THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 174: SPEAK AND SPELL

Presented by Kevin W. Stroud

EPISODE 174: SPEAK AND SPELL

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 174: Speak and Spell. In this episode, we're going to look at how plays composed in the late 1500s provide clues about the pronunciation of words at the time. Modern scholars have been able to recreate much of that pronunciation from the way words were used in rhyming poetry. And during a time when spellings more closely represented the way words were pronounced, those spellings also provide an important clue. In fact, it was during this period that one of the first English spelling books was published, and it proved to be very popular. This time, we'll look at how spelling books helped to standardize English spelling even if those spellings didn't match the pronunciations. We'll also continue to look at the works of William Shakespeare during this period, and we'll examine how his rhymes and spellings reflected the way people spoke at the time.

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.

One other quick note before we begin. At the end of the last episode, I said that I was going to talk about Romeo and Juliet in this episode, but I was being a bit too optimistic. I'm not actually going to get to that play this time. The Elizabethan period was an incredibly active time in the history of English, and I think this episode will illustrate that. William Shakespeare was about to reach his creative peak, other poets and playwrights were making important contributions, and scholars were busy writing about various aspects of the English language. So there is a lot to address in these episodes. And to avoid making this episode over two hours long, I have decided to save Romeo and Juliet for next time. But I will discuss A Midsummer Night's Dream in this episode, and I will also look at an important text on English spelling. So as usual, there's a lot to cover.

And let's begin by picking up where we left off last time. In the last episode, we looked at the re-opening of the theaters in London after an outbreak of plague subsided in 1594. And we looked at some of Shakespeare's early comedies that were being performed around that time.

Well, Shakespeare didn't just write comedies during this period. He also turned his attention back to history plays. Even though many of his plays are difficult to date with certainty, most scholars agree that his history plays about King John and Richard II were in place by this point around 1594 or 1595.

The play about King John takes us back to the 1200s. You might remember John as 'bad' King John, and Magna Carta was composed during his reign largely to curtail his powers. Again, the exact date of this play is not known with certainty, but it is among the plays mentioned by Fancis Meres in his list of Shakespeare's plays composed in 1598. I've mentioned that list before because it confirms that certain plays like this one had been composed by that date. Over all, King John is not considered to be one of Shakespeare's better plays, and many scholars think it lacks the skill

and structure of his later works, so they think it was a relatively early play, and the best guess is that it was composed around the time the theaters re-opened or maybe even earlier.

The play is also somewhat unusual in that it was composed almost entirely in iambic pentameter verse. So most lines have the 'de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de DUM de-DUM' rhythm. Of course, Shakespeare routinely used that rhythm in his plays, but it was usually combined with prose or normal speech. Here, he sticks with that standard rhythm and rarely departs from it. So the entire play is essentially one long poem. I should note that even though he used iambic pentameter, the lines don't generally rhyme. So you might recall from prior episodes that this particular structure is called 'blank verse.'

King John isn't one of Shakespeare's more popular plays, so it hasn't had much of an impact on the language, but it did contribute a handful of popular expressions. Perhaps most famously, this is where the find the earliest version of the maxim "to gild the lily." It means to add to something that is excessive or unnecessary. The play focuses on John's rivalry with the French king, the Pope and some of his own nobles. At one point, John has been defeated in battle, and he hands over his crown to the Pope's representative in England. The representative returns it to John in exchange for John's agreement to end his ongoing dispute with the Church. John then has a second coronation for himself in order to be re-crowned as king. And that's the context for this early use of the maxim 'to gild the lily.' John was already king, so the second coronation was just confirming what already existed. John's loyal supporter, the Earl of Salisbury, provides the notable passage where he describes the redundant nature of the second coronation. He says:

Therefore, to be possess'd with double pomp,
To guard a title that was rich before,
To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,
To throw a perfume on the violet,
To smooth the ice, or add another hue
Unto the rainbow, or with taper-light
To seek the beauteous eye of heaven to garnish,
Is wasteful and ridiculous excess.

So in his list of redundancies, Salisbury says that it is like 'gilding refined gold' – in other words, adding gold layer to gold. And he says that it is like 'painting the lily' – in other words, adding color to a beautiful flower. But these two separate examples have been blended together over time. And today, we have the blended phrase 'to gild the lily.'

The final act of the play gives us the first recorded use of the maxim 'to fight fire with fire.' After John's reconciliation with the Church, he still finds himself at war with his nobles. John's nephew Philip leads the royal forces and encourages his uncle to take the war to the rebels. Philip begins the passage by asking John, "But wherefore do you droop? Why look you sad?" Now this line is notable because of his use of the word ***wherefore***. The word ***wherefore*** meant 'why' in Early Modern English. So when Philip asks 'wherefore do you droop,' he meant 'why do you droop' 'or 'why are you slumping.' And I mention that here because we will encounter another well-known use of that word in the next episode – in Romeo and Juliet. Of course, that is where we

hear Juliet's famous line, "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?" As we'll see, she isn't asking 'where' Romeo is. She is actually asking 'why' he is. But again, more on that next time.

Now after Philip asks John why he looks so sad, Philip provides encouragement by saying, "Be great in act, as you have been in thought. Let not the world see fear and sad distrust." He then adds, "Be stirring as the time, be fire with fire, Threaten the threat'ner . . ." And that is the earliest known version of the popular maxim to 'fight fire with fire' or to 'meet fire with fire.' In this case, it meant to meet force with force.

This play also contains what may be the first recorded use of the term ***cold-blooded***. The term also appeared in some other documents around this same time, so Shakespeare probably didn't invent it, but he was certainly one of the first to use it. And I mention that term because it is a good example of the disconnect between English spelling and pronunciation. Notice that the words ***cold*** and ***blood*** are both spelled with the letter [o] – a double [o] in the case of ***blood***. Well, we know that the [o] in ***cold*** has the 'long O' sound (/o:/). And at one time, in Middle English, double [o]'s were also used to represent that same sound. After all, the best way to indicate a long vowel sound was to double the vowel letter. And scholars are confident that the word ***blood*** was originally pronounced /blo:d/ as the spelling would suggest. But of course, today, we say ***blood*** with a completely different vowel sound. So instead of saying /c:old blo:d/, we say 'cold blood.' And in fact, the pronunciation of ***blood*** had already started to change by the time of Shakespeare. By the early 1500s, it had become /blu:d/. Most of the words spelled with double [o]'s had changed in that way by the Elizabethan period. That's the same sound we still hear in other words spelled with double [o]'s like ***moon***, ***soon***, ***room***, ***food***, ***tooth***, ***tool*** and so on. Well, during Shakespeare's time, many people – especially those with conservative accents – would have still said /blu:d/ instead of ***blood***. The pronunciation was probably starting to shift in the direction of ***blood***, but it took a century or so for that change to happen. But despite all of those changes in pronunciation over the centuries, notice that the spelling of the word ***blood*** never changed.

By the late 1500s, many words had acquired accepted spellings which were preferred by writers and printers. Most of those spellings were based on traditional pronunciations that had been around for a while, but some of those pronunciations were starting to change. And ***blood*** is a good example of that. While some words like ***food*** and ***tooth*** retained the long /u:/ sound, other words were acquiring shorter vowel sounds like the /ʊ/ sound in ***look*** and ***book***, and in some parts of England, the /ʌ/ sound of ***blood*** and ***flood***. As those pronunciations changed, the spellings stayed the same. And that disconnect between spelling and pronunciation still persists to this day. Generally speaking, we spell words today like they were pronounced in and around London in the mid-to-late 1500s. And that's the case thanks in large part to the advent of spelling guides and dictionaries, which we will explore in a moment. But before we look at that development, we need to look at another history play composed by Shakespeare around this same time.

