been giving her advice. She calls out to the spirits:

Now help, ye charming spells and periapts;
And ye choice spirits that admonish me
And give me signs of future accidents.

Now that passage may provide some evidence that Shakespeare had been reading Reginald Scot's book on witchcraft that I discussed at the beginning of the episode. The passage uses the word ***periapts*** to refer to charms or amulets. It's ultimately a Greek word that had passed into French. The first recorded use of the word in English was in Scot's book on witchcraft, and here, Shakespeare uses the same word less than a decade later. Since it is not a very common word, and since those are two of the first known uses of the word in English, it seems possible that Shakespeare took the word from Scot's book.

Joan summons the spirits to appear before her, but they all remain silent and offer no advice. She realizes that her magic no longer works. She says that she is no longer able to force her will. She laments:

My ancient incantations are too weak,
And hell too strong for me to buckle with:
Now, France, thy glory droopeth to the dust.

She is then captured by the English and burned at the stake as a witch.

That brings an end to Part One of the Henry VI trilogy. Part Two looks at the palace intrigue and divisions that led to the Wars of the Roses. But even this second part features witchcraft as a plot device. Early in the play, the king is still a young man, and he marries a French princess named Margaret. Henry is delighted with his new queen. He says, "Such is the fulness of my heart's content," which is the first recorded use of the term ***heart's content***. It's a term that Shakespeare may have actually coined himself.

Despite Henry's marriage, he is still young and inexperienced, and much of the power rests in the hands of his powerful and popular uncle, the Duke of Gloucester, who is serving as the Lord Protector of England. Within the royal court, there is a plot to bring down Gloucester, and Gloucester's wife – the Duchess – consults with a witch and conjuror to summon a spirit who will predict the future of Henry's reign. In a dramatic scene, they conjure a spirit who offers some vague predictions, but they are caught in the act and arrested for dabbling in the dark arts. The Duchess is found guilty and exiled, and Gloucester himself is forced out of office.

The scene where the Duchess conjures the spirit resembles many of the scenes from Marlowe's play Doctor Faustus, and many scholars think that the scene represents an attempt by Shakespeare to mimic Marlowe's play which was still being presented on the stages of London at that time. [*SOURCE: The Genius of Shakespeare, Jonathan Bate, p. 110-11.*]

With the fall of Gloucester, much of the rest of play tracks the rise of Richard, the Duke of York, who emerges as the leader of the Yorkist faction and the rival of Henry and the Lancastrians.

At one point, York is sent to Ireland to put down a rebellion, but he suspects that it is an attempt to get rid of him. He encourages an uprising against the king led by a rebel named Jack Cade. The idea is to test the waters and see how secure Henry's support is among the nobles and the rest of the country.

Jack Cade's rebellion is an actual event that took place, but of course, Shakespeare's version is highly dramatized. Cade's rebellion was a revolt led by common people, similar to the Peasant's Revolt that had taken place in the prior century. And in Shakespeare's version, it is a revolt against not only the government, but also the entire literate class of England. As the rebellion gets underway, one of Cade's henchmen utters the famous line, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers." Cade agrees, not only because they are responsible for the laws, but also because they can read and write.

The rebels then seize a clerk, who they assume to be literate. When Cade's men discover a book in his pocket, Cade asserts, "Nay, then, he is a conjuror." So in their minds, the ability to read and write was associated with witchcraft. And that harkens back to the discussion I have presented before about how the word ***grammar*** evolved into the word ***glamour*** because the ability to read and write Latin was treated as an almost supernatural power by many people. When the clerk is asked if he signs his name to a document or simply makes a mark, the clerk says that he signs his name, which is confirmation that he is literate – and thus a villain and traitor. Cade replies, "Away with him, I say! Hang him with his pen and inkhorn about his neck."

In a later scene, Cade makes it clear that his opposition to the lawyers, and clerks and lawmakers is because they abuse the common people by binding them to documents they can't read and understand. When Cade encounters a certain Lord, he says, "Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school." Adding, "It will be proved to thy face that thou hast men about thee that usually talk of a noun and a verb, and such abominable words as no Christian ear can endure to hear. Thou hast appointed justices of peace, to call poor men before them about matters they were not able to answer. Moreover, thou hast put them in prison; and because they could not read, thou hast hanged them; when, indeed, only for that cause they have been most worthy to live."

