THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 170: PRINTERS, PLAGUE AND POETS

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 170: Printers, Plague and Poets. In this episode, we're going to take a look at the connection between poetry and plague in the early 1590s. We'll see how a widespread outbreak of the recurring sickness led to Shakespeare's early career as a poet, and that poetry likely included his many sonnets. We'll also examine how an old acquaintance from Shakespeare's hometown emerged as one of the leading printers in London, and we'll see how modern spelling was forged in those printing shops during the Elizabethan period.

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 last time, we looked at the surviving evidence to determine what is actually known about the life of William Shakespeare. But prior to that episode, we got our first glimpse of a Shakespeare play being performed on the stages of London. The performance of that play was documented by the owner of the Rose Theater named Philip Henslowe. Henslowe's surviving diary records the performance of a play called 'harey the vj' on March 3, 1592. That entry was almost certainly a reference to the play we know today as Henry VI, Part One. And then we looked at Robert Greene's dying reference to Shakespeare as an 'upstart crow' a few months later. By that point, Shakespeare was well on his way to becoming the most famous playwright in the English language, but when Robert Greene composed his screed against Shakespeare late in the summer of 1592, the theaters of London were actually closed. And they would remain closed for much of the following two years.

That was because London had experienced an outbreak of plague in the early summer, and the outbreak was so severe that the city authorities had ordered the theaters be closed in June. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare: The Evidence, Ian Wilson, p. 125*] Since the disease tended to spread wherever large groups of people assembled, it was common to ban public gatherings when the plague re-appeared as it did from time to time. If you think lock downs are a recent phenomenon – they're not. They've been around for centuries, and in the summer of 1592, the residents of London were living through another one.

Those closings meant that actors and playwrights were suddenly out of work, at least within the vicinity of London. For a writer like Shakespeare, whose career was just starting to take off, it must have been incredibly frustrating.

This particular outbreak of plague in 1592 was especially bad. It has been estimated that over 10,000 people died in London between December of that year and December of the following year. Some estimates suggest the total number was quite a bit higher than that. [*SOURCES: Death By Shakespeare, Kathryn Harkup, p. 22* and *Shakespeare: The Evidence, Ian Wilson, p. 132*]

Of course, this was a time of increased literacy, and people were interested in finding ways to prevent the contagion or cure it once it had been acquired. So books about preventing or curing the plague were in high demand. A couple of dozen books were published on the subject during the Tudor period of England. [*SOURCE: Death By Shakespeare, Kathryn Harkup, p. 220*] And in the middle of this particular outbreak in the early 1590s, a book called 'Defensative against Plague' was composed by a writer named Simon Kellwaye. The book described the symptoms of the disease in great detail, and it offered a variety of questionable treatments and preventative measures.

In one passage, Kellwaye described the symptoms experienced at the initial onset of the disease. He wrote in part, "The signes when one is infected are these, first hee is taken with a hoate feauer, and sometime with a delirium . . ." [*SOURCE: Defensatiue against Plague, Simon Kellway, Second Treatise, Chapter 2*] That passage is notable because it contains one of the earliest known uses of the Latin word ***delirium*** in English. In Latin, ***de*** meant 'off or away from' and ***lira*** meant a 'track or furrow' like the track left by a plow. So ***delirium*** literally meant the 'state of being off track or off course.' It meant you weren't thinking straight.

By the way, the native English word ***learn*** comes from the same Indo-European root word that produced the Latin words ***lira*** and ***delirium***. In English, the original sense of the word ***learn*** to stay on course or stay on track. But again, just as 'staying on course' produced learning, 'losing track of where you were' produced delirium.

As I noted, this particular book by Simon Kellwaye not only described the symptoms of the plague, it also offered advice to help prevent and cure the disease. His preventative measures included keeping a clean house and clean clothing, and to fill the house with certain flowers and herbs. He also recommended burning juniper, rosemary and lavender in the fire place and breathing the smoke produced by those herbs. And that reference to breathing smoke is notable because I mentioned in an earlier episode that tobacco had recently been introduced from the New World, and at the time, it was thought that tobacco had medicinal properties. So it appears that many people smoked tobacco to help ward off the plague. Of course, that didn't really help at all, but it may have contributed to the rapid growth in the popularity of smoking during the Elizabethan period. [*SOURCE: Death By Shakespeare, Kathryn Harkup, p. 221*]

Kellwaye also included recipes for concoctions that would help preserve one's health and protect against the disease. There was a great demand for foods and drinks that had medicinal properties, and there were lots of people willing to supply them even if they didn't work. It was during this same year of 1592 that we find the first recorded use of the word ***herbalist*** (or /**h**erbalist/ depending on your pronunciation). It meant a person who prepared or sold herbal remedies. The word ***drugger*** was also first recorded during this outbreak of plague. Again, it meant a person who sold or dispensed drugs. We also find the first recorded use of the Latin word ***laboratory*** (or /la-bor-uh-tory/, again, depending on your pronunciation). It referred to a room or building where people practiced alchemy and prepared medicines.

But of course, most of those medicines and remedies were completely useless against the plague. And so, maybe it is isn't surprising that this period also gave the first recorded uses of the terms ***gravedigger*** and ***last rites***.

Given that herbal remedies didn't really prevent the spread of plague, much of the advice in Simon Kellwaye's book could have been ignored. But he did suggest one preventative measure that probably did work. He wrote that one way to avoid the plague was to "flye far off from the place infected" – adding "the farther from it, the safer shall we be." And that was probably the best advice of all. When the plague arrives, get out of town as fast as you can.

And that was what the acting companies did in the wake of the plague that closed the theaters in 1592. Public performances were banned within seven miles of the city of London. Beyond that limit, the companies could get special permission to travel around the country to give performances. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare, Bill Bryson, p. 44-5.*] But that was only an option for a few of the more prominent companies. In fact, most of the acting companies that had existed prior to this outbreak of the plague didn't survive the two-year closure of the theaters that followed. When the outbreak finally came to an end in 1594, only two major companies remained. I'll deal with those developments in more detail over the next couple of episodes, but for now, we just need to know that one of those companies was closely associated with Philip Henslowe's theater called The Rose in the southern suburbs of London. That company was the Lord Admiral's Men. And Christopher Marlowe wrote most of his plays for that company before he was killed.

Meanwhile, the other major acting company was closely associated with the oldest permanent theater in London called the The Theatre. It was located in the northern suburbs of the city, and the acting company associated with that theater was called the Lord Strange's Men – named after its patron, Ferdinando Stanley, who bore the title of Lord Strange. He actually died during this particular outbreak of the plague, though he may have actually died from a different illness. At his death, the company was re-organized into a new company that became known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men. And that was William Shakespeare's acting company.