That other play was Richard II, and for this play, we have a bit of evidence to help date it. The evidence comes in the form of an invitation. I noted in a prior episode that William Cecil was Queen Elizabeth's chief advisor. Well, he was a very old man at this point, and he would soon be

succeeded by his son Robert. Robert was a rising figure in the government at the time, and in late 1595, he received an invitation from one of his kinsmen named Sir Edward Hoby to attend a private showing of a play. The invitation asked if Robert was available to attend a supper where "King Richard present himself to your view . . ." Most scholars think that was a reference to this particular play – Richard II. If so, we can establish that the play was being performed by the latter part of 1595. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare: The Evidence, Ian Wilson, p. 202-3*] The play was published a little over a year later in 1597.

Now this play, Richard II, was the beginning of a new sequence of history plays by Shakespeare that covered the period from the late 1300s into the 1400s. In a way, what happened here was sort of like what happened with the Star Wars films. Of course, the original Star Wars trilogy was released in late 1970s and early 80s. And then several years later, George Lucas decided to go back and produce a new trilogy that served as prequels to the original films. Well, Shakespeare apparently did the same thing here. He had already produced a series of plays that covered the Wars of the Roses in the 1400s. I discussed those plays in prior episodes. They were Henry VI, Parts One, Two and Three, and Richard III. Those plays covered the extended dispute between the Houses of Lancaster and York. Well, now Shakespeare apparently decided to pull a 'George Lucas' and go back and tell the story of the kings leading up the Wars of the Roses. That story sequence began here with Richard II, who was king in the late 1300s. He was deposed by his cousin Henry Bolingbroke, and this play tells that story.

Bolingbroke was the son of John of Gaunt, who was the patriarch of the Lancastrians. And when Henry Bolingbroke defeated his cousin Richard, he became Henry IV – the first Lancastrian king. He was later succeeded by his son, Henry V, who was succeeded by his son, Henry VI. And of course, that takes us back to Shakespeare's original set of history plays that began with Henry VI. This new series of plays covered the lives of those early Lancastrian kings, and they essentially served as prequels to the original set of plays. And if we put all of these history plays together, what we have is the story of the rise and fall of the House of Lancaster. These new plays tell the story of its rise, and the prior plays tell the story of its fall.

Earlier, I mentioned that list of Shakespeare plays composed by France Meres in 1598. It's an important document because it confirms which plays existed at that time. Well, that list includes this new history play, Richard II, as well as the two plays that plays that followed – Henry IV Parts One and Two. But it doesn't include the final play in the sequence – Henry V. So it appears that Richard II was composed by 1595 based on the reference to the play in that letter I mentioned a moment ago. And it appears that the following two Henry IV plays were composed a short time later since they were included in that early play list. And then it appears that the final play in the sequence, Henry V, was composed a short time after that since it wasn't included in that play list. That seems to be the generally accepted view of most scholars, and it gives us a general idea as to when these plays were composed.

Now just like the King John play that we just looked at earlier, Richard II is also composed almost entirely in verse. So once again, we have that 'de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM' rhythm for the entire play.

Now back in Episode 134, I talked about the real-life Richard II and the important events surrounding his reign. And I also mentioned this particular play by Shakespeare. In fact, I included an except of a famous speech from that play rendered by the Lancastrian patriarch, John of Gaunt. It comes from his death-bed speech in the play, and it is one of the more patriotic passages in all of Shakespeare's works. He describes an idealized England. Here is the beginning of the passage, and I'll read in a way that emphasizes the iambic pentameter rhythm that runs throughout the play:

This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for her self
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in a silver sea

'de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM – every line' Of course, the actors would not have read the lines that stiffly, but you can see how that rhythm would tend to get a little monotonous after a while.

Now that speech I just read is one of the more memorable parts of the play, but otherwise, the play hasn't had much of an impact on the language we speak today. Of course, Shakespeare continued to invent new words, several of which appear for the first time in the play. Many of his words were formed by playing around with prefixes and suffixes. He would often add or delete one of those elements to create a new word or a new variation of an existing word. Many of those words never really caught on though. For example, immediately prior to the passage I just read, John of Gaunt laments that Richard has largely ignored his advice and counsel. He says, "Though Richard my life's counsel would not hear, My death's sad tale may yet undeaf his ear." So he coined the word ***undeaf*** to mean that Richard would actually listen to his advice. Obviously, that word didn't survive in the language.

In an early scene of the play, Richard is hearing a dispute, and to confirm his fair judgment, he says, "impartial are our eyes and ears." Well, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, that's the first recorded use of the word ***impartial***. It appears that Shakespeare coined it from the existing word ***partial*** by simply adding the prefix '***im-***' to the front of it in the same way he added '***un-***' to the front of the word ***deaf***. But whereas ***undeaf*** never caught on, the word ***impartial*** did, and we still use it to this day.

Now, in the play, the dispute that Richard was hearing when that passage was uttered was a disagreement between his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, and another noble named Thomas Mowbray, the Duke of Norfolk. The dispute – and Richard's resolution of the dispute – informs much of what happens later in the play. As Mowbray defends his position before the king, he points to his own reputation. He says, "The purest treasure mortal times afford is a spotless reputation." This is the first known use of the term 'spotless reputation' in the English language. It appears to be a description that Shakespeare coined in this play.

That passage occurs in a part of the play that features not only iambic pentameter, but also rhyming verse. So these passages actually rhyme. But if we look closely as the rhymes, we see that some of them don't actually work today. In this same passage, Shakespeare rhymes ***grave*** with ***have***, ***one*** with ***done***, and the verb 'to ***tear***' with the word ***fear***. Now each of those word pairs shares a common spelling pattern, but the vowels are pronounced differently today. So for example, ***grave*** and ***have*** are both spelled with 'a-v-e,' ***one*** and ***done*** are both spelled with 'o-n-e,' and ***tear*** and ***fear*** are both spelled with 'e-a-r.' Remember what I said earlier. Despite the way we pronounce words today, we tend to spell them like they were pronounced in London in the mid-1500s. And at that time, scholars think ***grave*** and ***have*** would have been pronounced /grav/ and /hav/. ***One*** and ***done*** would have been pronounced /o:n/ and /do:n/, and ***tear*** and ***fear*** would have been pronounced /tɛr/ and /fɛr/. Shakespeare rhymed those word pairs because they still rhymed in his day.

In that same passage, Shakespeare also rhymed words with those double O's that we saw in the word ***blood*** earlier. In fact, here he rhymed the word ***blood*** with the word ***withstood***. Again, ***blood*** and ***stood*** have slightly different vowels today thanks to changes that took place in the following century. In this same passage, he also rhymed the words ***boot*** and ***foot***. Again, despite the similar double [o] spellings, they don't rhyme today, but they did at the time. ***Boot*** and ***foot*** would have probably been pronounced /bu:t/ and /fu:t/. The pronunciation shifted from /fu:t/ to /fʊt/ in the following century. So ***boot***, ***foot***, ***flood*** and ***stood*** all had that long /u:/ sound during the Elizabethan period. It is likely that some people were already starting to pronounce some of those words differently, but most speakers would have recognized a common pronunciation with that /u:/ sound. Again, the shared spellings are telling us something. They're telling us how the words were pronounced in London in the mid-to late-1500s.

Now back in Episode 134 when I talked about the real-life Richard II, I titled that episode 'The Lancastrian Standard.' And that was because Lancastrian England in the 1400s was the period when English spellings showed the first signs of becoming fixed and standardized. At a time when French was still in common use, the Lancastrians encouraged the use of English in government documents, and the customary spellings of the Chancery office were really the first step towards a fixed spelling system.

Then in the mid-1400s, the printing press provided the next major step. In 1476, William Caxton brought the printing press to England. He had worked in the Low Countries, and his first typesetters came with him from the continent. I noted in that episode that Dutch printers typically spelled a 'hard G' sound in a word with the letters [gh]. And it is believed that that Dutch spelling convention gave us the [gh] in words like ***ghost*** and ***aghast***, both of which had previously been spelled with a simple [g] in English. So even though spellings were starting to reflect the way words were pronounced, there was a disconnect in certain words.