These are interesting passages because they show Shakespeare's appeal to the common man. Whereas Christopher Marlowe was a Cambridge man, a so-called University Wit who loved to flaunt his classical learning in his passages, Shakespeare's characters sometimes revel in their opposition to that class. It gave Shakespeare's plays a special appeal to certain part of his audience who might have shared some of the same resentments about unscrupulous lawyers and

the exploitation of common people by those with a formal education. [*See William Shakespeare: A Biography, A.L. Rowse, p. 89.*]

Cade's rebellion is soon put down, and Richard, Duke of York returns to England and defeats Henry VI in battle. And that brings an end to Part Two of the series.

Part Three picks up the story there, and much of the plot of this final play in the series centers around the triumph of the Yorkists over the Lancastrians during Henry's reign. After his defeat at the end of Part Two, Henry agrees to recognize Richard of York as his successor, but that decision effectively disinherits his own young son. Henry's wife, Queen Margaret, is outraged at the prospect that their son has been abandoned in the succession, so she takes up arms and leads her forces against York. She defeats him and takes him captive. In a compelling scene, the two face off against each other and exchange insults. Remember that Margaret had been a French princess, so York calls her "She-wolf of France" and then says of her, "O tiger's heart wrapp'd in a woman's hide" – in other words, he says that she has a tiger's heart wrapped inside of a woman's body. Remember that line because it will be important in a moment. After the exchange, the Queen orders York to be executed. She says, "Off with his head, and set it on York gates; So York may overlook the town of York." That is apparently the first recorded use of the phrase "Off with his head" in an English document. [*SOURCE: https://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/263700.html*.]

With York's death, his claim to the throne passes to his son Edward, and the remainder of the play focuses on Edward's attempts to defeat Queen Margaret and Henry, and his eventual victory in which he becomes Edward IV, the first Yorkist king of England.

So those are Parts One, Two and Three of Henry VI, the first set of plays that are believed to have been composed by William Shakespeare, perhaps as part of a collaboration with one or more other writers.

Again, the first reference to this series comes from Philip Henslowe's business records for the Rose theater in March of 1592. But also note that the records don't specifically mention the author of the play, so while we can assume that Shakespeare had been in London for a while by this point, we don't have a specific reference to him. But a few weeks later, that first reference finally appears in the historical record. And it was not a flattering reference at all.

This first reference came from Robert Greene, who I mentioned earlier in the episode. You might recall that Greene was one of the so-called University Wits like Marlowe who had a Cambridge education and made his living as a writer around London. But he was also a troubled soul who spent the early 1590s drinking himself to death and living in poverty. He had become a bitter and jealous man who resented the success of other writers, and that resentment apparently extended to a young man from Stratford who had just written one of the most successful series of plays on the London stage.

In August of 1592, a few months after that first reference to the play called 'harey the vj,' Greene was on the verge of death, and he knew it. During those final days, he composed a short work based on his own life, and the work contained several pointed observations about other writers around town. The work was really intended for his fellow University Wits like Christopher Marlowe and Thomas Nashe. And he intended to caution them about a young newcomer – a man with only a grammar school education who dared to challenge the men who were regarded as the finest writers and poets in England. In a general comment about actors at the time, Greene wrote:

"Yes, trust them not, for there is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey."

Greene died a few days later on September 3. As soon as he died, a local printer named Henry Chettle collected Greene's final writings and published them under a very long title which is usually shortened to just 'A Groatsworth of Wit.' A groat was a small coin worth four pence. Greene's 'Groatswoth of Wit' was the bitter thoughts of a dying man, and that passage I just read was a personal attack on the man who would soon become the most revered writer in the English language. Greene's 'Shake-scene' was almost certainly Shakespeare. It is also the first reference we have to him as a playwright in London.

Now in order to understand the references to Shakespeare in the passage I just read, we have to look a little closer at what was written. First of all, Greene never really called anyone out by name. Instead, he described the objects of his scorn with references that his intended readers would understand.

The passage refers to the writer as an 'upstart Crow' – so someone who was new on the scene. ***Upstart*** was a relatively new term in the language, and it reflects the social mobility of the period as many commoners and people from the lower classes were starting to acquire wealth and higher status in Elizabethan England. And for Greene, the young 'upstart Crow' was just such a person – a person of low status presumably with a lesser education who was moving up in the world. [*SOURCE: The Genius of Shakespeare, Jonathan Bate, p. 16.*]

Greene then says the young writer has been "beautified with our feathers." This appears to directed at his fellow University Wits, and suggests that the young writer was using elevated poetry and prose that was previously limited to a small group of highly educated writers like Greene himself.

