THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 175:
THE ENGLISH OF ROMEO AND JULIET

Presented by Kevin W. Stroud

EPISODE 175: THE ENGLISH OF ROMEO AND JULIET

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 175: The English of Romeo and Juliet. This time, we're going to examine one of the most popular plays ever written – a play that continues to be performed on stages and adapted to the silver screen to this day. Of course, that play is Romeo and Juliet. It is arguably Shakespeare's most popular play, and while he didn't invent the story, he certainly brought it to the masses through his poetic language and his particular use of English verse and prose. In this episode, we'll look at how the language of the play reflects the state of English in the late 1500s. We'll examine some interesting developments in English pronunciation as reflected in the play, and we'll also identify several terms and phrases used in the play have become part of the standard lexicon of English.

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

Now this time, we're going to focus on one of the most popular romantic stories of all time – the story of two star-crossed lovers from Verona named Romeo and Juliet. It is one of William Shakespeare's most enduring plays, and it continues to exert its influence on popular culture. If you have access to a theater or cinema or a streaming video service, you shouldn't have any problem finding a version of this play to watch. In fact, according to motion picture experts, Romeo and Juliet has been adapted to film more that any other Shakespeare play. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare: A Hundred Years of Film, Eddie Salmon.*] One of the most popular modern adaptations was the musical West Side Story – which now has two different motion picture versions. So most of you are probably familiar with this story.

My original plan was to discuss Romeo and Juliet as part of a regular episode. I've been trying to cover multiple Shakespeare plays within each episode so that we don't spend forever on this particular period of English. But I have so much to say about this play that I finally decided, heck with it, I'll just dedicate an entire episode to it. But this episode isn't just about that particular play. I'm actually going to use the play as a 'jumping off point' to discuss several other aspects of Elizabethan English that need some attention. And this will allow me to do more of a deep dive into some of those subjects.

Also, a few episodes back, I spoke with Ben Crystal about Shakespeare's English. Of course, Ben is a Shakespearean actor and also the son of the linguist David Crystal who has been so instrumental in reconstructing the way Shakespeare's English actually sounded. Ben has taken that research and study around the world to teach acting troupes how to perform these plays in their original pronunciation – or OP, for short. Well, during my original discussion with Ben, I had a few questions for him about this particular play, so in this episode, I'm going to include his comments and thoughts as well.

So let's get started, and let's begin with the earliest evidence we have of Shakespeare's version of the play. As I noted in the last episode, he composed a separate play called A Midsummer Night's Dream at some point in the mid-1590s. The general consensus of most scholars is that that play was composed sometime around 1595 or 1596. That would be during the year or so that followed the re-opening of the theaters in London after the plague that ravaged the city subsided. And due to may stylistic similarities, it is generally agreed that Romeo and Juliet was composed around the same time. In fact, A Midsummer Night's Dream concludes with a play-within-the-play based on an old Greek story called 'Pyramus and Thisbe.' And that play-within-the-play bears some striking similarities to the story of Romeo and Juliet. So most scholars agree that Shakespeare composed – or completed – Romeo and Juliet around the same time as A Midsummer Night's Dream, so sometime around 1595 or 1596.

The first actual evidence of the play appeared early in 1597. And that evidence was the earliest printed version of the play. I say the 'earliest printed version' because the wording of this early version is slightly different from the later Folio verison that we know today. This early version was published in the small quarto format, which was generally used for plays at the time. You might recall that that was a book format where a page was printed and folded twice to create four leaves from each original sheet of paper. This early quarto is sometimes called the 'bad quarto' of Romeo and Juliet. It was either based on an early draft of the play or was an unauthorized attempt to re-create the play by someone involved in the production. It appears that Shakespeare's acting company wasn't happy with the quality of this early version, so a couple of years later, a much better version was published apparently with the consent of the company. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare: The Evidence, Ian Wilson, p. 238-9.*]

As I noted, Romeo and Juliet would prove to be one of Shakespeare's most popular plays, and that first printed version suggests that it was already a hit. It proclaimed that the play "hath been often (with great applause) plaid publiquely." That implies that the play had been performed on many occasions before it was published early in 1597. And that tends to confirm a composition date around 1595 or 1596, or perhaps even slightly before that. At any rate, it appears that the play was popular from the beginning.

But I think it's important to note that the story of Romeo and Juliet was not a product of Shakespeare's imagination. It was actually an older Italian story that had been around for over a century. In the early 1500s, an Italian poet named Luigi da Porto had produced a version of the story with many of the elements that we would recognize today. Even in his account, he noted that it was old story that he had heard many times. He called his version 'Giulietta e Romeo.' In the mid-1500s, another Italian writer named Matteo Bandello published his version of the story, which was then translated into French. And a short time after that, the French version was translated into English by a writer named Arthur Brooke. He called his English version 'The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet.' And that appears to have been the primary source used by Shakespeare when he composed his version for the stage in the 1590s. [*SOURCE: The Shakespeare Guide to Italy, Richard Paul Roe, p. 8.*] So this was actually an old story in the late 1500s, but Shakespeare elevated it into a piece of literary art. And in doing so, he gave us one of the greatest romantic tragedies ever told.

Now if you're familiar with Romeo and Juliet, you know that it is centers around two rival families. In Luigi da Porto's earlier Italian version, the families were called Capuleti and Montecchi. Shakespeare simply shortened Capuleti to Capulet, but Montecchi underwent a slightly greater change. It was altered to Montague. So where did the name Montague come from?