Then I talked about the rise of etymological spellings in the early 1500s. That was an attempt to insert letters into words to reflect the Latin or Greek origins of the word. Those letters represented sounds that had become silent over the centuries, but some scholars and printers

wanted to provide a link back to the original root word. That's how we got the [b] in words like ***debt*** and ***doubt***, and the [p] in a word like ***receipt***, and the [l] in ***salmon***.

Then in the mid-1500s, we saw that some scholars were increasingly frustrated with the state of spelling at the time, and they started to recommend a purely phonetic approach. That included writers like John Hart who even devised his own phonetic script to spell words exactly like they were pronounced. But that idea never really stood a chance. First of all, as Hart demonstrated, the existing alphabet wasn't sufficient to represent all of the sounds in the language. For example, each vowel letter represented a so-called 'long' sound and a separate 'short' sound, like the 'long A' in ***hate*** and the 'short A' in ***hat***. For a phonetic spelling system to work, it would require the adoption of new letters, which was very difficult in the era of the printing press when printers had to work with the type they had.

Another problem with the phonetic spelling approach is that it assumed that words were pronounced in one specific way or one way that was deemed to be 'correct.' But of course, as we've seen, accents varied greatly throughout England and the British Isles. Accents also varied in the same place among different classes of people. So it was difficult to adopt a phonetic spelling system when there were so many different ways of pronouncing the same word.

Another problem is the fact that the pronunciation of words changes with time. If you adopt a phonetic spelling system, you have to constantly revise it or it soon ceases to be phonetic.

It was the schoolmaster Richard Mulcaster who tried to reconcile these competing ideas, and in doing so, he gave us our modern approach to spelling. Back in Episode 163, we looked at his book called the Elementarie. In that book, he recognized the value of phonetic spellings. In fact, the vast majority of words at the time were spelled phonetically, but as we've seen, there were exceptions and limitations. Well, Mulcaster said that the well-established spelling conventions should be maintained and standardized. He said that is was impractical to adopt a purely phonetic approach. So it was OK to include letters to reflect to the Latin and Greek roots of a word, and it was OK to use silent [e]'s at the end of a word to indicate that the prior vowel was pronounced as a long vowel. All that was really needed was a standardized approach. Once spellings were fixed, people would learn them and use them, and that was all that really mattered. He even recommended the preparation of an English dictionary to help standardize spellings. He didn't prepare a dictionary himself, but he did include a list of several thousand common words to illustrate his approach.

Now even though Mulcaster's ideas about spelling soon became the norm, it isn't clear how much his book actually influenced those developments. He was a headmaster writing to other scholars, so his audience would have been somewhat limited. But now, at the current point in our overall story in the year 1596, Mulcaster's ideas were about to be made available to the general public. And that was a crucial step in standardizing the spellings that existed at the time.

The book that brought these ideas to the general public is known as 'The English School-Maister.' The book was written by a schoolmaster named Edward Coote, and it was published in 1596. As we'll see, it was one of the earliest spelling books, and it had a significant influence on

the way words were spelled going forward. In fact, what really fixed and standardized English spellings was the advent of spelling guides and dictionaries designed for the general public. Coote's book also included a long list of words to illustrate his recommended spellings, and many of those words included short definitions. So this book hinted at the development of a proper English dictionary, which was less than a decade away. Mulcaster had recommended the creation of an English dictionary, and Coote showed how it could be done.

Now I said that the title of the book was the 'English School-Maister,' but Coote made it very clear that his book wasn't intended solely for schoolmasters and other scholars. He intended the book to be made available to the general public. It was essentially a step-by-step guide for someone who was learning how to read and write, but didn't have a formal education. The idea was that the book would serve as a practical guide. So the spellings he used were the spellings that people would actually encounter if they were reading books at the time. He wasn't interested in reform or academic arguments about phonetic spelling. He just wanted to help people to read the books that were coming off the presses. And as it turned out, a lot of people wanted that type of guide. The book proved to be very popular. It remained in print for over a century. It was still being printed and read in the 1700s, and over that period of time, more than 40 editions appeared. [*SOURCE: The Art of Spelling, Marilyn Vos Savant, p. 79*] This established the model going forward. Other spelling guides were published in the 1600s, and they tended to follow Coote's approach of using common spellings that people would actually encounter. And the success of those guides and the new dictionaries to come effectively locked in those spellings going forward. And they gave us a spelling system largely based on pronunciations that existed in the 1500s, subject to the occasional silent letters to show the history of a word or to indicate how a vowel sound was to be pronounced.

In the introduction, Coote made it clear that his intended audience was anyone who wanted to learn how to read and write. He wrote "I am now therefore to direct my speech to the vnskilfull, which desire to make vse of it, for their owne priuate benefit; and to such men and women of trade, as Taylors, Weauers, Shop-keepers, Seamsters, and such other, as haue vndertaken the charge of teaching others . . ." This statement reflects the fact that many people at the time wanted to learn how to read and write, but didn't have the means to do so. And note that he specifically addressed his comment to men and women. Girls were still restricted from attending schools, so they had to learn on their own or from a private tutor. In fact, in a later section of the book, in a series of dialogues which he composed, he has one of the speakers say that he was taught to read and spell by his 'Dame' – in other words, by a female teacher. So we have evidence in this book that women were also serving as teachers and instructors during this period.

With respect to Coote's spellings, he specifically stated that he was using the spellings which were generally accepted at the time. Those were the ones used by most printers. Many of them were phonetic and reflected the way words were pronounced at the time, but as we've seen, some of them contained silent letters which weren't pronounced. And of course, there was still quite a bit of variation in the way some words were spelled. So Coote said that he was only going to focus on spellings that were generally accepted at the time. He wrote, "Also where I vndertake to make thee to write the true Orthography of any word truely pronounced, I must meane it of those

words whose writings [are] determined: for there are many, wherein the best English-men in this Land are not agreed."

Since the book was intended as a spelling guide, it begins by introducing the letters of the alphabet. It then illustrates the sounds of the letters by combining them into simple syllables like 'ba, be, bi, bo and bu.' From those basic syllables, the book shows how they can be combined to form entire words.

The second part of the book is structured as a series of dialogues between characters who discuss English spelling and pronunciation. In one of the dialogues, a master explains how a silent [e] can be added to the end of a short word to indicate a long vowel sound. In other words, the silent [e] is a way of indicating that the preceding vowel letter has the same sound as its name, so for example, when the letter [a] has the /ei/ sound or the letter [i] has the /ai/ sound. Those are the so-called 'long' sounds of the vowel letter. So when a silent [e] is added to the end of a word, it allows us to distinguish ***hat*** from ***hate***, ***bit*** from ***bite***, and ***hop*** from ***hope***. As I've noted in prior episodes, that spelling convention emerged over the prior century or so, and Richard Mulcaster had recommended it as a way to mark a long vowel sound in his book for other scholars. Now, Coote also adopted the technique in his spelling book for the general public.

In the dialogue, the master acknowledges the value of consistent spelling rules, but rejects the idea that they should replace the existing conventions. Again, the idea wasn't to reform English spelling, it was simply to help people understand the spellings that were being used at the time.

The dialogue then focuses on many other examples of the silent letters found in printed works. Since those spellings with silent letters were common, Coote accepted them as the 'standard' spellings. In the dialogue section, the master notes that the [e] is not pronounced in the name ***George***. In fact, there are two [e]'s in ***George*** and neither is pronounced. He notes that the letter [i] is not pronounced in words like ***shield***, ***brief***, ***siege***, ***fruit*** and ***suit***. The letter [o] is not pronounced in words like ***people*** and ***jeopardy***. The letter [u] is not pronounced in words like ***guest***, ***guide***, ***build*** and ***tongue***. Now, of course, we know that most of those spellings have a historical basis. It might have been a spelling convention borrowed from French or some other source, or it might have been a way to distinguish different vowel sounds with the limited vowel letters that we have. But whatever the source of those spellings, printers were using them, so Coote taught them.