He then says of the young writer, "that with his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you." As I noted in the last episode, 'blank verse' referred to poetry that was written in iambic pentameter and didn't rhyme, like the poetry and plays of Christopher Marlowe. According to Greene, this young newcomer was arrogant enough to presume he could match Marlowe and his 'mighty line.' And note that reference to "his Tygers hart wrapt in a Players hyde." That is a direct parody of Shakespeare's line that we looked at a moment ago in Henry VI, Part Three when the Duke of York referred to

Queen Margaret as “tiger’s heart wrapp’d in a woman’s hide.” It was a line that was probably being recited on the stages of London as Greene wrote that passage, and here, he used the same line, only changing the term ‘woman’s hyde’ to ‘Players hyde’ meaning an ‘actor’s hide.’ So Greene is basically saying that the young writer had a tiger’s heart wrapped in an actor’s skin.

Greene then refers to the young writer as “an absolute Johannes fac totum, is in his owne conceit the onely Shake-scene in a countrey.” ‘Shake-scene’ seems to be a clear reference to the name ‘Shakespeare,’ and before that, Greene referred to him as a ‘Johannes fac totum,’ which is a Latin phrase that literally translates as a ‘Johnny do everything’ or a ‘Jack do everything.’ This is the first recorded use of that phrase, and it is considered to be an early version of the more anglicized term ‘a Jack of all trades’ which appeared in the following century. As I’ve noted before in the podcast, the term ‘Jack’ was often used a general term for a man or a person. So when Greene refers to the object of his scorn as a ‘Johannes fac totum’ – or a ‘Jack of all trades’ – that seems to suggest that the person was both an actor and writer. In fact, that probably explains why we don’t have a reference to Shakespeare before this point. He was probably a young actor forced to do a variety of odd jobs for the theater company he worked with – what was typically called a ***hireling*** at the time. And now, he had moved up to being a writer. For a young man with a grammar school education doing odd jobs around a theater company to suddenly write the most popular play on the London stage, well, it was too much for Greene to bear. And it is one of the great ironies of the story of Shakespeare. The first reference we have to him as a playwright in London is an attack on him as an overrated upstart without a university degree, while most audiences today consider him to be the most elevated writer in the English language. [*See Globe: Life in Shakespeare’s London, Catharine Arnold, p. 91.*]

Despite Greene’s inflammatory remarks, Shakespeare did have his defenders. It seems that some of his friends protested Greene’s remarks to the man who published the book – Henry Chettle. A couple of months later in December, Chettle published an apology. In the epistle of a book called ‘Kind-Heart’s Dream,’ Chettle wrote that he regretted the comments that had been made about the young playwright, and that others “have reported his uprightness of dealing, which argues his honesty, and his facetious grace in writing, that approves his art.” [*William Shakespeare: A Biography, A.L. Rowse, p. 98-9.*]

Unfortunately for Greene, his final manuscript tainted his own reputation more than Shakespeare’s. And Greene’s death was followed by Christopher Marlowe’s death a few months later. In May of 1593, Marlowe was murdered. He and several companions had gone out to dinner at a local tavern, and afterward, he got into an argument with one of the men over the bill. Marlowe drew a dagger on the other man – one Ingram Frizer, and Frizer retaliated by stabbing Marlowe in the head, ending his life. And a few months after that, Thomas Kyd died. He was the playwright who wrote The Spanish Tragedy that I looked at in the last episode. So Greene, Marlowe and Kyd all died in rapid succession, and with them, the first wave of English playwrights faded into history.

The door was now open for the next wave of writers led by the young ‘upstart Crow’ – one William Shakespeare.

But who was that young playwright who had filled theaters around London, and been the object of Robert Greene's ire? So far in our story, we've only had vague references to the man. Well, next time, we'll look at the historical record to determine exactly what we know and don't know about William Shakespeare. And spoiler alert, there's a lot more that we don't know that we do know. Given the gaps in the historical record, it probably isn't surprising that many people have tried to fill in those gaps with speculation and conjecture. So next time, we'll try to sort fact from fiction and determine exactly what we know about the man who is considered by many to be the greatest writer in the English language.

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