Well, we don't know for certain, but there is a very compelling theory, and that theory takes us back to the episode I did about Shakespeare's sonnets. If you recall that episode, many scholars think that the young man that Shakespeare repeatedly referenced in the sonnets was the young Earl of Southampton, named Henry Wriothesley. There is a lot of evidence pointing to that connection, including the fact the Shakespeare's earliest published poems were dedicated to him. And there is even speculation that Shakespeare spent some time living at the residence of Southampton and Southampton's mother during the years when the theaters were closed due to the plague. Well, as it turns out, Southampton's mother was part of the English house of Montague, which meant that Wriothesley himself was also a descendant of that family. Now given the slow pace of the podcast over the past few episodes, that earlier sonnet period may seem like a long time ago, but it was really only a year or two before Shakespeare wrote Romeo and Juliet. And some scholars think he may have started working on the play during that same period. So it is possible that he decided to change the Italian name from Montecchi to Montague based on his connection to Southampton and the Southampton family. [*SOURCE: Shakespeare: The Evidence, Ian Wilson, p. 195.*] Again, we don't know that for certain, but the connection is intriguing.

Now obviously, Romeo and Juliet is a romantic story. Even though it ends in tragedy, it is a story about love at first sight. But as I take you through the play, you should keep in mind that women were not permitted on the stage during the period in which Shakespeare lived and wrote. So all female roles had to be portrayed by males. A character like Juliet would have probably been played by a teenage boy. Some scholars have noted that this limitation affected the way Shakespeare wrote love stories like Romeo and Juliet. With boys and men playing female characters, it wasn't really possible to include intimate sex scenes. So that meant that Shakespeare had to convey that sense of love, desire and intimacy through language. The words had to do the heavy lifting. [*SOURCE: The Friendly Shakespeare, Norrie Epstein, p. 47.*] And this is considered to be one of his greatest poetic works.

So let's look a little closer at the play, and let's begin with the introductory prologue. This introductory passage is described as the 'chorus' in the printed version of the play, and that's a term taken from ancient Greek plays. A couple of episodes back, I mentioned that Greek plays usually featured a group of singers and dancers who sang about and commented on the action of the play. They were called the ***chorus***, and that is actually where we get the word ***chorus***. In Elizabethan England, the term was often applied to the parts of a play that were traditionally performed by the chorus. But over time, the chorus had been largely reduced to an individual who addressed the audience with a short monologue. And that's what we have here.

This short chorus – or introductory prologue – not only sets the stage for the play, it also gives away the ending. It reveals that the play is a story about two 'households' or families in Verona in northern Italy. The families have an ancient grudge which has been renewed, but a son of one family and the daughter of the other become 'star-crossed lovers.' That means that they were born under the wrong stars, and are therefore fated to meet a tragic end. The chorus tells us that they will eventually take their own lives, but in doing so, will bring an end to the family strife.

Now I want you to listen to two versions of this opening chorus. The first is from the BBC production of the play back in 1979. The chorus is presented by the well-known actor Sir John Geilgud, and of course, it is delivered in a modern style of speech typically heard in presentations of the play today. It is a very formal version of what we know today as Received Pronunciation – the standard spoken accent of southern England. Many people refer to this accent as a standard British Accent. Of course, it is actually one of many different British accents, but it is the cultivated accent that was traditionally used by news presenters. At one time, if you spoke with a different British accent, you were encouraged or even required to learn Received Pronunciation if you wanted to speak on the radio, or television or on the stage. Of course, that isn't necessarily the case today, but Received Pronunciation still carries a lot of weight in Britain, and it is the accent that is generally used in performances of Shakespeare's plays in England.

So again, this is Sir John Geilgud's presentation of the opening chorus. And I should note that this is composed as a rhyming passage, so you may notice that as well. Here it is:

Two households, both alike in dignity
(In fair Verona, where we lay our scene),
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life,
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-marked love
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, naught could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage –
The which, if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

So again, that is the opening chorus of Romeo and Juliet as presented by Sir John Geilgud in modern Received Pronunciation. Well, as I noted earlier, I spoke with Ben Crystal a few episodes back. Ben and his father David have been key figures in the spread of what is known as Shakespeare's Original Pronunciation – or OP. That involves the presentation of Shakespeare's plays in a reconstructed version of an accent that might have been used at the time based on all of the available evidence about Elizabethan pronunciation. Much of the evidence includes evidence from Shakespeare's plays like the way he rhymed words and the way he made puns with words.

The idea is that plays like Romeo and Juliet can be performed in this old accent instead of modern Received Pronunciation. And as we'll see, the use of this old accent sometimes reveals rhymes and puns that we can't really hear today using modern pronunciations. Also, since Elizabethan speech represents a point in the history of the language just before it spread it around the world, the Original Pronunciation contains elements that seem familiar even if you are not from the British Isles. Some people describe the sound of OP as a cross between Received Pronunciation, Irish English and American English. And that is exactly what it should sound like because that is the version of the language that was spoken just before it split and fractured into those various regional forms.

I should also note that David Crystal really started his work on reconstructing Original Pronunciation thanks in large part to Romeo and Juliet. In the late 1990s, a replica of the Globe Theater was built in London near the site of the original theater. And shortly after it was completed, David Crystal was contacted and his assistance was requested to help present a version of Romeo and Juliet using the accent of the late 1500s. The resulting performances were so popular that an effort was made to bring that pronunciation to audiences around the world. And again, Ben Crystal has been an important part of that effort. So when I spoke to him recently, I asked him to present this same opening chorus in Original Pronunciation. I want you to compare this version to the Received Pronunciation version that I played a moment ago:

Two households, both alike in dignity
(In fair Verona, where we lay our scene),
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life,
Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-marked love
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, naught could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage –
The which, if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

Now that passage gives us the famous description of Romeo and Juliet as 'star-crossed lovers.' And if you paid attention to the rhymes, you probably noticed that most of them still work today. The only real exception in that part where Shakespeare rhymes the word ***love*** with the word ***remove***, but as we saw in the last episode, ***love*** and ***remove*** would have been pronounced more like /lʊv/ and /re-mʊv/ at the time, so they would have rhymed, and you can hear that pronunciation and that rhyme in Ben's OP version of the passage.