The dialogue then presents many examples of silent letters based on the etymology or old pronunciations of words. He discusses the silent [b] in ***debt*** and ***doubt***, as well as at the end of words like ***lamb***, ***comb***, and ***thumb***. He mentions the silent [h] in ***ghost***, as well as in words like ***chronicle***, ***anchor*** and the name ***John***. He mentions the silent [n] at the end of words like ***solemn*** and ***hymn*** ('h-y-m-n').

And he notes that the letter combination [gh] was silent or lightly pronounced in many words. Of course, we still have lots of those words today where the [gh] doesn't really represent any sound at all – in words like ***light*** (l-i-g-h-t) and ***eight*** (e-i-g-h-t-) and ***though*** (t-h-o-u-g-h). Those are

mostly words inherited from Old and Middle English where the spelling represented a /x/ sound that has largely disappeared. So a word like ***light*** was once pronounced more like /lixt/. By the late 1500s, that sound had largely disappeared in those words, but the [gh] spelling was retained by writers and printers, so Coote maintained it as well. Interestingly, the dialogue section suggests that some conservative speakers still pronounced that sound very lightly. In that section, a master and student are discussing spelling conventions, and the master says that the sound represented by [gh] may or may not be pronounced by speakers, but he adds "the truest is both to write and pronounce them." In a separate dialogue, one of the speakers says, "[gh] is the truer writing, and it should have a little sound." So, Coote is recommending a light or soft pronunciation of that /x/ sound, but he acknowledges that many people don't pronounce the sound at all, and of course, it would soon disappear altogether from the standard English of London and southern England, though it survived in some other parts of the British Isles like in Scotland.

The dialogues then note that English words that end with an /us/ sound are spelled with a single [u] when they consist of one syllable. The word ***truss*** is given as an example, but of course, we could also add words like ***bus***, ***plus***, ***fuss***, and ***puss***. The book then notes that when the sound appears at the end of a multi-syllable word, it is usually spelled [ous]. The words ***glorious*** and ***frivolous*** are given as examples.

These types of examples are intended to illustrate situations where the accepted spellings aren't strictly phonetic or straight-forward – where the spellings don't necessarily match the pronunciation. Cootes discusses those spellings because they pose a challenge to people learning to read and write. He then explains that another problem occurs when people speak with an accent that is very different from the accent used around London. Since London speech guided English spelling, the spellings were more phonetic among those speakers. But if someone spoke with a very different accent, especially a rural accent, the spellings were less likely to reflect the way that person pronounced their words. Coote wrote, "I know not what can easily deceiue you in writing, vnlesse it be by imitating the barbarous spéech of your Country people, whereof I will giue you a tast, thereby to giue you an occasion to take héed, not of these only, but of any like.

He then gives examples of what he considers to be incorrect or bad speech. He begins by mentioning the vowel sound in words like ***mill*** and ***hill***. He says some people wrongly pronounce those words as 'mell' and 'hell' with a slightly different vowel sound – more of a short [e] sound. That was a common feature of the accent spoken in Kent to the southeast of London. And it had apparently spread to London as well. He says, "Some people speake thus: The mell standeth on the hell, for the mill standeth on the hill: so knet for knit, bredg for bridg." Again, the idea was that someone who pronounced those words in that way would tend to spell them incorrectly with an [e] rather than an [i]. [*SOURCE: The Cambridge History of the English Language, Volume III, Roger Lass, Ed., p. 17*]

The passage then includes some more examples of what Coote considered to be 'bad' pronunciations. For example, he criticizes people who say ***afeard*** rather than ***afraid***. ***Afeared*** was very common at the time, and still exists in some dialects. As we'll see, even Shakespeare used it.

But Coote considered it to be a bad pronunciation which could cause people to spell the word incorrectly. Of course, he spells the word like we do today – 'a-f-r-a-i-d.'

Coote also mentions another pronunciation which he considers to be improper. And that pronunciation is especially notable because it is one of the earliest references we have to an important vowel change that took place in English over the following century. Coote references the words ***dirt***, ***girth***, and ***her***, which were traditionally pronounced /dɪrt/, /gɪrth/ and /hɛr/. He says that some people mispronounce those words. Instead of /dɪrt/, they say 'durt,' which he spells 'd-u-r-t.' And instead of /gɪrth/, they say 'gurt,' which he spells 'g-u-r-t.' And for the feminine pronoun, instead of saying /hɛr/, he says that some people mispronounced it as 'hur,' which he spells 'h-u-r.' Now obviously, the vowel sound that he thought was incorrect is the typical vowel sound that we hear today in the standard English of southern England and North America. And that's because several different vowel sounds merged into a single, uniform /er/ sound in the 1600s. That /er/ sound was actually a brand new sound in the language at the time. And even though the 'r' sound at the end was later dropped in most British English accents, it survives in American English. And that 'r' sound was really the key to this merger.

I mentioned this particular merger back in Episode 160. That was the episode where I talked about the letter [r] and its pronunciation, and I mentioned that the modern sound of that letter can do funny things to a vowel sound that immediately precedes it or follows it. It appears that people sometimes anticipate that 'r' sound, which has open vowel-like qualities, and they adjust the preceding vowel slightly to accommodate that 'r' sound. So in this case, the short 'e', 'i', and 'u' sounds were pronounced with the tongue in very different positions, but when those sounds appeared before the 'r' sound, people tended to cheat a little bit, and they shifted the tongue into a more centralized or neutral position to anticipate the shape required to make the 'r' sound. That meant that those three distinct vowels all merged together into the centralized vowel that is pronounced /ə/ and is called schwa by linguists. In earlier episodes, I described that /ə/ vowel sound as a black hole which tends to suck in the vowel sounds around it. And that's basically what happened here. That /ə/ sound combined with the following [r] gave us the /er/ sound that is so common today.

So let's look a little closer at that change. Words spelled with [er] originally had the /ɛr/ sound. That included words like /nɛrve/, /vɛrb/, /mɛrcy/ and /hɛr/. Well, now they started to become ***nerve***, ***verb***, ***mercy*** and ***her***. Words spelled with [ir] traditionally had the /ɪr/ sound. That included words like /dɪrt/, /gɪrl/, /thɪrd/ and /fɪrst/. Now those words started to be pronounced ***dirt***, ***girl***, ***third*** and ***first***. And words spelled with [ur] or [wor] traditionally had the /ʊr/ sound. That included words like /hʊrt/, /nʊrse/, /wʊrd/ and /wʊrm/. But with this vowel merger, those words now became ***hurt***, ***nurse***, ***word*** and ***worm***.

So I hope you can hear how those vowel sounds merged into the same general sound over time. Coote's spelling guide provides some of the earliest written evidence of this change, and even if it existed in other parts of England prior to this point, Coote confirms that it had started to reach London by the late 1500s. Coote considered it a bad pronunciation, but it obviously became widespread over the course of the following century.

Now I should note that this merger didn't happen in parts of Scotland and Ireland, so many speakers in those regions still pronounce many of those words with the older vowel sounds.

The merger is also important to the theme of this episode because it shows how English spelling preserves the pronunciations of the 1500s. At the time, spellings with [er], [ir], [ur], and [wor] reflected different vowel sounds and different pronunciations. But today, those spellings often represent the same sound. As a result, modern spelling is much less phonetic that it was during the time of Shakespeare.

And note how the vowel merger I just described is really the opposite of the double [o] examples I mentioned earlier. Words spelled with double [o]'s have different vowel sounds today because the vowel sound split into different sounds. So instead of a vowel merger, that was a case of a vowel split. Words like ***boot***, ***blood***, and ***foot*** were spelled with double [o]'s because they once had the same vowel sound – /bu:t/, /blu:d/, and /fu:t/, respectively. That was likely still the case when Shakespeare lived. But in the 1600s, the sound start to move in different directions. And when that happened, the older spellings no longer reflected the way the words were pronounced.