Well, about a year after the outbreak of the plague, a group of actors from both of those companies requested permission from the authorities to stage plays outside of London in other parts of the country. The actors worked together on the tour, but what is so interesting about the license that was granted is that it mentioned most of the actors by name, but it didn't include the name of William Shakespeare. [*Shakespeare: The Evidence, Ian Wilson, p. 133*] So why was he left out?

Well, we don't know for certain. Shakespeare isn't clearly documented with the Lord Chamberlain's Men until shortly after the plague lifted the following year, so maybe he wasn't a formal member yet. But as we've seen, his plays were already being performed around London. A more likely answer is that he simply didn't join the other members on their tour. Instead, it appears that he chose to remain around London. And with the theaters closed, it appears that he chose to write poems instead of plays.

During this period, poetry was still more highly regarded than drama. And a poet owned his own poems and could publish them for money, whereas plays belonged to the acting company. So composing poems for publication could provide some much needed income while the theaters were closed. For Shakespeare, poetry apparently paid better than the meager income paid to traveling actors.

During those two plague years, he composed two major narrative poems, both of which were published and proved to be very popular. The first appeared in 1593 and was called Venus and Adonis. When published, it became the first published work issued in Shakespeare's name. The poem is based on a story taken from the writings of the Roman poet Ovid, who was a recurring source for Shakespeare's works. The poem is about Venus, who was the goddess of love. In the poem, she tries to seduce the handsome young Adonis, but Adonis rejects the advances and chooses to go hunting instead. Despite Venus's warnings, Adonis is killed during the hunt, and Venus is left heart-broken.

A year later, Shakespeare produced another narrative poem called the Rape of Lucrece. It also had classical roots and harkens back to one of the earliest Roman legends. The poem is set during the period when Rome was ruled by tyrannical kings. In the poem, Lucrece is raped by the son of the Roman king. Lucrece reveals the rape to her husband and then commits suicide. The outage that follows leads to the expulsion of the king's son from Rome. In Roman legend, this was a key event in the banishment of the Roman king Tarquin the Proud, and the establishment of the Roman Republic. Shakespeare apparently had a fascination with this story because he also made reference to it in several of his later plays.

Though these two early poems proved to be very popular during Shakespeare's lifetime, they have been largely forgotten over the centuries. In modern collections of his works, they are often relegated to the back of the book, if they're included at all. So they haven't had much impact on the English language.

It's really other aspects of these two poems that have fascinated scholars over the centuries. First, both poems were dedicated to the 19-year old Earl of Southampton named Henry. By the way, his surname isn't spelled like it sounds. It's spelled 'w-r-i-o-t-h-e-s-l-e-y,' but he is generally known to history simply by his title – Southampton. The dedications to him are interesting because it appears that Shakespeare was seeking his patronage. The earl had inherited his title from his father, who had died several years earlier, but since Southampton was a minor, his guardian was the queen's closest advisor, William Cecil. At the time of these two poems during the plague years, Southampton was on the verge of turning 21 and having control over his own estate. That's probably why Shakespeare was seeking his patronage. But there's a little more to this story.

For reasons that we will look at later in the episode, it appears likely that Shakespeare also composed many, if not all, of his sonnets during this same time period. And many of those sonnets are actually addressed to a young man. And given some of the clues that can be discerned from those sonnets, many scholars think that Southampton was the young man referenced in those short poems. And they also think it is very possible that Shakespeare was living at Southampton's

residence during this period. Again, we'll develop some of those ideas later in the episode, but I wanted to plant that seed for you here.

So these early two poems establish a clear connection between Shakespeare and his potential patron – the Earl of Southampton. The other interesting thing about these two poems is the printer that Shakespeare chose to publish them. Both were printed by a printer named Richard Field. Shakespeare and Field were both from Stratford-upon-Avon, and they were apparently old acquaintances. Both had moved to London, and just as Shakespeare found success as a writer, Field found success as a printer. In fact, this episode is as much about Richard Field as William Shakespeare. So let me tell you a little bit more about Field.

As I noted, he grew up in Stratford. He and Shakespeare were around the same age, and their boyhood homes were located near each other, so they almost certainly knew each other growing up. Around the age of 18, Field moved to London, and he served as an apprentice under a printer named Thomas Vautrollier. Vautrollier actually published Richard Mulcaster's textbook called 'The Elementarie' which I discussed back in Episode 163. That book started to lay the foundation for modern English spelling. And as we'll see in a moment, those ideas were adopted by printers as well.

Vautrollier died in 1587, and his wife continued the printing business, alongside his young Stratford apprentice Richard Field. Well, the relationship between the widow and Field wasn't just a business relationship because a couple of years later, they were married, and Field effectively took over the printing business at that point. During his career, he printed many different types of works, including political pamphlets, sermons, Latin classics, schoolbooks, language learning books, and poetry.

One of the fascinating things about the books printed is Field's print shop is how many of them served as sources for Shakespeare's later plays. Print shops typically maintained a copy of the books they printed in case future editions were required. And that has led to a lot of speculation that Shakespeare would often hang out at Field's shop and read the books, thereby providing inspiration for many of his well-known plays. And as I mentioned in the last episode, we don't have any evidence that Shakespeare himself actually maintained his own personal library. So the idea that he used Field's books would explain how he got access to the stories that later became his plays. Again, we don't know for sure, but it is a popular theory among some scholars.

For example, going back to the days of Vautrollier, the printing shop published Thomas North's translation of the Greek writer Plutarch. That translation served as a primary source of Shakespeare's history plays that were set in ancient Greece and Rome. The shop also published a Latin version of Ovid's Metamorphoses, which as I noted a moment ago, was another major source of Shakespeare's works, including that first poem Venus and Adonis. The shop also published a second edition of Holinshed's Chronicles, which was the major source of Shakespeare's history plays that were set in England. The shop printed a text called Treatise of Melancholy by Timothy Bright, which was a background source for Hamlet. Robert Greene's romance called Pandosto was also printed at the shop, and it was the source of Shakespeare's play called The Winter's Tale. Shakespeare's plays occasionally feature phrases rendered in

Italian, and all of the Italian phrases that appear in his plays are also found in a handbook for learning Italian called the Campo de Fior. Well, that handbook was also published in the same print shop. [*SOURCE: William Shakespeare: A Biography, A.L. Rowse, p. 65*.]