Now returning to the play, the opening scene takes place on the streets of Verona where members of the Capulet family encounter members of the Montague family, and fighting breaks out between the two groups. The brawl only comes to an end when the Prince of Verona arrives. The

Prince declares that the feud has gone on long enough, and he orders the execution of anyone who disturbs the streets again.

We then find out that the head of the Montague family has a son named Romeo who is in love with a woman who doesn't love him in return. But that woman isn't Juliet. It's actually a different woman named Rosaline. She is a member of the rival Capulet family, though we never actually meet her in the play. All we know is that Romeo is moping around because his love is unrequited.

Meanwhile, the head of the Capulet family has a daughter named Juliet. A local nobleman named Paris wants to marry her, and her father agrees that it would be a good match. The problem is that Juliet has not quite reached the age of 14. Even in Elizabethan England, that age was considered to be too young for marriage. It isn't clear why Shakespeare made her such a young girl in the story, but one theory is that the boy who played her in the production may have been the same age, and this was simply a way of referencing the boy's age for the audience. But regardless, she is depicted as being very young in this play.

We are then told that the Capulets are planning a great feast, and Romeo learns that Rosaline – the girl he is infatuated with – will be there. At the feast, the attendees wear masks, and Romeo decides to sneak in wearing a mask, along with his friends Benvolio and Mercutio. At the feast and party, Romeo sees Juliet for the first time, and he immediately falls for her. So in an instant, he falls out of love with Rosaline and falls in love with Juliet. He approaches Juliet, and they have a short conversation. And here, Shakespeare does something very subtle and very interesting. Through most of his plays, he ducks in and out of verse. In other words, sometimes the dialogue is just normal prose like I'm speaking to you right now. Then sometimes, he switches into iambic pentameter where each line has that specific 'de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM' rhythm for five beats. That's a type of poetry, even if it doesn't rhyme. Remember that poetry is just speech or writing that has some type of formal structure to it beyond normal grammar. So the use of a specific meter or rhythm is type of poetry. But then sometimes, Shakespeare takes it one step further and makes the lines rhyme so that he is actually using rhyming verse in his dialogue. Well, here, he takes it yet another step further, and he actually structures this initial dialogue between Romeo and Juliet as a sonnet. A sonnet is a type of rhyming poetry that uses iambic pentameter and also a specific rhyming pattern, but it is also limited to 14 lines in total. So it has an even more formal and more specific structure, and of course, it is a structure typically associated with an expression of love or affection. So here, Romeo and Juliet exchange lines in a way that is actually a sonnet. Here is the passage from the BBC production of the play:

[CLIP]

ROMEO: (*taking Juliet's hand*)
If I profane with my unworthiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:
My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

JULIET:
Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this,
For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

ROMEO:
Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIET:
Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer.

ROMEO:
O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do.
They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET:
Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

ROMEO:
Then move not, while my prayer's effect I take.
(*Kisses her*)

That passage concludes with the first kiss between Romeo and Juliet. Many scholars are fascinated by the way Shakespeare shifts in and out verse in his plays, and the different levels of formality and verse that he employs. His use of language almost always depends on what happening in a given scene. Comedic passages are often written in normal prose, whereas formal passages and soliloquies are typically written in a specific meter like iambic pentameter. In this play, Romeo tends to break into poetry whenever he sees or thinks about Juliet. Back when I spoke with Ben Crystal, I asked him about the way Shakespeare's used different types of poetry and poetic structures in his plays, and here is what Ben had to say about that:

> So imagine for a moment that you're sitting at the writing desk up in the writing garret – the wind whistling around the roofs, and you've got some parchment, and you've got your quill, and you've got your ink, and the process of writing was quite slow and laborious, you know – dip, dip, dib, scratch, scratch, scratch, dip, dip, dib, scratch, scratch, scratch. But let's massage that image for a moment and imagine that you have five different quills in front of you to write five different types of speeches or speech styles for your characters, and those would be prose, which is a style of writing or giving speech to characters that doesn't really have any structure to it beyond grammar and punctuation. Prose is just like Austin and Dickens and Philip Pullman where the words go from one side of the page to the other. If you add a bit more structure than just grammar and punctuation to prose – if you limit the number of syllables in a line, for example – then you get to poetry. If you add more structure to poetry, perhaps by repeating similar spelt or sounding words, then you'll get rhyming poetry. Add even more structured to rhyming

poetry – by limiting the number of lines, for example – then you get a sonnet. And then if you limit or add more structure to sonnet by either limiting the number of lines or repeating rhymes, then you get song. Those are the five main, as it were, quills that Shakespeare had at his disposal, or that he seemed to use or enjoy using – prose, poetry, rhyming poetry, sonnet, and song. And these occur throughout his plays and are are styles of writing that he gifts to different types of characters in different situations.

Now it was not Shakespeare's idea to write his character's speech in iambic pentameter. This was actually Marlow's idea. Marlowe was the one that was 'Shakespeare before Shakespeare' essentially that thought 'if I use this style of poetry that everybody loves, that also has the same rhythm as spoken modern or early modern – what we would now call Early Modern English – and also the same rhythm as the human heartbeat, then my characters are going to sound more natural because they're speaking in a style of poetry that has the same rhythm as spoken English. They're going to somewhat human, because that rhythm is the same as our rhythm of a heartbeat. But there's still going to be heightened. It's still going to clearly be theatrical, because no one speaks in poetry of a day to day basis.'