So whether sounds merged together or split apart after the 1500s, the result was essentially the same – a less phonetic spelling system and frustration for generations of people trying to spell English words.

Now at the end of Coote's book, he included a long list of words with his recommended spellings. They were words that he considered to be hard words that people might not know how to spell or might not be familiar with. They were mostly Latinate words, and he included short definitions or synonyms for many of them. Some scholars have noted that this was a major step in the direction of an English dictionary with English words defined with English terms, but this word list was somewhat limited. He only included about 1400 words, whereas Richard Mulcaster's earlier book about English spelling included a list of about 8000 words. Also, Coote did not feel the need to define every word. He only defined the words that he thought readers might not understand. And where a word had multiple definitions, he only included the definition that people might not know. He specifically mentioned how he chose to define the word ***bark***. He said that almost everyone knows that the word ***bark*** refers to the sound a dog makes, so there was no need to include that definition. But ***bark*** also refers to a type of ship, so that was the only definition he included. While Coote's word list with definitions came close to an English dictionary, it didn't quite hit the mark. But the first proper English dictionary was just around the corner. It would appear just eight years later.

As I noted, Coote's spelling guide was the first such guide to reach a wide audience, including printers who were obviously interested in the way words were spelled. Printers wanted to use spellings that people recognized because it made their publications easier to read – and therefore easier to sell.

Other spelling guides appeared during the 1600s, and as I noted, that first English dictionary appeared just eight years later. Initially, there was still some variation in the way those sources spelled words, but over time, the spellings started to converge. And for the first time in English,

there were resources that people could consult to determine how a word was supposed to be spelled. The people turning to those sources included printers. In many ways, printers had led the way toward standardization, but now, with spelling guides and dictionaries in place, they followed what those sources recommended. By the end of the 1600s, modern English spelling was basically in place. So in the end, it was really dictionaries and spelling guides like the one published by Coote that gave us the spellings we have today. [*SOURCE: A History of English Spelling,' D.G. Scragg, p. 77-8.*] And those spellings largely reflect the state of the language in the 1500s.

Now in the same year that Edmund Coote published his spelling guide, a writer named Thomas Nashe published a notable pamphlet called 'Haue with you to Saffron-Walden.' Nashe was a poet and playwright. He was also a writer of pamphlets, and this particular pamphlet composed in 1596 was part of an on-going dispute with another writer named Gabriel Harvey. They attacked each other in pamphlets for several years, and this was Nashe's final reply. Saffron-Walden was Harvey's residence, and he had apparently retired there a couple of years earlier. So that explains the title of Nashe's pamphlet – 'Haue with you to Saffron-Walden.'

The pamphlet is notable for our purposes because it contains the earliest known use – or one of the earliest known uses – of several common idioms. For example, in one passage, Nashe wrote that Harvey had abandoned a couple of companions and "left both of them in the lurtch." According to the Oxford English Dictionary, that is the first recorded use of the phrase 'left in the lurch' in an English document.

You might think that the phrase is derived from the word ***lurch*** as in the lurching of a ship, but it isn't. It's actually derived from a completely different word. ***Lurch*** was the name of a game played with dice similar to backgammon. It came to England from France where it was called ***lourche***. Well, if a player was losing the game very badly, to the point that he or she had no chance of winning, that person was said to 'incur a lurch' or to be 'in the lurch.' The term is still used in cribbage in a similar sense. Well, from that gaming sense of the word ***lurch***, it produced this particular phrase 'to leave someone in the lurch' meaning to leave someone in a difficult or hopeless position. Again, it is first recorded in this pamphlet by Thomas Nashe, though it was probably in common use at the time.

Nashe's dispute with Harvey also extended to Harvey's brother Richard. And in one passage of the pamphlet, Nashe attacks both of the brothers. He writes, "I vtterly despai[r]e of them, or not so much despaire of them, as count them a paire of poore ideots, b[e]ing not only but also two brothers, two blockheads, two blunderkins, hauing their braines stu[f]t with [n]ought but balder-dash." And I mention that passage because that is the first recorded use of the word ***balderdash*** in English.

Now since that is the first recorded use, it may seem like Nashe coined the term ***balderdash***. But that probably isn't the case. A short time later, the word popped up again in several other documents where it meant a frothy liquid. So the term was probably around in common speech when Nashe wrote his pamphlet. And when he wrote that the Harvey brothers had brains stuffed with nothing but balderdash, he meant that their brains were filled with froth. But in the early 1600s, the sense of the word started to shift from a frothy liquid to a mixture of liquids. And

from there, the term was extended to language by the end of the century. Instead of a jumbled mixture of liquids, it came to me a jumbled mixture of words. And that is the sense of the term today when we say that someone is 'speaking balderdash.'

In another part of the pamphlet, there is a dialogue section. Fictional dialogues were common in documents during this period. And in the pamphlet, Nashe has his characters debate whether burning or drowning is worse. One of the characters says, "if the worst come to the worst, a good swimmer may doo much, whereas fire . . . sweepeth cleane where it seazeth." This is one of the earliest recorded uses of the phrase 'worst comes to worst.'

The pamphlet also provides the first reference to a phrase later found in many nursery rhymes like Jack and the Beanstalk. Nashe criticizes Harvey for being a long-winded pedant who loves to hear himself talk. He says that Harvey is someone who will spend a whole day speaking about "the first inuention of Fy, fa, fum, I smell the bloud of an English-man." Of course, you probably know that phrase as "Fee fie fo fum, I spell the blood of an Englishman." As I noted, it appeared in several later nursery rhymes, but it was apparently common at the time. The context of Nashe's statement that Harvey would spend the who day discussing the origin of that phrase indicates that it must have been common in the late 1500s. And in fact, Shakespeare used the same phrase a few years later in King Lear. In that play, the character Edgar says, "Fie, foh and fumme, I smell the blood of a British man." The phrase is apparently derived from the word ***fie***, which many people used to show disgust in the late Middle Ages.

Interestingly, when Nashe wrote "Fy, fa, fum, I smell the bloud of an English-man," the word ***blood*** was spelled b-l-o-u-d. At least, that's how the printer spelled it. But when the same basic phrase appeared in the First Folio of Shakespeare's works nearly 30 years later, it was spelled 'b-l-o-o-d.' And that shows how the spellings were quickly falling into line with the spellings we use today.

I think Nashe's pamphlet is interesting to note because it shows how active this period was in terms of the development of the language. We tend to focus most of our attention on the major works of Shakespeare, but here we have an obscure pamphlet written to attack a fellow writer, and it contains several firsts for the language. So even obscure documents like this show significant developments in the way words were being used at the time.

Now as I noted, Nashe's pamphlet was published in 1596 – the same year as Coote's spelling guide. During this same year, there also was a notable political development in England. In the springtime, England sent a naval expedition to Spain to ransack the port city of Cadiz. This was part of the ongoing dispute between England and Spain. It had been almost two decades since the Spanish Armada had been repelled from England. In the years that followed, the English navy emerged as a powerful force in the north Atlantic. And this particular assault on Spain was actually successful. The Spaniards were taken by surprise, and the English forces were able to capture the city of Cadiz for a brief period of time. The local Spanish authorities actually sank many of their own ships to prevent them from being captured. But limited supplies forced the English to abandon the city a short time later. When they left, they took a lot of Spanish gold and silver with them, but the sailors largely distributed it among themselves – leaving very little for a

disappointed queen back in England. Elizabeth needed the money to pay the cost of the expedition, and of course, to fill her own coffers. [*SOURCE: The Tudors, Peter Ackroyd, p. 451.*]

One of the leaders of the expedition was Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex – generally known to history as Essex. He was already emerging as an important figure late in Elizabeth's reign, and as we'll see in the next couple of episodes, he had an up-and-down relationship with Elizabeth. And this is a good example of the conflict that was to come. Many people hailed him as a hero for the attack on Cadiz, but Elizabeth was furious that he didn't provide her with the gold and silver that she expected to receive.