The shop also printed another text that influenced Shakespeare. That text was an English translation of an Italian poem called Orlando Furioso. The poem was originally composed in the early 1500s by an Italian poet named Ludovico Ariosto. It's an epic poem set during the reign of Charlemagne, and it is believed to have been a source for Shakespeare's play Much Ado About Nothing. But the English translation of that poem printed by Richard Field is actually important to English historians for a completely different reason. And that's because the handwritten manuscript that Field's shop used to prepare the printed version has survived the centuries. It is extremely rare to have a printer's manuscript copy from this period, and the fact that it exists allows historians to compare the manuscript copy with the final printed copy. And the comparison confirms something that historians of English strongly suspected – that printers routinely changed the spelling of handwritten manuscripts to bring the spellings in line with an accepted standard that printers were using at the time. And you will probably not be surprised to learn that those printer's spellings are much more in line the spellings we use today. In other words, printers like Richard Field helped to fix the spellings that we use today, for better or worse.

Now I want to illustrate how Field's print shop changed the spellings used in this manuscript, but before I do that, I want to give you a little bit of background about this particular translation and the man who composed it because its an interesting story.

This English translation of that Italian poem Orlando Furioso was composed by a man named John Harington. And believe it or not, if you ever need to use the bathroom and you say that you are going to the 'john,' you may actually be referring to John Harington. So let me explain.

Harington was a godson of Queen Elizabeth, and he was a prominent figure at her court. And he was apparently a bit of an inventor. He actually designed a toilet that flushed, which was unknown in England at the time. There were similar toilets in other parts of the world, so he isn't really considered to be the person who innovated the idea, but since that type of toilet was unknown in England, he was considered to be the inventor there. He actually wrote a book about it, which Richard Field printed. Harington called the toilet 'Ajax,' which was based on a current slang term for a toilet. People called a toilet the 'jakes.'

Well, today, many people call a toilet or a bathroom 'the john,' and many etymologies attribute that modern slang term to the name of John Harington. Now, to be fair, no one really knows for certain which historical 'John' actually contributed his name to the device. Harington is really just a popular guess.

But beyond his association with toilets, Harington had a mixed history at Elizabeth's court. He seems to have fallen in and out of favor with the queen, and on one occasion, she supposedly sent him away, and told him that he couldn't return until he had translated this Italian poem in its entirety. She apparently thought that would keep him away for a while, but it seems that he completed the translation very quickly. At any rate, once the translation was completed, he

submitted it to Richard Field to be printed. And it is the handwritten manuscript of that translation that survives to this day, and it shows how the spellings were changed at Field's print shop to bring them in line with the shop's spelling standards.

Again, it is extremely rare to have this type of evidence, but it is a goldmine for historians who study the development of English spelling. It shows that some printers had adopted spelling standards to provide some consistency and uniformity among the documents they printed. It also confirms that printers played an important role in standardizing English spelling. But I should emphasize that these were more like general tendencies rather than fixed rules. There was still a fair amount of variation.

So let's take a closer look at how the manuscript was changed by the print shop. I noted in earlier episodes that many words ended in a silent E in early Modern English. The E had once been pronounced, and represented the remnant of an old inflectional ending that had been reduced a generic 'eh' sound. But by the 1500s, that final sound was rarely pronounced in those words. But those silent E's came in handy in print shops because they could be added or removed to lengthen or shorten a line of text. That way, printers could keep the margins even and justified. But Field's print shop tended to drop those final E's unless they served a specific purpose in the pronunciation of the word. So where Harington's handwritten manuscript spelled the word ***am*** as 'a-m-e,' the print shop dropped the E and used the modern spelling 'a-m.' And Harington also added an E to words like ***confesse*** and ***fleshe*** and ***teare***, but the printed version dropped those E's and brought the spellings in line with those we use today.

Now even though many of those silent E's were dropped, they were sometimes retained at the end of a word to indicate that the previous vowel sound was pronounced as a long vowel. So in that case, the silent E was retained as a marker. It didn't really represent a specific sound. Of course, we still do that today. Remember that the so-called 'long' vowel sounds in Modern English are basically represented by the name of the letter. So the long sound of letter A is /ay/, the long sound of letter E is /ee/, and so on. So to indicate that a vowel letter is representing it's own name, we still tend to mark that sound with a silent E at the end. It's why ***fin*** with a 'short I' sound is spelled with a simple I, but ***fine*** with its 'long I' sound has a silent E at the end. That was a technique that was encouraged by Richard Mulcaster in his book called Elementarie, which was also printed in Field's print shop. And the print shop used the same approach in its publications.

But to mark a short vowel sound, it was once common to double the consonant after the vowel. Again, I have talked about this technique in earlier episodes. And it still survives today in many two-syllable words. So we have ***dine*** with its 'long I' sound and its silent E at the end, but we have ***dinner*** with its 'short I' sound and its double N's after it. If we take away one of those N's, it become ***diner***. So again, the double N's indicate a short vowel sound. Also think about the difference between ***ape*** with its 'long A' sound and silent E at the end versus ***apple*** with its 'short A' sound and double P's after it.

As those examples indicate, we still use that approach with two-syllable words, but we don't tend to use it as much with short one-syllable words. In those cases, if there is no 'silent E' at the end,

we just assume the vowel letter is pronounced as a short vowel in most cases. We don't really need to double the following consonant. Well, Richard Field's print shop tended to use the same approach. So where Harington had spelled the word ***sin*** as 's-y-n-n-e,' Field used the modern spelling 's-i-n.'

This also points to another modern approach in Field's books. Whereas the letters I and Y were somewhat interchangeable up to this point, Field preferred to use the letter I to mark the vowel sound, except in limited cases. So in Harington's manuscript, he used the term ***wycked synne***. Both ***wycked*** and ***synne*** were spelled with a Y. But Field changed both words to their modern spellings with an I – 'w-i-c-k-e-d' and 's-i-n.' Similarly, Harington's handwritten manuscript spelled words like ***tyme*** and ***vyle*** with a Y, but Field changed them to an I. [*SOURCES: A History of English Spelling, D.G. Scragg, p. 70* and *The Cambridge History of the English Language, Volume III, Roger Lass, Ed., p. 42*.]