Now, let's go back to the quills. Shakespeare gifts Romeo and Juliet a sonnet to speak to each other when they first meet. The first thing they say to each other, Romeo starts speaking in rhyming poetry, Juliet responds in rhyming poetry, they share a rhyming couplet, and then, right before they kiss for the first time, they share another rhyming couplet, and indeed have shared a sonnet. Now as first meetings go, it's not bad, you know. Consider the modern, you know. "Hey, grandma? Grandpa, how did you both meet? Oh, well, you know, went into a bar and had a couple of drinks, and I don't really remember what happened next." "Hey, Romeo and Juliet? (Were they to live and survive the play.) How did you both meet. Well, you know I walked into this dance, and I saw this person, and they were so beautiful that when I went over to speak to them, what came out of my mouth was poetry, so lifted was my heart by, and so entranced I was, that rather than throw a drink in my face and walk away, they responded in rhyming poetry, and right before we kissed for the first time, we realized that we shared a sonnet.

Now, as a cute meet as a first encounter, it's a pretty good romantic story, and, as I said earlier, Shakespeare's audience were especially attuned to listening out for the occurrence of all sorts of variations in the meter and rhyme, and that sort of thing, because they were so much keener hearers than than we might be now.

The possibilities of meeting someone, and their sharing a sonnet naturally is a pretty pretty wildly high, I mean pretty broadly low, I mean to say. And so he's saying, through the gift of that particular style of poetry, indeed, through the use of that 'quill,' this is a very special meeting now. Could he thereby have written it in prose? Yep, he does, and he writes love encounters in prose all the time. Beatrice and Benedict and Much Aso almost entirely speak in prose to each other.

> Could he have written them in poetry? Well, yes, but evidently he's trying to tell us that this is a particularly special love at first sight meeting. So rhyming poetry would also work, but isn't essentially special enough. To skip over sonnet for a second, the other quill available to him was song, but he's not writing a musical. and so to have them sing to each other wouldn't be appropriate. Now, think about musicals for a second. When characters break into song, it's usually because there's no other way to express how they feel, because the feelings, the emotions underneath them are bubbling to such a point that they have to sing. And that's true in Shakespeare, too.
>
> So alongside that hierarchy of speech, of prose, to verse, to rhyming verse, to sonnet, to song, as the structure increases, so too does the emotional content. So, as it were, the heart beats faster, perhaps, or the the pulse quickens as one switches from one style of speech or one quill to another.

Now after Romeo meets Juliet for the first time, he and his friends leave the party, but Romeo decides that he has to see Juliet again. He turns back and climbs a wall leading to an orchard beside the Capulet home. His friends – Mercutio and Benvolio – then have a brief conversation where they talk about Romeo's actions. Mercutio doesn't really make a distinction between love and sexual desire, so he thinks Romeo is trying to hook up with a girl. But it isn't clear if he thinks Romeo is pursuing his first love Rosaline or Juliet – the girl he just met. And here, we have a good example of Shakespeare as his most bawdy. Mercutio utters a passage that was actually censored at the time due to its explicit nature. It's a passage where he alludes to sexual intercourse by referencing a couple of different kinds of fruit – a medlar, which supposedly resembled female genitalia, and a poppering pear, which supposedly had a phallic shape.

Mercutio says of Romeo:

If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark.
Now will he sit under a medlar tree,
And wish his mistress were that kind of fruit
As maids call medlars when they laugh alone.
Romeo, that she were, O, that she were
An open-arse, or thou a popp'rin pear!

Now, as I said, the two types of fruit are the key to understanding the allusion that is being made in that passage. Medlars were popular fruits during the Elizabethan period, and they remained popular for a couple of centuries after that, though they aren't as popular today. The fruit has an odd appearance, with one end of it appearing to be open, even though its really not. And due to its appearance, some people at the time called it an 'open arse.' And again, due to its appearance, the word ***medlar*** was sometimes used as a slang term for female genitalia. Meanwhile, the poppering pear was a type of long pear that had a slight phallic shape. And that explains why Mercutio says that Romeo wishes that his girl was a medlar and he a 'popp'rin pear.' Also, some scholars have noted that the word ***meddle*** (m-e-d-d-l-e) was sometimes used as a slang term for sex, and is still used that way in some dialects today. So that reinforced the way Shakespeare used the word ***medlar*** in this passage.

I noted that this passage was apparently censored at the time – either voluntarily or involuntarily – in the early printed versions of the play. Specifically, the term 'open arse' was censored. In the earliest 1597 quarto, it is printed as "open Et caetera." In the quarto which appeared a couple of years later, the term was printed as "open, or" (so the conjunction, 'o-r'). That meant that the passage read, "O that she were An open, or thou a Poprin Peare." Many scholars think that the printer may have mis-read the original passage when he was setting the type, or maybe he was intentionally trying to avoid using the actual term. That same wording was carried over to the First Folio compiled after Shakespeare's death. But modern scholars are confident that the actual term used on the stage was 'open-arse' because that was a common slang term for the medlar fruit, and the term carried the sexual connotation that the passage was conveying. So today, many printed versions of the play actually use that term, though some still use the Folio version.

Now I also wanted to bring that passage to your attention for another reason, and that has to do with the term 'Poprin' Peare.' In the First Folio of Shakespeare's works, the term ***poprin***' is spelled 'p-o-p-r-i-n', but that's actually a slightly abbreviated form of the original word, which was ***Poperinge***. That's the name of a town in Flanders that was famous for its pears. So technically speaking, it is really a Poperinge Pear, but Shakespeare renders it as "poprin' pear." So he reduced that ending in much the same way that some people today say ***runnin'*** instead of ***running***, and ***jumpin'*** instead of ***jumping***. Well, historical linguists think that many people in the late 1500s spoke like that. It was common to say ***runnin'***, ***jumpin'*** and ***poprin'***, rather than ***running***, ***jumping*** and ***Poperinge***. And that pronunciation wasn't restricted to the lower classes. We even see it in the letters of Queen Elizabeth where she renders a word like ***beseeching*** as ***besichen*** ('b-e-s-i-c-h-e-n'). So in the 'Poprin' Peare' passage, Shakespeare provides more evidence of that widespread pronunciation. But there is actually a lot more going on with these types of pronunciations. Words that end in [-ing] underwent some notable changes in Early Modern English. I've been waiting for a good place to discuss those changes, and this seems like as good a time as any. So let me digress for a moment and discuss how that [-ing] ending came to be pronounced differently during this period.