That Spanish expedition is important to our story because it actually contributed a new word to the English language. And that was the word ***derrick*** meaning a device used to hoist or move something very heavy. And the story of this word is a fascinating insight into the political developments in England during this period.

The word ***derrick*** is actually derived from a person's name. That person was Thomas Derrick. He was part of the crew that took part in the siege and sack of Cadiz in 1596. But during that siege, he was accused of raping several women. When he returned to England, he was found guilty of that offense and sentenced to be brutally flogged. But in order to avoid that sentence, he agreed to become the executioner at Tyburn, which was the place where executions normally took place in London. So instead of receiving a brutal punishment, he agreed to inflict a lethal punishment on others. Supposedly, the deal was arranged by the Earl of Essex who I mentioned a moment ago. According to the most commonly recited accounts, Essex pardoned Derrick for the rapes and secured his new position as executioner. Over the course of Derrick's career, he executed over 3,000 people. And in a fascinating bit of irony, one of the people he eventually executed was Essex himself after the earl's dispute with the queen reached the level of treason. But more on that in an upcoming episode. [*SOURCE: The Merriam-Webster New Book of Word Histories, p. 138; Word People, Nancy Caldwell Sorel, p. 86.*]

Thomas Derrick was so well-known as the executioner during this period that his name soon became synonymous with the gallows itself. And in fact, the word ***derrick*** was sometimes used as a verb meaning 'to execute.' By the mid-1700s, the term was extended to cranes or other lifting devices. Those devices used lifts and pulleys, and apparently resembled the gallows which also had a large beam with a rope dangling from it. So some people referred to those cranes as ***derricks***, and that eventually became the accepted term for those devices, and thereby gave us the modern meaning of the word ***derrick***.

While the expedition to Spain was considered a success, England's greatest naval hero Francis Drake didn't participate in it. And that was because he had died a few months earlier near Panama. He had been on an expedition to the Caribbean and Spanish America when he contracted dysentery. And he died a short time later in January.

In fact, despite the naval success at Cadiz, the year 1596 was overall a bad year for many people in England. For the prior couple of years, there had been excessive rain and flooding, which had ruined many crops in the countryside. That led to starvation in many parts of the country. Many

people saw their wages plummet, and the price of essential goods like flour tripled during this period. Vagrancy had been a problem for many years, and now it became even worse. [*SOURCE: The Tutors, Peter Ackroyd, p. 448*.]

The bad weather and limited food supplies may have contributed to another outbreak of plague and other illnesses during 1596. In the springtime, Queen Elizabeth was reported to be ill, though she did soon recover. And during the summer, William Shakespeare's only son Hamnet died of unknown causes. He was only 11 years old. Around the same time, the leading patron of Shakespeare's acting company also died. His name was Henry Carey, and he was the Lord Chamberlain. You might recall that Shakespeare's acting company was called the Lord Chamberlain's Men. Well, when Henry died, the patronage passed to his son George. No one knows for certain what caused the deaths of Shakespeare's son and his company's leading patron, but there has been a lot of speculation they both died from the renewed outbreak of plague. So for Shakespeare, and many other people in England, the year 1596 was a year of death and disruption.

It was around this same time that Shakespeare probably composed two of his most popular plays – A Midsummer Night's Dream and Romeo and Juliet. As I noted at the beginning of the episode, we'll explore Romeo and Juliet next time. But I want to conclude this episode by examining A Midsummer Night's Dream.

For reasons that we'll see, modern scholars think these two plays were composed around the same time, though a specific date is difficult to determine. Both A Midsummer Night's Dream and Romeo and Juliet are included in Francis Meres's list of Shakespeare's plays from 1598 – a couple of years later. Also, Romeo and Juliet was published in a quarto edition in early 1597, so it had to have been composed around this time or earlier. Whether A Midsummer Night's Dream was composed slightly earlier or later or at the same time is unclear.

I should also note that Shakespeare's most popular and highly regarded plays started to appear around this time, and it seems likely that A Midsummer Night's Dream and Romeo and Juliet were composed during the beginning of this middle period when the overall quality of his plays increased. Most scholars agree that these two plays are the work of an experienced and mature playwright, and that makes it unlikely that they were holdovers from an earlier period of his career.

A Midsummer Night's Dream is set in ancient Greece before the time of the Trojan War. The opening scene features the leader of Athens named Theseus. According to Greek legend, Theseus defeated the Amazons and married their Amazonian queen. Well, the play opens with the anticipated wedding of Theseus and his soon-to-be wife, Hippolyta. But that is really just the backdrop of the play. They aren't really involved in the main part of the story.

A man named Egeus arrives at Theseus's court and complains that his daughter Hermia doesn't want to marry the man he prefers for her to marry. He wants her to marry a man named Demetrius, and Demetrius wants to marry her, but she is in love with another man named Lysander. So as the play begins, we have the primary couple of Hermia and Lysander, and we also

have Demetrius who is pursuing Hermia. But Demetrius also has a former girlfriend named Helena who is still in love with him. So Helena loves Demetrius, who loves Hermia, who loves Lysander.

Well, the primary couple, Hermia and Lysander, decide to leave the city and go to the woods to avoid Hermia's father and to elope with a wedding in the forest.

The scene then shifts to the woods, which is inhabited by fairies. I talked about the perception of fairies during this period back in Episode 168. As I mentioned in that earlier episode, fairies were traditionally viewed as sinister figures or playful tricksters. People who believed in them tried to avoid them. They were also generally though to be human-sized. The modern perception of fairies as tiny, delicate, winged creatures didn't really emerge until after the Elizabethan period, and a lot of people think this play by Shakespeare contributed to that modern perception. In fact, Shakespeare suggests that his fairies are tiny creatures in the scene where he first introduces them.

In this scene, we are introduced to the king and queen of the fairies – Oberon and Titania. By the way, if you're a fan of astronomy, you may know that the two largest moons of Uranus are called Oberon and Titania. And they were named after the characters in this play.

When we are first introduced to the Oberon and Titania, they are arguing with other, which frightens the other fairies. A fairy named Puck says:

But, they do square, that all their elves for fear
Creep into acorn-cups and hide them there.

So if they were small enough to hide in acorn cups, they must have been pretty small. And I should note that those two lines were part of a rhyming passage, so the lines were supposed to rhyme, but the first line ends with the word ***fear***, and the second line ends with the word ***there***. Well, earlier in the episode, I mentioned a passage in Richard II where Shakespeare rhymed that same word ***fear*** with the verb 'to ***tear***.' And I noted, that the words were probably pronounced /fɛr/ and /tɛr/ at the time. Well, here we have more evidence of that pronunciation because most scholars agree that the word ***there*** was pronounced much like today in Elizabethan England. In this same part of A Midsummer Night's Dream, Shakespeare rhymes the word ***fear*** with the word ***bear***, and in a separate passage, he rhymes ***there*** with ***swear***. So we have really strong evidence that he pronounced ***fear*** as /fɛr/, and if we give that word its original pronunciation, the lines I read a moment ago would have rhymed at the end like this:

But, they do square, that all their elves for fear (/fɛr/)
Creep into acorn-cups and hide them there.

That's a good example of how modern linguists have re-created Shakespeare's pronunciation.

So why were the king and queen of the fairies arguing with each other? Well, according to the fairy Puck, the queen Titania had taken a baby from a human couple and refused to give the baby to her husband, Oberon. And Oberon was upset about that.

Now that passage probably requires an explanation. I mentioned earlier that fairies were often perceived as sinister or malevolent figures. And according to one widespread belief, fairies were the cause of mental disabilities in babies or small children. It was believed that babies were born healthy, but in those cases, a fairy had stolen the original baby and replaced him or her with what was called a 'changeling,' which often suffered from disability or illness. So that is what Shakespeare is referencing here. The fairy queen has stolen a baby, but the king wants it for himself.