By the way, another common way to represent a long vowel sound in Middle English was to double the vowel letter. That made sense at a time when long vowels sounds were actually pronounced longer in duration than short vowels sounds. So you could represent that longer sound by just doubling the vowel letter. We still do that with the letter E in many words like ***tree*** and ***free*** and ***see***. But it was once common to do the same thing with our common pronouns – ***me***, ***we***, ***he*** and ***she***. And Harington's manuscript routinely spelled those words with double E's. But again, Field's printers shortened those pronouns by dropping the extra E and using the single E that we use today. It isn't clear why that shortened form was preferred for the pronouns, but it may have been partially a time-saving measure since those pronouns were so common. Dropping all of those extra E's meant that the type could be set much faster. And of course, when we're writing, it's easier to drop those E's as well. Notice that we do the same thing with the very common verb ***be***, but the insect ***bee*** still uses the double E's. Again, Field's spelling conventions were much more in line with those we use today. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare's Poems, Katherine Duncan-Jones and H.R. Woudhuysen, Ed., p. 473.*]

Now having said all of that, I should re-emphasize that these were general rules. The spellings were still not completely fixed, and there were many words that were spelled differently than today.

Also, Richard Field certainly had employees who set the type for his books, and they were not always consistent. It appears that the type in Shakespeare's two poems printed in the shop about a year part from each other were set by different employees. For example, the first poem Venus and Adonis spells the word ***she*** like we do today – 's-h-e.' But in the second poem, The Rape of Lucrece, the word ***she*** is spelled with double E's about 85% of the time. And whereas adverb endings in Venus are usually spelled 'l-y' like we do today, in Lucrece they are often spelled 'l-i-e' in an older style. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare's Poems, Katherine Duncan-Jones and H.R. Woudhuysen, Ed., p. 473.*]

So those types of inconsistencies were still common, but by examining Field's publications, we can see how printers were influencing the move toward modern spellings.

Now, so far, we've seen that poetry remained a lucrative art form for both writers and printers. Shakespeare's first printed poem – Venus and Adonis – was especially popular and went through 16 editions over the following half century. [*SOURCE: The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Sonnets and Poems, Colin Burrow, Ed., p. 6-7*]

The enduring interest in the art of poetry is also reflected in another book that Richard Field published, and it remains one of the most important text books on poetry in early Modern English. That book was called 'The Art of English Poesy' composed by a writer named George Puttenham. ***Poesy*** was just another form of the word ***poetry***, and it was really the more common form of the word during the Elizabethan period.

Puttenham's work was both a history of English poetry and an analysis of its structure and form. It was an expansive work encompassing three parts, and Field's print shop had published it in 1589, about three years before the outbreak of plague that closed the theaters. It was actually the first book that Field published on his own after the death of his former boss. Since it was published in Field's print shop, it is very possible that Shakespeare read the book, and it may very well have influenced the poetic style that he used. [*SOURCE: William Shakespeare: A Biography, A.L. Rowse, p. 62-3.*]

Puttenham argued that English poetry was capable of matching the beauty and structure Latin and Greek poetry, which was considered to be the ideal form of poetry at the time. As I noted a few episodes back, English poets had struggled to translate those classical works into English while preserving the rhythm or meter of the original works. You might remember that Greek and Latin poetry was based on syllable length. Each syllable was either pronounced long or short with the long syllables being twice as long as the short vowels. And Greek and Latin poetry used a specific patterns of long and short syllables.

Well, English doesn't work that way. Syllable length in English is much more random, and it doesn't fit that long and short pattern very well. Instead, English syllables are either stressed or unstressed. So they are either pronounced loud and clear or soft and subtle. So English poets developed a style that used certain patterns of stressed and unstressed syllables. And as I noted in that earlier episode, the most popular rhythm or meter to develop in the 1500s was what I described as the five heartbeat rhythm – 'de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM'. That was the rhythm called iambic pentameter. Well, Puttenham acknowledged that those types of rhythms based on stress were better suited to the English language, and could be every bit as effective as the long and short rhythms used in Latin and Greek poetry. In other words, poetic styles should be tailored to fit the language, and throughout his text, Puttenham attempts to show how English poetry should be tailored to the language of England.

But before an English poet could compose poetry, he or she had to determine which dialect of English to use. It's important to keep in mind that there really wasn't any such thing as 'standard' English at the time. As we've seen in prior episodes, English varied greatly from speaker to speaker. People in the north spoke differently than people in the south. People in rural areas spoke differently than people in the cities. And the dialect of upper class speakers was different from that

of lower class speakers. So in an extended passage, Puttenham explained which dialect of English should be used for English poetry, and that passage is probably the most often quoted part of the entire text. It is notable because Puttenham argued that the educated speech of London was the ideal form of English. And in making that argument, he outlined the parameters of what would soon be generally accepted as 'standard' English.

First, I should note that he referred to the English that was spoken in his day as 'Norman English' in contrast to the English that was spoken before the Conquest, which he called 'Anglesaxon.' So that shows the extent to which he recognized the foreign element in English even in the late 1500s.

He then says that poets should use the form of English that "is spoken in the kings Court, or in the good townes and Cities within the land, then in the marches and frontiers, or in port townes, where straungers haunt for traffike sake, . . ." So in other words, he recommends the use of the elevated language of the English court and type of language spoken in London, rather than the English spoken in rural areas or in the border regions or in port towns where different languages and dialects mixed together.

He then says that poets should avoid the English found "in Vniuersities where Schollers vse much peeuish affectation of words out of the primatiue languages." In other words, avoid the English used by scholars who rely on obscure multi-syllable loanwords from Latin and Greek. In a separate section, Puttenham says it is very difficult to write good English poetry with long multi-syllable words because the words don't tend to follow the required stress patterns of English.

He adds that the poet should also avoid the dialects spoken "in any uplandish village or corner of a realm, where is no resort but of poor, rustical, or uncivil people." So avoid the speech used in remote places because the people there speak an inferior form of English.

He then says that the poet should avoid "the speech of a craftsman or carter or other of the inferior sort, though he be inhabitant or bred in the best town and city in this realm, for such persons do abuse good speeches by strange accents or ill-shaped sounds and false orthography." So avoid the speech of manual laborers who speak with strange accents and often make the mistake of pronouncing words like they are spelled without understanding that those words should be pronounced otherwise.

Puttenham then says that the poet should "follow generally the better brought vp sort."

He even identifies the specific landmarks where his preferred form of English is spoken. The River Trent runs through the middle of England and provides a convenient landmark to distinguish the north from the south. Puttenham directs the poet to avoid "any speach vsed beyond the riuer of Trent, though no man can deny but that theirs is the purer English Saxon at this day, yet it is not so Courtly nor so currant as our Southerne English is, no more is the far Westerne mas speach: ye shall therfore take the vsuall speach of the Court, and that of London and the shires lying about London within lx [LX = 60] myles, and not much aboue. So if you traveled more than 60 miles

from London, you were not listening to a form of English that was appropriate for poetry. [*SOURCE: Arte of English Poesie, Book 3, Chapter 4*]

Now modern linguists would have a heart-attack if they heard a scholar give that type of advice. Puttenham was arguing that the only acceptable form of English to be used was the dialect of a small minority of the country. But his comments illustrate a common attitude among the educated classes of London during the Elizabethan period. If you didn't speak the language like they did, then you weren't speaking it correctly. And that attitude would only grow stronger with time.