To consider what happened with that [-ing] ending, we need to go back in time to earlier periods of English. Historical linguists tell us that words ending in [-ing] were once pronounced with a very distinct 'hard G' sound at the end. So instead of saying ***ring*** /riŋ/, they said /riŋg/, and instead of /siŋ/, people said /siŋg/. And the same was true for multi-syllable words like ***running*** (/runniŋg/) and ***jumping*** (/jumpiŋg/). Now that 'hard G' sound might not have been quite as strong or distinct as I'm making here, but it did exist at the end of those words. And that pronunciation can be traced back to Old English, and it continued into the Middle English period. And even though that 'hard G' sound at the end has mostly disappeared over time, it lingers on in a few dialects. There are places in the West Midlands of England where it is still common to hear words pronounced that way. In fact, this is a traditional feature of the so-called 'Brummie' accent spoken in Birmingham in the West Midlands of England. So that's one of the places where this old feature has survived. But for the most part, that 'hard G' has disappeared at the end of those words.

Well, the disappearance of that 'hard G' sound appears to be related to clipped pronunciations like ***runnin'*** and ***jumpin'***. So why is that? Well, let's look a little closer at what is happening at the end of these types of words. When we hear that distinct 'hard G' sound at the end of words ending in [-ing] today, it may sound a little weird to us, but think about words that end in [-ink]. Notice that we pronounce the K at the end of those words as a distinct sound – (/k/). We say ***think***, ***sink***, ***wink***, ***brink***, and so on. And I've noted before in the podcast that the 'K' sound and 'hard G' sound are almost identical in the way they are produced in the mouth. The only difference is that the vocal chords are engaged when we make the 'hard G' sound, but they not engaged when we make the 'K' sound. So linguists say that the 'hard G' sound is voiced, and the 'K' sound is voiceless. But otherwise, they're basically the same. And just as we pronounce the 'K' at the end of words ending in [-ink], people once did essentially the same thing with the 'G' at the end words ending in [-ing]. It was just as normal for them to say ***thing*** (/thiŋg/) as it is for us to say ***think*** (/thiŋk/).

But in the late Middle English period, for some reason, people started to drop that 'hard G' sound in some parts of Britain. Specifically, it tended to happen in multi-syllable words where the last syllable in the word was unstressed. So when we say a word like ***running***, we stress the first syllable – /RUN-iŋg/. The [-ing] part at the end is pronounced a little weaker. So it's an unstressed syllable. And in that environment – in an unstressed syllable at the end of a multi-syllable word – people tended to drop the 'hard G' at the end. So it ended up being pronounced much like tody in standard English.

So let's look a little closer at that. When we say ***running*** (/runniŋg/) in the old way, we basically close the back of our vocal tract, and then we open it and release the air to make the 'hard G' sound. But in these unstressed syllables, people would close the vocal tract at the end of the word, but they didn't open it up and release that 'G' sound. So the pronunciation shifted from ***running*** (/runniŋg/) to ***running*** (/runniŋ/). Again, that subtle change gave us the general pronunciation that is used today. And in fact, that /iŋ/ sound actually become a new, distinct sound in the language at the time. Previously, it had never existed by itself. It had always been followed by either a distinct 'G' or a 'K' sound – /iŋg/ or /iŋk/. But when it was clipped in this way, it produced that /iŋ/ sound by itself, and again, that was a new development in the language.

But sometimes, speakers reduced the sound at the end of those words even further. Some speakers didn't even make an effort to close the vocal tract at the end of that /iŋ/ sound. Instead, they finished the word with an 'N' sound. So from /runniŋg/, /runniŋ/ to /runnin/, there was just a gradual reduction in the way those unstressed syllables were pronounced. And through this process, words like ***jumping*** (/jumpiŋg/) and ***something*** (/somethiŋg/) and ***nothing*** (/nothiŋg/) became ***jumping*** (/jumpiŋ/) and ***something*** (/somethiŋ/) and ***nothing*** (/nothiŋ/), and then in the speech of many people, they became ***jumpin***', ***somethin***' and ***nothin***'.

It appears that this development began in the north of Britain in the late 1300s. There is some evidence of this change in the spellings of early manuscripts from that region. Over time, it appears that the change gradually spread southward, and it eventually reached southern England in the 1500s.

Again, there is some limited evidence of this change in the way people spelled words in the late 1500s. As I noted, we see it in the writings of Queen Elizabeth when she wrote ***besichen*** for ***beseeching***, and we see it in Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, when he writes ***poprin*** for ***Poperinge***. We also see in the way Shakespeare and other poets in the late 1500s rhymed words and used puns. For example, Shakespeare equated ***eating*** and ***eaten*** (e-a-t-e-n). So 'I have eaten the sandwich,' and 'I was eatin' the sandwich.' He also equates ***mounting*** and ***mountain***. So 'I am mountin' an expedition to climb the mountain.' And he equated ***raising*** and ***reason***. So 'He is raisin' his hand for no reason.' By the way, those example sentences are mine, not Shakespeare's.

So again, this is the type of evidence that indicates that people would routinely clip the end of those [-ing] words in the late 1500s and early 1600s, but the written evidence of that change is even more widespread in the late 1600s and 1700s. So either these types of pronunciations became more common over time, or printers and writers become more comfortable with dropping the [g] at the end of these words to reflect the pronunciations. At any rate, by the 1800s, you would have heard people saying ***runnin***', ***jumpin***', ***dancin***' and ***singin***' at every level of society. It became somewhat standard.