The fairy Puck says that he is Oberon's servant and trickster. He makes the king laugh by performing tricks on humans. He says that he tricks a fat old horse by pretending to be a young filly. And he tricks an old woman by pretending to be a crab apple in her bowl of ale so that when she drinks from the bowl, he bobs against her lips and makes her spill it on herself. And he pretends to be a stool, and when an old woman tries to sit on him, he slips out from under her so that she falls to the ground and cries out and coughs while everyone laughs at her. Now in the passage where Puck says that, Shakespeare includes a couple of rhymes that seem odd to us today. He rhymes the words ***crab*** and ***bob*** and the words ***cough*** and ***laugh***. Here's the entire passage, and notice those odd rhymes:

I jest to Oberon and make him smile
When I a fat and bean-fed horse beguile,
Neighing in likeness of a filly foal.
And sometime lurk I in a gossip's bowl
In very likeness of a roasted crab,
And, when she drinks, against her lips I bob
And on her withered dewlap pour the ale.
The wisest aunt, telling the saddest tale,
Sometime for three-foot stool mistaketh me;
Then slip I from her bum, down topples she
And "Tailor!" cries and falls into a cough,
And then the whole choir hold their hips and laugh
And waxen in their mirth and neeze and swear
A merrier hour was never wasted there.

So this is a fascinating passage because of those two couplets where he rhymes those words with 'short A' sounds (***crab*** and ***laugh***) with those words with 'short O' sounds (***bob*** and ***cough***). Now the first two words – ***crab*** and ***laugh*** – are spelled with an [a], and the second two words – ***bob*** and ***cough*** – are spelled with an [o]. So that suggests that historically they were not pronounced with the same vowel sound. And of course, they are not generally pronounced with the same vowel sound today. So why did Shakespeare rhyme them?

Well, the answer is that the words actually did rhyme at the time – at least in some common accents. So far in this episode, we've seen examples where words that once had the same vowel sound split into different sounds after the 1500s. That's what happened with most of the words spelled with double [o]'s like ***food***, ***foot*** and ***blood***. And we've also seen examples where words that once had different vowel sounds experienced a merger where the various vowel sounds came

together and merged into the same sound like ***verb***, ***bird***, and ***word***. Well, now we have an example where both of those developments occurred. In this case, we have words with distinct vowel sounds that merged together – or nearly merged together – in the 1500s, and then in the following century, they split apart again. So the distinct vowel sounds in ***crab*** and ***bob*** and in ***laugh*** and ***cough*** merged together in the 1500s as /a/. So they would have been pronounced /crab/ and /bab/ and /laf/ and /caf/. But then they split apart again in the following century. So for this brief period of time in which Shakespeare lived, these words would have rhymed with each other, and we can find many of those types of rhymes in his works and the works of other writers during this period.

Now I say that those words had the same vowel sound, and some speakers probably did pronounce them the same. Other speakers might have made a slight distinction between the two vowel sounds, but they were close enough in pronunciation that they could rhyme with each other. Now I don't have time to explore that history any further in this episode, but I am going to discuss it in a little more detail next time. And the reason why this is so fascinating is that speakers who pronounced the vowels sounds in those words exactly the same way may provide evidence of an early American accent emerging during this period. And by that I mean that this feature survives in American English in a way that it doesn't really survive in British English. Again, I'll explore that issue in more detail next time, but I just wanted to note that the 'short A' and 'short O' sounds in a lot of words were so close in pronunciation during this period that Shakespeare could rhyme them.

The argument between the fairy king and queen continues, and in one passage, the fairy queen Titania says that their arguments and disagreements have caused great suffering over the land. In an extended passage, she describes how the winds have sucked up the seas and deposited the water over the country causing great flooding and suffering. The passage describes how crops have rotted in the fields and the crows have become fat from eating the corpses of dead sheep. She laments that the seasons have switched places and sickness had spread across the land.

This passage so closely describes the situation in England in 1595 and 1596 that most scholars are convinced that Shakespeare was referencing those actual events here. Even though the play was set in ancient Greece, references like this were often included to appeal to a contemporary audience. Remember that these plays were not really written for posterity. They were written for paying audiences in London in the late 1500s. So the inclusion of that passage about flooding, famine and disease is some of the strongest evidence we have that the play was composed around this time in 1596 or slightly before.

Now after Titania leaves the scene, the fairy king Oberon and his trickster servant Puck remain behind. Oberon has a plan to deceive Titania so he can get the baby from her. He tells a story about seeing Cupid shoot his arrow at a vestal virgin, but the arrow missed and landed on a flower. The virgin carried on unaffected. He says that she walked on "In maiden meditation, fancy-free." And that is the first recorded use of the term 'fancy-free' in the English language. It appears to be a term that Shakespeare coined.

So what exactly does 'fancy-free' mean? Well, believe it or not, ***fancy*** is just a shortened or slurred version of the word ***fantasy***. And during the Elizabethan period, the word ***fancy*** literally meant a ***fantasy***, but it could also be used to mean 'affection or love.' We still have that sense in English when we say a person 'fancies' someone. Well, in this case, since Cupid's arrow missed the vestal virgin, she continued on 'fancy-free' – meaning 'without falling in love.' Of course, that sense of 'living without a care in the world' has become the usual sense of the term 'fancy-free' today. In American English, the term is common in a phrase like 'footloose and fancy free.'

So how did the word ***fancy*** come to have its modern meaning as something overly elaborate or ornamental? Well, if you fantasize about something, you often imagine an ideal situation, perhaps something that doesn't even exist in the real world. That seems to be how the word evolved into a sense of something ideal or perfect or elaborate, which gave us the modern sense of the word. And that modern sense was in place by the late 1700s.

So ***fancy*** and ***fancy-free*** once had a connection to love and affection. And as Oberon recounts his story about Cupid, he says that Cupid's arrow missed the maiden and landed on a white flower, but the flower then turned purple with love's wound. Oberon says that if the juice of the flower is extracted and placed on the eyelids of a sleeping person, that person will fall in love with the first creature he or she sees when he or she wakes up. He wants Puck to find the juice and place it on Titania's eyelids while she is sleeping. When she awakes and falls in love, she will be distracted so that Oberon can take the baby from her. Once he has the baby, he will then remove the love spell. With the plan in place, Puck leaves to obtain the juice of the flower.

The scene then turns back to the humans. Remember that the primary couple in the story are Lysander and Hermia. They are in love with each other and have fled to the forest to elope. But Demetrius is also in love with Hermia, and his former girlfriend Helena is still in love with him. Well, Demetrius has followed Hermia into the forest, and Helena had tagged along as well. We then hear a conversation between Demetrius and his former girlfriend Helena where he says that he no longer loves her, but Helena says that she still loves him dearly. The fairy king Oberon overhears the conversation and feels sorry for Helena. When Puck returns with the juice that makes people fall in love, he tells Puck to place some of it on the eyelids of the Athenian man in the forest who no longer loves his girlfriend. The juice will rekindle his love for her. Of course, he is referring to Demetrius, but Puck is uncertain who Oberon is referring to. Oberon then places some of the juice on the eyelids of the sleeping fairy queen Titania.

Following Oberon's instructions, Puck goes through the forest looking for the Athenian man, but Puck can't find him. We then have the following passage from Puck where he initially says he can't find the Athenian, and then suddenly comes across a couple sleeping on the ground and assumes this is the man that Oberon was referring to. But it's not. It's actually the original couple – Lysander and Hermia. Now this is a rhyming passage, but notice how almost none of the lines rhyme today. Puck says:

Through the forest have I gone,
But Athenian found I none
On whose eyes I might approve

This flower's force in stirring love.
Night and silence! Who is here?
Weeds of Athens he doth wear.
This is he my master said
Despisèd the Athenian maid.
And here the maiden, sleeping sound
On the dank and dirty ground.
Pretty soul, she durst not lie
Near this lack-love, this kill-courtesy.