Of course, it is easy to dismiss Puttenham's advice as arrogant and bigoted. But we should keep in mind that he was writing a manual for poets, and he was describing a form of English that was quickly emerging as the 'standard' form of the language. So in that sense, he was merely advising poets to write to that generally-accepted standard. And most of them did just that. So people like Puttenham not only 'described' that emerging standard, they also helped to 'make' it the standard by encouraging writers and poets to use it.

Now even if you restricted the use of English to the educated and cultivated dialect of London, that wasn't all you needed to consider. Within that word stock, there were a lot of obscure words. Some were older words that had fallen out of use. And some were technical loanwords from Latin and Greek with a lot of syllables. Puttenham advised poets to avoid both of those sets of words. He wasn't opposed to all loanwords, just technical and obscure words – what were commonly known as 'inkhorn' terms at the time. He thought that some people tried to impress each other by coming up with those types of words. He wrote, "Young schollers not halfe well studied..when they come to their friends..will seeme to coigne fine wordes out of the Latin." And, I mention that passage because – according to the Oxford English Dictionary – that is the first known use of the word ***coin*** to mean the creation or invention of a new word or phrase.

The text also contains the first recorded use of the word ***comma*** in an English document. It was used in the original Greek sense of the word as a short pause in a sentence. We also find the first known English use of the words ***periphrase***, ***anagram***, and interestingly, the first recorded use of the Latin word ***insect*** in an English document.

The use of the word ***insect*** comes in a passage where Puttenham says that the poet's style and register should match the subject matter. High and lofty subjects require an elevated style of speech, whereas low and base subjects require a much more basic style. But in saying that, he notes that a poet can discuss lofty matters involving insignificant creatures. So a poetic treatment of war beware between frogs or mice or insects can be presented in an elevated way because the topic is ultimately about war – not the creatures involved. In that passage, he wrote of frogs and mice, and added, "So also is the Ante or pismire, and they be but little creeping things, not perfect beasts, but insects, or wormes." [*SOURCE: Arte of English Poesie, iii. v. 125.*] That is the sentence that contains the first recorded use of the word ***insect*** in English. Note that he begins by referring to the 'Ante or pismire.' ***Ant*** is an Old English word, but ***pissmire*** was another old word for an ant. It's probably native to English because the word ***mire*** is a common term for an ant in many Germanic languages, though the form of the word varies a bit from language to language.

The term ***pissmire*** apparently comes from the idea that an anthill has a urine-like smell. It produced the word ***pissant*** which appeared in the following century. And here, Puttenham refers to ants as ***insects*** using the Latin word ***insectum***, which literally meant 'in sections' because the bodies of insects are divided into three separate sections.

Puttenham's text also contains the first – or one of the first – uses of the Italian word ***stanza***, which is a group of lines featuring a specific rhyme scheme or pattern that is used throughout the poem. The word ***stanza*** literally meant a stopping place. It's related to words like ***stand***, and ***stance*** and ***statue***. And that's because a person reading or reciting a poem would come to brief stop or pause at the end of each ***stanza***. [*SOURCE: Arte Eng. Poesie, ii. ii. 54.*]

Of course, a stanza is a vary basic component of a poem. Once a rhyming pattern in established in a stanza, it tends to be repeated throughout the poem. And in fact, repetition is a very basic component of all poetry. One of the things that distinguishes poetry from normal speech is the organization and structure of the language used in poetry, and especially the use of repeating patterns. Of course, one type of repeating pattern is repeating sounds. Old English used alliteration, which was the repetition of sounds at the beginning of words. During the Middle English period, English poetry started to rely more on rhyming verse, which was the repetition of sounds at the end of words, specifically the sound at the end of the last word in a line.

Well, in the course of Puttenham's discussion about the different styles used in poetry, he devoted a section to repetition. He explained the different ways in which the poet can use repetition, and he gave examples from existing poems. For example, he explained how some poets repeat the same words at the beginning of a series of lines, or the same words in the middle of the lines. He also illustrated how some poets repeat the same word or phrase within a line of poetry.

In the course of that discussion, Puttenham used a word that has a very specific linguistic meaning today. He used the word ***reduplication*** from Latin and French. It is itself a form of repetition. It contains both the prefix ***re-*** meaning 'to do again,' and ***duplication*** meaning 'copy or double.' So ***reduplication*** literally means 'to double back.' As I said, the word has acquired a specific linguistic meaning over the centuries, and today, it refers to a term made up of repeating words – usually with a slight change in pronunciation between the repeated terms. It includes modern terms like ***hip hop***, ***zig zag***, ***chit chat***, ***knick knack***, ***see saw***, ***tick tock***, and ***tic tac toe***.

Now Puttenham didn't use the word ***reduplication*** in that way, and he didn't describe those types of terms, but I wanted to mention those types of repetitive terms here because they were starting to become much more common in the language during the Elizabethan period. It's very rare to find those types of terms prior to the 1500s. Chaucer had used the word ***ha-ha*** for laughter, and he had also used the word ***hotch-potch***, which later evolved into ***hodge-podge***. ***Hotch-potch*** itself evolved out of an even older term – the word ***hotch-pot***, which meant a pot full of a variety of ingredients. And that sense of a mixture or variety passed through from ***hotch-pot***, to ***hotch-potch***, to ***hodge-podge***. In that evolution, we can hear how English speakers converted two distinct words into a rhyming pair which repeated the same sounds.

In the 1400s, we find a few more of those terms like ***mish-mash***, and ***riff-raff***, and also the term ***hurly-burley***, which meant turmoil or confusion. Then in the 1500s, we start to see lots more of those terms like ***bibble-babble*** and ***ribble-rabble***, both meaning 'idle or empty talk,' and ***dibble-dabble*** meaning 'rubbish,' and ***flim-flam*** meaning 'a trick or deception,' and the Irish loanword ***hubbub*** meaning 'confused shouting or yelling.' We also find the word ***hugger-mugger***, which meant 'privacy or secrecy,' and the phrase '***tit for tat***,' which follows a similar pattern.