Now so far, we've been looking at multi-syllable words that ended in [-ing]. We've explored how these changes affected unstressed syllables, but around the time that Shakespeare was writing in the late 1500s, the change also started to impact single-syllable words as well. Linguists think those types of words like ***thing*** and ***ring*** and ***sing*** had retained their distinct 'hard G' sounds at the end up to that point. So they were still pronounced ***thing*** (/thiŋg/), and ***ring*** (/riŋg/), and ***sing*** (/siŋg/). But around the current point in our overall story of English in the late 1500s, that 'hard G' sound started to disappear at the end of those single-syllable words as well. And that gave us our modern pronunciations as ***thing*** (/thiŋ/), ***ring*** (/riŋ/) and ***sing*** (/siŋ/). Again, some dialects like Brummie may retain an 'hard G' at the end of those words, but most English dialects don't do that anymore.

That development may help to explain why the 'hard G' sound disappeared in those situations, but the 'K' sound never did.' And that's because if both sounds had disappeared at the end, then ***thing*** (/thiŋg/) and ***think*** would have both become (/thiŋ/). ***Ring*** (/riŋg/) and ***rink*** would have both become (/riŋ/). ***Sing*** (/siŋg/) and ***sink*** would have both become (/siŋ/). The 'hard G' and 'K' sounds at the end had always distinguished those types of pairs, so even though the 'hard G' sound gradually fell way, the 'K 'sound was probably retained at the end in order to maintain a distinction between those types of words.

By the way, that was the general state of things in the 1600s and 1700s. Single-syllable words like ***ring*** and ***sing*** were pronounced much like they are today without a distinct 'hard G' at the end. But as I noted, in multi-syllable words, that final unstressed syllable had been reduced down to an 'n' sound at the end like in ***runnin'*** and ***jumpin'***. Well, a lot of people who studied and wrote about English didn't like the way those multi-syllable words were pronounced. They thought ***runnin'*** and ***jumpin'*** were bad pronunciations. They thought the final part of those words should be pronounced just like the final part of ***ring*** and ***sing*** since they all ended in 'i-n-g.' So in the 1700s and 1800s, there was a concerted effort by grammarians and school teachers to fix that

inconsistency and to correct what they perceived as a 'bad' pronunciation. And gradually, the educational system brought all of those pronunciations back in line again giving us ***running*** and ***jumping*** alongside ***ring*** and ***sing***. Of course, some dialects have resisted that change. And for those dialects that held onto forms like ***runnin'*** and ***jumpin'***, they are actually using the pronunciations that were common in Shakespeare's time, and in the century or so that followed. That also explains why those pronunciation are common in many American English dialects – because North America was settled at a time when those pronunciations were still common in the language.

By the way, I have focused on the disappearance of the 'hard G' sound at the end of words, but we can find this same type of variation in other places too. The /iŋ/ sound sometimes appears in the middle of a word, and here, the pronunciation sometimes includes the 'hard G' and sometimes it doesn't. In words like ***bingo*** and ***single*** and ***finger***, the 'hard G' is generally used. But when the /iŋ/ sound is followed by [er] or by another [-ing], the 'hard G' usually disappears, as in ***ringer*** and ***singing***, as opposed to /riŋ-ger/ and /siŋ-ging/.

And then we have the word ***English***. I sometimes receive feedback from listeners about my pronunciation of that word. Of course, the word ***English*** comes up quite a bit in a podcast about the history of English. When I pronounce the word, I don't pronounced the 'hard G' in the middle, but some of you do. So I say /Eŋ-lish/, where some you say /Eŋ-glish/. Both pronunciations are common today, but the distinction really takes us back to how we deal with that 'hard G' sound at the end of /iŋ/. Though it has largely disappeared at the end of words, it sometimes survives in the middle.

So with that, let's return to the play. When we last saw Romeo, he was scaling a wall to enter the Capulet's garden, which leads to Juliet's window. And when we pick up the story at that point, we find one of the most memorable scenes in all of the Shakespeare canon. This is the so-called 'balcony scene,' even though Shakespeare never actually used the word ***balcony***. The play simply says that Juliet appears above Romeo at a window. In fact, the word ***balcony*** isn't even recorded in English at this point. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, it's first found in an English document shortly after Shakespeare's death a couple of decades after this play was written. But over the years, this scene was often depicted with Juliet in a balcony, so we tend to think of this as the 'balcony scene.'

Romeo looks to the window and sees Juliet. And then we have this famous passage. Again, this is from the BBC production of the play:

But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sick and pale with grief,
That thou, her maid, art far more fair than she.
Be not her maid since she is envious.
Her vestal livery is but sick and green,

And none but fools do wear it. Cast it off.
It is my lady, O, it is my love!
O, that she knew she were!

Now the most famous part of that passage is the first two lines – "But soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!" One of the things that stands out about that first line is the syntax or word order. It contains the adverbial phrase 'through yonder window.' Today, we would tend to put that phrase after the verb ***breaks***. So we would probably say 'What light breaks through yonder window.' But Shakespeare placed it before the verb – "What light through yonder window breaks." It seems a little odd to us today to pack all of that information in before the verb, but it's something occurs quite often in Shakespeare's works. Another good example of this phenomenon occurs in Macbeth where we find the line "something wicked this way comes," rather than 'something wicked comes this way.' Again, he puts the verb at the end of the sentence and packs in all of the other information before it.

Part of the reason why Shakespeare did that from time to time is because his lines were often composed as poetry with a specific meter that he had to satisfy. So for example, in that passage we just heard from Romeo and Juliet, it is composed in iambic pentameter – that 'de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM de-DUM' rhythm. And the rhythm works better with the 'through yonder window' part placed before the verb. Poetry allowed writers to play around with word order like that. But it's also important to keep in mind that the word order of English was much looser in Early Modern English. The first English grammar book had only recently been composed, and it did little more than describe English grammar in Latin terms. So for the next century or so, it was still common to find these types of adverbial phrases is positions where we don't usually find them today.