So within that passage, Shakespeare rhymes ***gone*** and ***none***, ***approve*** and ***love***, ***here*** and ***wear***, ***said*** and ***maid***, and ***lie*** and ***courtesy***. Now again, those don't rhyme today, but they did at the time. I'm going to read that same passage again, and this time, I'm going to give the final word in each line the pronunciation that most scholars think it had at the time.

Through the forest have I gone (/go:n/),
But Athenian found I none (/no:n/)
On whose eyes I might approve (/aprʊv/)
This flower's force in stirring love (/lʊv/).
Night and silence! Who is here? (/hɛr/)
Weeds of Athens he doth wear. (/wɛr/)
This is he my master said (/sɛd/)
Despis-èd the Athenian maid. (/nɛd/)
And here the maiden, sleeping sound (/səʊnd/)
On the dank and dirty ground. (/grəʊnd/)
Pretty soul, she durst not lie (/ləɪ/)
Near this lack-love, this kill-courtesy. (/kur-teh-səɪ/)

Within those rhymes you can hear the sound of Elizabethan English.

Also, I should mention something interesting about the part of that passage which refers to Hermia sleeping "on the dank and dirty ground." In the original First Folio version of this play published in 1623, the word ***dirty*** is spelled 'd-u-r-t-y.' That's the same type of spelling that Edmund Coote used in his spelling guide which we looked at earlier. In fact, he used the word ***dirt*** as an example. He said some people mispronounce /dɪrt/ as /dərt/, which he spelled 'd-u-r-t.' That was an early indication that the vowel sound in /dɪrt/ was shifting and merging with those other vowel sounds and becoming /dərt/. And here, the First Folio published about 30 years later, shows the same spelling. That is further evidence that this vowel merger had become much more widespread over the intervening years.

Now returning to the play, Puck has encountered this sleeping couple on the ground, and he assumes the man is the one who has fallen out of love with his partner. So he places the love drops on the eyelids of the sleeping man. But as I noted, the man is not Demetrius, but Lysander. And Lysanda is in love with Hermia, and they are soon to be married in the forest.

Meanwhile, the other couple – Demetrius and Helena – have gone their separate ways. Demetrius is looking for Hermia and Helena is chasing after him. But Helena passes by Lysander just as he awakes from his nap. And seeing Helena, he suddenly falls in love with her.

So now the two couples are completely mismatched. While the two women are still in love with their respective men, each of the men is in love with the woman who is part of the other couple.

The scene then shifts another part of the same forest where a group of men are rehearsing a play to be performed at the upcoming wedding of the Athenian leader Theseus. This play is intended to be part of the wedding entertainment, but the men are manual laborers, and not very good actors. Puck sees them rehearsing and decides to play a trick. One of the men is a weaver named Bottom. And Puck turns his head into the head of a donkey, only the weaver doesn't realize that his head has changed. When the other men see him, they start to freak out, and some of them run away. The weaver Bottom says, "Why do they run away? This is knavery of them to make me afeard." Now here, we see Shakepeare use the word ***afeard*** instead of the word ***afraid***. Remember from earlier that Edmund Coote has criticized people who said ***afeard*** instead of ***afraid***. He thought it was a bad pronunciation. Interestingly, a few lines later, Shakespeare has the same character Bottom say, "I am not afraid." So within a few lines, the same character uses both forms of the word, which suggests that Shakespeare considered them to be somewhat interchangeable.

Bottom thinks the other men are playing a joke on him by pretending that his head has changed form. He says, "I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me." Of course, that was a cute little bit of wordplay by the playwright since Bottom's head was now the head of ass. And scholars have also noted that his name is Bottom, which is a synonym for ***ass*** in the sense of one's backside. So there's a lot of wordplay in this passage. As it turns out, Titania – the queen of the fairies – is sleeping nearby, and when she awakes, she sees Bottom with his ass's head. Since Oberon has placed the love drops on her eyes while she was sleeping, she instantly falls in love with Bottom and his donkey's head. She tells him that she loves him and orders the other fairies to pamper him and do as he wishes.

Puck returns to the fairy king Oberon to tell him what has happened to Titania. Oberon is pleased with the results, but then he asks Puck if he has delivered the love drops to the Athenian man. Puck says that he has, and as he does so, Demetrius arrives. Oberon says that is the man, but Puck realizes that he has made a mistake because that isn't the man who received the drops.

Remember Demetrius was the man who left his girlfriend to follow Hermia into the forest with her boyfriend Lysander. Demetrius was supposed to receive the love drops so he would fall back in love with his girlfriend, but instead, Lysander got the drops and fell in love Demetrius's old girlfriend Helena. He then left the sleeping Hermia to follow after Helena. Well, Hermia has awakened to find her boyfriend Lysander missing. And when she sees Demetrius in the forest, she assumes that Demetrius has killed him. She confronts Demetrius, but he denies the accusation. He says:

You spend your passion on a misprised mood:
I am not guilty of Lysander's blood.

Again, this is supposed to be a rhyming couplet, but ***mood*** and ***blood*** don't rhyme today. Of course, they did rhyme at the time. As we saw earlier, words with those double O's were generally pronounced with an /oo/ sound at the time. And as I noted before, ***blood*** was pronounced /blu:d/. And here, we have further confirmation when Shakespeare rhymes that word with ***mood***.

Meanwhile, the fairy king Oberon now realizes the mistake that has been made, and he orders Puck to find Helena so that he can correct the error. Puck replies with one of the more quoted lines from the play – "Lord, What fools these mortals be!"

Puck returns with Helena, and when her old boyfriend Demetrius awakes from a nap with the love drops on his eyelids, he sees her and falls back in love with her. Meanwhile, Lysander – who mistakenly received the drops – is given an antidote, and his love returns to Hermia. The fairy king also restores Bottom's head and removes the spell from the fairy queen Titania. So now, all has been resolved. The two couples in the forest are now in love with each other again. The Athenian leader Theseus soon encounters the couples in the forest while hunting, and seeing that they are in love, he orders that the couples join him, and he directs that his upcoming wedding be a three-way wedding for all three couples.

At the wedding, the workers perform the play that they have been rehearsing. The play is actually a classic tale called 'Pyramus and Thisbe.' It appears in the writings of the Roman poet Ovid, who I've noted in prior episodes was one of Shakespeare's influences and the inspiration of several of his poems and plays. Well, this particular tale is especially interesting because it features two lovers – Pyramus and his girlfriend Thisbe. They live in adjoining houses, but their parents oppose their relationship, so they agree to meet in secret outside of town. Thisbe arrives first, but is frightened by a lion and runs away. She drops her veil, which the lion seizes in his mouth. The lion has just killed an ox, so his mouth is bloody, and he drops the veil on the ground. The veil is now covered in blood, so when Pyramus arrives a short time later, he finds the bloody veil and the lion's footprints. He assumes that Thisbe has been killed by the lion, and in a state of anguish, he kills himself on the spot. Then, Thisbe arrives to see her boyfriend lying dead on the ground. She breaks down, and then she kills herself as well. So spurred to desperate measures by disapproving parents, and a mistaken assumption of death – both the young man and young woman are dead – having taken their own lives. This is the portion of the play that is acted out at end of A Midsummer Night's Dream, and it seems remarkably similar to another story that appeared on the stages of London around this same time. Of course, that is the story of Romeo and Juliet. Modern scholars are intrigued by the possible connections between that play and this play-within-a-play featured at the end of A Midsummer Night's Dream. It seems possible that Shakespeare was inspired by this classic story of Pyramus and Thisbe. But Romeo and Juliet isn't really Shakespeare's version of that story. Even though his version is the most well-known today, the story of the star-crossed lovers from Verona had actually been around for a while. Shakespeare just adapted the story for the stage, and in doing so, he created one of the most popular plays of all time.

So next time, we'll look a little closer at that play, and we'll also examine the other events of the late 1590s that shaped the English language.

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