The Elizabethan period in the later 1500s gave us ***ding-dong*** for a ringing sound, and ***fiddle-faddle*** meaning 'a trivial matter.' During this period, people took the word ***fable***, which had been around for a couple of centuries, and they created the term ***fible-fable*** meaning 'nonsense.' And by the early 1600s, that term ***fible-fable*** was shortened to simply ***fib*** meaning 'a lie.' So ***fib*** is ultimately derived from ***fable*** thanks to this type of repetitive word-play.

We find new examples of these words popping up even during the plague years from 1592 to 1594 when the theaters were closed. The word ***dilly-dally*** is first recorded during that period – meaning 'to be indecisive or hesitant.' The term ***helter-skelter*** also pops up during those years. It meant 'to act with haste or confusion.' Another new term during those two years was ***snip-snap*** meaning 'to speak in a snappy or smart manner.' The related term ***snipper-snapper*** also appeared around the same time. It was generally used to mean a young or unimportant person. Some sources like the Oxford English Dictionary claim that ***snipper-snapper*** evolved into ***whipper-snapper*** during the following century, as when an old man refers to a young person as a 'young whipper-snapper.'

In the following years, hundreds more of these terms entered the language like ***hoity-toity***, ***flip-flop***, ***sing-song***, ***chit-chat***, ***zig zag***, ***tip-top***, ***criss-cross***, and so on. In the 20th century, companies figured out that these terms make great product names which are easy to remember. That gave us products like ***Mellow Yellow***, ***Slim Jim***, ***Lite-Brite***, ***Tic-Tacs***, and ***Nutter Butters***.

But linguists have studied this phenomenon, and they have noticed something very interesting about these terms. They all follow the same pattern. In the examples where the vowel changes in the middle – like ***chit-chat*** and ***tip-top***, the vowel changes in a very specific way. Linguists noted that the first word usually had a 'short I' sound pronounced /ih/ and the second word usually has a 'short A' sound pronounced /æ/ or a 'short O' sound pronounced /ah/. Again, from /ih/ to /æ/ gives us terms like ***zig zag***, ***chit chat***, ***knick knack***, ***mish-mash***, ***riff-raff***, ***kit-kat***, ***splish splash***, and so on. But it's never the other way around. It's never ***knack-knick*** or ***zag-zig***. It has to go the other way. And from /ih/ to /ah/, we have ***tip-top***, ***flip-flop***, ***hip-hop***, ***tick-tock***, ***wichy-washy***, and so on. Again, it's never in the reverse order. It's never ***top-tip*** or ***flop-flip***. To put it in more linguistic terms, we always start with a high front vowel – /ih/ – and then we drop down to a lower vowel sound – /æ/ or /ah/. We never start low and move high.

Now in some of these terms we start with a long vowel sound – /ee/. Again, that's a high front vowel. And again, we drop down from there to a lower vowel. ***Sing-song***, ***ping-pong***, ***ding-dong***, and so on.

In some of these case, we have three words instead of two. In those cases, the first two words follow the same order, and the third word had a vowel that is even lower or further back like /ah/ or /oh/ or /oo/. So we have this same movement from high to low and front to back as we progress through the sequence like ***tic-tac-toe*** and ***bing-bang-boom*** and ***bish-bash-bosh***. They all follow that same general pattern, and they never go in the reverse.

So why am I telling you all of this? Well, it's because English – like most languages – has an inherent order and structure that we don't always realize or appreciate. And poets tap into that structure when composing poetry. So as I noted a few episodes back, English has its own rhythm, which poets adapted to the 'de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM' rhythm of iambic pentameter. And here we see that English speakers often create these repetitive terms, but again, they always follow the same general vowel progression. So these repetitive terms have their own natural poetic rhythm. And when we coin one of these terms, we are using a type of word play the same way poets do. We are tapping into the natural rhythm and structure of the language. Think about children's nursery rhymes. Hickory-dickory-dock, Higglety pigglety pop, Wynken Blynken and Nod, Little Jack Horner, Little Miss Muffet, and Ring Around the Rosie. Even Twinkle Twinkle Little Star. They all show that same type of type of vowel progression. Some scholars have even noted it in a phrase like 'Big Bad Wolf.'

But it isn't just nursery rhymes. Shakespeare himself sometimes adopted this same technique. In his play, All's Well That Ends Well, a character refers to his ***kicky-wicky***, which appears to be a term that Shakespeare coined which meant 'a girlfriend or wife.' And in his play Henry IV, Part One – composed two or three years after the theaters re-opened – he apparently coined another one of those repetitive terms. He used the term ***skimble scamble*** to mean 'confused, incoherent or nonsensical.' He used it in a scene where a character expresses frustration at another person's statements by referring to them as "Such a deale of skimble scamble stuffe." [*SOURCE: W. Shakespeare, Henry IV, Part 1 iii. i. 150*.] And even the phrase 'skimble scamble stuff' has that same type of vowel progression – /ih/-/æ/-/uh/.

And that's what George Puttenham was trying to describe in his book about English poetry. He was trying to explain how writers could tap into that natural structure of the language to create poetry.

Now I began this discussion about Puttenham's book by noting that it was printed in Richard Field's print shop – the same shop that printed Shakespeare's early narrative poems during the plague years of the early 1590s. And while Shakespeare may have hung around that shop and read a copy of Puttenham's book while he was there, we can never know for sure. But we do know that Shakespeare spent those plague years writing poetry. And that poetry probably included his well-known sonnets. So in the last part of this episode, I want to turn our attention to those sonnets.

Now today, when we think of William Shakespeare, we think of his plays and his sonnets. So in terms of poetry, the sonnets get most of the attention. Most people today aren't even aware of those two narrative poems that I mentioned earlier. But while the sonnets have attracted a lot of attention, they are an enigma. We don't really know for certain when Shakespeare wrote them –

though for various reasons, most scholars think they were written around the same time as those other two poems. We also don't know exactly who they are written about. They specifically mention a young man and woman, but it isn't clear if they were actual people or just figments of Shakespeare's imagination or some combination of both. Again, modern scholars have some strong beliefs and opinions about the identity of those two people, but we don't know for certain who they were. We also don't know if Shakespeare approved the publication of the sonnets or if he had any involvement at all in their publication. And for that reason, we don't know if the published order of the sonnets reflects the order in which he wrote them or if the publisher just put them in an order that seemed logical based on the content. So as you can see, there are many unanswered questions about these little poems, and that mystery may help to explain why many people still find them so fascinating.

So let's begin by noting that sonnets ultimately have their origin in Italy in the 1200s and 1300s. The word ***sonnet*** comes from the Italian word ***sonetto*** meaning 'little song.' They were short love poems, and they typically had 14 lines. The rhyming patterns used in Italy were a little different from the pattern that was later adopted in England, but the basic concept was well-established by the time English poets began to write them in the 1500s.