One other note about that passage. The line reads "What light through yonder window breaks." ***Yonder*** is one of those words that was very common in Early Modern English, but isn't really used that much in standard English today. Of course, it survives in some dialects. For example, in some parts of the US, you might hear someone refer to something being located 'over yonder' or 'down yonder.' But the word ***yonder*** was once more common because it was part of the standard demonstrative pronoun system in Early Modern English. So let me explain what I mean by that.

Today, we use words like ***this*** and ***that***, and ***these*** and ***those*** to indicate location. If we are standing near a window, we would refer to 'this' window or 'these' windows. If we are standing far away from a window, we would refer to 'that' window or 'those' windows. It is a simple contrast. And those words – ***this***, ***that***, ***these*** and ***those*** – are called demonstrative pronouns. But in Early Modern English, instead of that simple near and far distinction, there was actually a three-way distinction. If the window was near the speaker, the speaker would have referred to 'this' window or 'these' windows, so it was essentially the same as today. But if the speaker wasn't near the window, then it depended on where the person being spoken to was standing. If the person being addressed was standing near the window, then the speaker would refer to 'that' window or 'those' windows. So ***that*** and ***those*** referred to things located near the person being addressed. But if the thing being referred to was not located near either the speaker or the listener

– then the word ***yonder*** was used. In this passage in the play, Romeo isn't actually speaking to Juliet yet. He merely sees her at a distance in the window. So technically, he is really addressing the audience. And the window isn't near Romeo or the audience, so that's why he refers to it as 'yonder' window. Of course, as the word ***yonder*** declined in use, the words ***that*** and ***those*** expanded to take its place. So today, we would simply refer to 'that window' instead of 'yonder window.' [*SOURCE: The History of English: An Introduction, Stephen Gramley, p. 140.*]

So to summarize all these comments about that passage, if we switch the placement of the adverbial phrase to move it after the verb ***breaks*** like we would typically do today, and if we update the word ***yonder*** to the more modern word ***that***, then Shakespeare's "What light through yonder window breaks" becomes 'What light breaks through that window.' So within that very familiar passage, we can see how the language has developed in subtle ways since the late 1500s.

Now the passage we just looked at is immediately followed by a line that may be even more well-known. Juliet thinks of Romeo and utters the famous line, "O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?" In the scene, he can see where she is standing, but she can't see him. But contrary to popular belief, she isn't asking 'where' Romeo is. She is actually asking 'why' he is. In other words, she is asking why he has to be a Montague – a son of the rival family. This is part of a debate she is having with herself while standing at the window.

So the word ***wherefore*** meant 'why' at the time. In fact, ***wherefore*** has clear Germanic roots, and other Germanic languages have their own versions of that word like Swedish ***varfor***, Danish ***hvorfor***, Dutch ***waarvoor***, and German ***wofür***. All of those Germanic words are cognate with English ***wherefore***, and they all carry that sense of 'why' for 'for what.' In fact, we can think of ***wherefore*** as literally meaning 'what for.' At any rate, Juliet is asking 'why' Romeo has to be a Montague.

She says that Romeo should refuse his father's name, or that she will change her own surname if Romeo truly loves her. But then she acknowledges that the names don't really matter. She asks the now famous question,"What's in a name? That which we call a rose By any other name would smell as sweet."

After Juliet sees Romeo, the two express their love for each other, even though they just met earlier in the evening. In fact, they even make plans to get married. Things move really fast in the play. You just have to accept that the normal timeline has been compressed into a few days in order to tell the story.

Romeo eventually leaves Juliet's window, and she utters the famous line "Parting is such sweet sorrow." The next day, Romeo goes to meet with a Friar named Lawrence to see if he will conduct the secret wedding ceremony. When we first meet the Friar, he is picking flowers and poisonous weeds. He is a bit of alchemist. He studies flowers and plants – and notes their ability to heal, as well as their ability to cause sickness. Again, Romeo wants the Friar to perform a quick wedding ceremony.

One of the interesting things about this scene is that it is written entirely in rhyming couplets. Even when Romeo enters and the two characters exchange single lines of dialogue, the rhyming scheme is maintained, so if one character utters a single line, the other character's next line will rhyme with it. These passages are always intriguing because the often reveal rhymes that worked at the time, but don't work today. And this scene is no exception.

In the scene, the Friar is aware that Romeo has been in love with Rosaline, so he is a bit surprised when Romeo tells him that he has met Capulet's daughter and he wants to marry her. We then have a passage where Romeo and the Friar exchange a rhyming couplet. In fact, the first line is split between Romeo and the Friar. Romeo says that the Friar has mocked him for his love of Rosaline, and he begins the line by saying, "and bad'st me bury love" – in other words, the Friar has told him to 'bury his love.' The Friar finishes the line by responding, "Not in a grave." He then adds the following line,"To lay one in, another out to have" – in other words, 'I didn't tell you to put your love in a grave, I told you to set aside the love you had for Rosaline who didn't love you, so that a new love could be had." So when we put all of that together, the lines read:

ROMEO: and bad'st me bury love
FRIAR LAWRENCE: Not in a grave.
To lay one in, another out to have

So in that couplet, Shakespeare rhymes the words ***grave*** and ***have***, which obviously don't rhyme today.

Friar Lawrence then agrees to conduct the marriage. The scene ends with the two characters exchanging another couplet:

Romeo says he is ready and doesn't want to waste any time, and the Friar warns him to take it slow and steady because haste can make a person stumble and fall. In the exact wording of the play, Romeo says: "O, let us hence, I stand on sudden haste." And the Friar replies, "Wisely and slow; they stumble that run fast."