The form was really popularized in England by a couple of English poets named Sir Thomas Wyatt and Henry Howard, who was the Earl of Surrey. Those two men are sometimes called the 'Fathers of the English Sonnet.' Their poems were published in an important collection in the mid-1500s [*Tottel's Miscellany*], which proved to be very popular.

Over the following decades, many poets tried their hand at writing sonnets. For example, in the late 1560s, a poet named Thomas Howell published a collection called Newe Sonets. They are mainly notable today because one of them contained the line "Counte not thy Chickens that vnhatched be, Waye wordes as winde, till thou finde certaintee." That passage is notable because it appears to be the first attested version of the well-known proverb, 'Don't count your chickens before they hatch.' [*SOURCE: Thomas Howell, Newe Sonets sig. C.ij and America's Popular Proverbs and Sayings, Gregory Titelman, p. 59*]

For several decades, English sonnets varied in length and structure. In English, the term ***sonnet*** basically just meant a short love poem. But by the 1580s, the structure had been largely fixed in the form that would become standard in English. It consisted of 14 lines of iambic pentameter. The rhyming scheme was pretty simple. The first four lines, the second four lines, and the third four lines each had an alternating rhyme scheme. In other words, within each group of four, the first and third lines rhymed with each other and the second and fourth lines rhymed with each other. That left two lines at the end, which also rhymed with each other.

That was the structure that Shakespeare employed , and today it is so synonymous with him that the form is sometimes called 'Shakespearean.' But he did not invent it. It was already in common use.

Now it isn't known with certainty when he wrote the sonnets, but we do have some clues. First of all, in 1598 – four years after the plague subsided and theaters re-opened, a writer named Francis Meres wrote a book called 'Palladis Tamia, Wit's Treasury.' I mentioned that book in the last episode, and it contained a list of Shakespeare's plays that had been written and performed by that date. It also made reference to "his sugared Sonnets among his private friends." [*SOURCE: Shakespeare: The Evidence, Ian Wilson, p. 244*] So that confirms that the many, if not all, of the sonnets had been written by 1598. Again, that was four years after the plague lifted. So we know that the sonnets were composed early in Shakespeare's career – not later. Meres's comment that the sonnets were shared among Shakespeare's friends is another important piece of information. It suggests that they weren't really intended for publication. They were just written to entertain friends. And that was common for sonnets at the time.

The year after Meres's book was released, a printer named William Jaggard tried to cash in on Shakespeare's growing fame. He published a book called 'The Passionate Pilgrime. By W. Shakespeare... Sonnets To sundry notes of Musicke.' So on its face, it purported to be a collection of Shakespeare's sonnets. But you know what they say. You can't judge a book by its cover. The title was a little bit of false advertising. The book mostly contained works by other poets. But it did contain two of Shakespeare's sonnets. They were ones that later became known as Sonnet 138 and Sonnet 144. [*SOURCE: The Genius of Shakespeare, Jonathan Bate, p. 62*] That collection confirms that some of the sonnets were being passed around – and some printers were interested in publishing them.

But it took another decade before the entire collection of sonnets was published. In 1609, late in Shakespeare's career, a printer named Thomas Thorpe published the sonnets under the title 'SHAKE-SPEARES SONNETS Never before Imprinted.' It contained 154 sonnets in total, and it was that collection that gave us the sonnets as we know them today in the order we know them today.

But again, one of the enduring mysteries is whether Shakespeare himself had anything to do with the publication and whether he had any input in the way they were presented. It's also unclear how the poems came into Thorpe's possession. Scholars have argued these points for centuries, but we simply don't know for certain.

I should also note that the sonnets have not always been held in high regard. Unlike the two narrative poems that I mentioned earlier in this episode, both of which were re-printed several times and praised by Shakespeare's contemporaries, that wasn't the case with the collection of sonnets. Thorpe never re-printed them or produced more editions. And they were barely even mentioned by other writers in the 1600s. Even in the 1700s and 1800s, critics were not particularly kind to the collection. It's really only been in the last century or so that critics have come around. They are now held in much higher regard. [*SOURCE: The Genius of Shakespeare, Jonathan Bate, p. 44*]

Over the centuries, readers have scoured the sonnets for clues about their composition and the persons that Shakespeare was writing about. Many critics suggest that that is a pointless endeavor. These are poems, so they may not be about anyone in particular. But other scholars

insist that they tell a story, and that story may involve the Earl of Southampton who I mentioned earlier in the episode.

You might recall that the two poems I discussed earlier – Venus and Adonis and the Rape of Lucrece – were both dedicated to the young Earl of Southampton. It appears that Shakespeare sought his patronage, and he may very well have served as Shakespeare's patron during this period. Well, many scholars think that Shakespeare was living at Southampton's residence during the plague years of 1592 to 1594, or at least during part of that time. And they think Shakespeare composed most if not all of the sonnets during that same time period. They argue that a large number of the poems are specifically about Southampton. And they base this conclusion on several clues in the lines that Shakespeare wrote.

First, it's important to note that Southampton had recently been involved in a dispute with his guardian William Cecil. Remember that Cecil was Queen Elizabeth's close advisor, and he had become Southampton's guardian several years earlier when Southampton's father died. Well, Cecil tried to arrange a marriage between his granddaughter and the young earl. But Southampton didn't want any part of it, and he refused to marry her.

Well, the early group of sonnets are addressed to a young man. And in them, Shakespeare encourages the man to get married so he can produce children and ensure his legacy. So the person being addressed is apparently reluctant to get married. Shakespeare also specifically mentions that the young man's father is deceased – as was the case with Southampton. The passages also refers to the young man's mother and implies that she is still living, which again was the case with Southampton. From those and other clues, many scholars think that Shakespeare was writing about Southampton – the same man to whom he had dedicated those earlier two poems. And they think the sonnets were produced around the same time.

So let's take a closer look at that first group of sonnets. The first 26 poems appear to be part of a related group, and again, all appear to be addressed to the same young man. Let's look at the first four lines of Sonnet number 1. In these lines, Shakespeare appears to be saying that we like it when beautiful and handsome people have children because that ensures that their beauty never dies. And when a men get old and dies, his legacy survives in his children. Shakespeare writes:

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
But as the riper should by time decrease,
His tender heir might bear his memory: (end-quote)

Now this passage is interesting because in the second line, Shakespeare says that 'beauty's rose might never die.' Well, earlier in the episode I mentioned that Southampton's given name was Henry Wriothesley (/risley/) – spelled 'w-r-i-o-t-h-e-s-l-e-y.' Well, supposedly, the name was also pronounced /rosely/ at the time. And that reference to 'beauty's rose' at the very beginning of this sonnet collection is considered by many scholars to be another clue that the person being described was /rosely/ – or /risley/ – or Southampton as he is generally known.

Shakespeare then includes a passage where he seems to be saying that the young man is obsessed with himself, while he should be sharing his beauty with the world.

In Sonnet number 3, Shakespeare begins by telling the young man to look in the mirror and tell the face he sees that it is time to have a child. He writes:

Look in thy glass, and tell the face thou viewest
Now is the time that face should form another;

He concludes the sonnet by stating that the young man is the mirror image of his mother suggesting that his mother is still alive. And he adds that as the young man ages, he will see his youth in his children, but if he dies childless, his image will be gone forever.

Now we often think of sonnets as love poems, but as you can see Shakespeare's sonnets are often more like life advice, especially the advice from an slightly older adult to a young man.

The poems continue along in much the same manner with Shakespeare encouraging the young man to marry and have children. In the last two lines of Sonnet 13, he tells the young man that he had a father and his son should be able to say the same. He writes:

Dear my love, you know
You had a father: let your son say so.

That's the passage that indicates that the young man's father is deceased. Again, it's another clue that the poem is about Southampton.

A few sonnets later, we find what is probably the most well-known sonnet of all and one of the most recited poems in the English language. It is Sonnet 18. You've probably heard it before. You may have even learned it in school. And you probably thought it was about a beautiful woman. But given the placement of the sonnet in this group of poems addressed to the young man, and how he should preserve his beauty by getting married and having children, it is generally agreed that this poem is addressed to him. It reads:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;
And every fair from fair sometime declines,
By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest;
Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this and this gives life to thee.

Then two sonnets later, Shakespeare plays around with the idea of gender. He says that the object of his affection has a 'woman's face' and a 'woman's gentle heart.' He refers to the person as the "master-mistress of my passion." But he then refers to the person as a 'man in hue' who "steals men's eyes and women's souls.' He adds that Mother Nature had intended to make the man a woman, but then she added "one thing to my purpose nothing." Now that added thing is generally interpreted as a reference to the male appendage, which Shakespeare says he has no use for. That is at least the common interpretation of the sonnet. It seems to refute any notion that Shakespeare desired a sexual relationship with the young man. But again, it's all a matter of interpretation. And it assumes that the sonnets are about actual people. Again, for all we know, it could all be poetic licence.

As we keep reading, we find a series of sonnets in which the person being addressed has betrayed Shakespeare in some way and expresses remorse. In Sonnet 35, he writes:

No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud:
Clouds and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.

Again, we see another reference to roses there. In this case, a rose with thorns.

At Sonnet 40, we find out the possible discretion. The person being addressed had taken Shakespeare's woman. The same idea is expressed throughout this series of poems. For example, the opening lines of Sonnet 42 read:

That thou hast her it is not all my grief,
And yet it may be said I loved her dearly;
That she hath thee is of my wailing chief,
A loss in love that touches me more nearly.

We then have a series of sonnets where Shakespeare expresses worry that the person being addressed will leave him, and treat the poet like a stranger. There is a darkness and sadness that runs through those sonnets.

In Sonnet 57, Shakespeare describes himself as a slave who has no choice but to wait for the person being addressed to show interest in him. And he spends his time thinking about how the person is making someone else happy. In the course of this sequence, he writes about the destructive effects of time, insomnia caused by unrequited love, and being in such despair that he wishes he were dead.

Then in the sonnets numbered in the late 70s, we have another group that appear to be addressed to a literary patron, which again, points to Southampton as the person being addressed – at least in this group. In Sonnet 78, Shakespeare notes that he has repeatedly invoked the person being addressed as the inspiration of his poetry, and now other poets are doing the same. In the opening lines, he writes:

So oft have I invoked thee for my Muse,
And found such fair assistance in my verse
As every alien pen hath got my use
And under thee their poesy disperse.

In the following sonnet – number 79 – Shakespeare writes about a rival poet who is now composing poetry to the person being addressed and is trying to win his favor. Again, the common assumption is that Shakespeare now had competition, and these sonnets are about one or more other poets who were trying to win Southampton's favor and patronage.

Near the end of the sequence, specifically number 87, Shakespeare says farewell to the person he is addressing, and says that he does not deserve his love or attention. The tone of this sequence is that the relationship has come to an end.

Now again, there are 154 sonnets in total. And out of the first 126, none are expressly addressed to a woman. Some are clearly addressed to a man, and the others are genderless. Some scholars think they are all addressed to the same young man, while others think they are about different people – both men and women. But it's not until sonnet 127 that we clearly have a group of sonnets composed to and about a woman.

He describes the woman as his 'mistress' and his 'goddess' and he repeatedly refers to her with feminine pronouns. He even gives us a physical description, writing that she has black eyes, black hair, and breasts that are 'dun' (d-u-n), which meant brown. Shakespearean scholars have historically referred to the mysterious woman as the 'dark lady' because he repeatedly describes her in that way, and it appears to be something that he found very attractive about her.

But then in Sonnet 133, we find out that she is with another man, specifically with his friend. Whether this is the same young man described in the earlier sonnets is unknown. Shakespeare then laments that he has lost both his mistress and his friend. In the final few poems, he laments his loss, and he describes his mistress as 'cruel' and as a 'tyrant' who has twisted his mind and his perceptions of the world. He has become world-weary and complains about his state in life.

Again, these are the sonnets composed by Shakespeare. They may not be what you thought they were, and scholars have had mixed opinions about them over the years. They remain a mystery for all the unanswered questions they raise. There seems to be an autobiographical element to at least some of them, and much of that evidence points in the direction of the Earl of Southampton. That evidence also suggests a link to Shakespeare's two narrative poems that were dedicated to Southampton during the plague years of the early 1590s. And that would also suggest that they were all composed around the same time.

But Shakespeare didn't just spend that time writing poems. In the months after the theaters re-opened in 1594, we have evidence that new plays by him were being performed, and that suggests that they were also written during that two-year period when the theaters were closed.

So next time, we're going to turn our attention to those early dramas. And they are important because they reveal a great deal about the English language at the time. In fact, one of them called 'Love's Labour's Lost' contains several passages where Shakespeare actually comments about the language of his day, including the way words were pronounced and spelled. So next time, we'll dig a little deeper into his plays, and we'll see what they have to tell us about the state of English at the time.

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