So here, Shakespeare rhymes the words ***haste*** and ***fast***. Again, those words don't rhyme today.

Now those two rhymes that I just pointed out have something in common. Of course, they all have a vowel sound spelled with letter A, but in each pair, one word has the 'long A' sound pronounced /ei/, and the other has the 'short A' sound pronounced /æ/. Those so-called 'long' and 'short' sounds of letter A are what distinguishes ***cape*** from ***cap***, and ***hate*** from ***hat***. And in these passages, they provide the different vowel sounds in ***grave*** and ***have*** in one couplet, and ***haste*** and ***fast*** in the other. So why did Shakespeare rhyme those words then?

Well, as you might have guessed, it's because the so-called 'long' and 'short' sounds that we associate with the letter A today are not the same as they were in the late 1500s. In Shakespeare's day, those two sounds were more similar, so much so that they could rhyme with each other. So let me digress for a moment here and explain how the sounds of letter A were different from today. And this discussion will also tie into something I mentioned in the last episode.

So let's begin with a quick reminder about the use of those terms 'long' and 'short' to describe vowel sounds. As you probably know, each vowel letter in English has at least two basic sounds – one of which is typically called its 'long' sound and one of which is called its 'short' sound. And those terms 'long' and 'short' harken back to earlier periods of English when the those vowel sounds actually varied in length in a more regular way than they do today. But since then, many of the sounds of the vowel letters have changed. We have had lots of vowel shifts over the centuries – the Great Vowel Shift being the most well-known, but it wasn't the only one. And thanks to those shifting vowel sounds over the centuries, our modern vowel letters have sounds that don't necessarily match the sounds they had five or six centuries ago. Today, the length of those pronunciations is also somewhat variable depending on the letter, and the way sound is used is a particular word, and the accent of the speaker, and so on. So today, when we refer to the 'long' and 'short' sounds of a vowel letter like the letter A, it has more to do with the overall quality or sound than the actual amount of time that we enunciate it.

In modern usage, the 'long' sound of a letter is the same as its name – so the 'long A' sound is /ei/. But you may also remember that all of our long vowel sounds shifted and changed as part of the Great Vowel Shift, which really began in earnest during the 1400s. And generally speaking, the long vowel sounds were raised through that shift. And that just means that, over time, people changed the way they pronounced certain words by replacing an existing vowel sound in the word with a new vowel sound. And that new vowel sound tended to be pronounced with tongue slightly raised from where had been before. And this change also affected the 'long A' sound. The original 'long A' sound was /a:/. It's the original sound of letter A going back to the Roman alphabet, and it's still the common sound of the letter in most of continental Europe. We find it in loanwords like ***lava*** and ***latte*** from Italian, ***armada*** from Spanish, ***lager*** from German, and ***yacht*** from Dutch. And that was still the 'long' sound of letter A in England during Shakespeare's lifetime. This was actually was one the last vowel sounds to shift as part of the Great Vowel Shift. Over the course of the following century or so, the sound of the letter gradually shifted upward – meaning the front of the tongue was gradually raised when words with that sound were pronounced. So the sound shifted from /a:/, up to /æ:/, then up to /ɛ:/, and then up to /ei/. It took many years for speakers to get there, but they did eventually. And some speakers were probably using some of those newer pronunciations in Shakespeare's lifetime, but the original /a:/ pronunciation was still common in his lifetime.

By the way, that original /a:/ sound is basically the sound that you make when your doctor tells you to open your mouth and say 'ah.' And the reason why your doctor tells you to do that is because /a:/ is the lowest vowel sound – meaning that you basically flatten your tongue to make it. So when you flatten your tongue, it makes it easier for the doctor to see your throat. A low vowel like that simply means the tongue is not raised in the front or the back.

That was basically the position of the tongue when people pronounced the letter A in the Elizabethan period. So when Shakespeare used words like ***grave*** and ***haste*** in those passages I read a moment ago, those words were probably pronounced /gra:v/ and /ha:st/ at the time.

Now I mentioned all of that stuff about the long sound of letter A back in those earlier episodes about the Great Vowel Shift because, again, that shift encompassed all of the long vowel sounds

in English. But what about the 'short A' sound? I haven't had much to say about that sound. Well, remember that the short sounds of the vowel letters have been more stable over the centuries. In fact, the short sounds of letters E and I have barely changed at all. But there has been some change with the others.

As I noted, the modern 'short' sound of letter A is /æ/ – the sound we hear in ***hat***, ***cap***, ***hand***, ***back***, ***mad*** and so on. But again, that isn't the sound that was common in Shakespeare's time. In his time, the 'short' sound of letter A was /a/. Now you may be saying, "Wait a minute, I thought you just said the long sound of letter A was /a/?" Well, remember, the long and short sounds of the letters were once distinguished by length. So yes, the long and short sounds of letter A were once both /a/. The long sound was just held a little longer when it was pronounced. So the short sound was /a/ and long sound was /a:/.

So now you can see why Shakespeare rhymed those words with the 'long' and 'short' A sounds. The quality of those vowel sounds was largely the same at the time. The only difference was length. So he rhymed ***grave*** and ***have*** because they were pronounced /gra;v/ and /hav/ at the time. And he rhymed ***haste*** and ***fast*** because they were pronounced /ha:st/ and /fast/ at the time.

Over the course of the following century, the short vowel sound was also raised slightly from /a/ to /æ/ – and that gave us the modern 'short A' sound. So /hav/ became /hæv/ and /fast/ became /fæst/. And in the centuries after that change occurred, the 'short A' sound underwent a variety of other changes. It was in later centuries that the vowel sound lowered again in certain words in southern England – especially words where the 'short A' sound was followed by an [-s], [-f], or [-th]. That's what caused words like ***class***, ***staff*** and ***path*** to become /clɑ:s/, /stɑ:f/ and /pɑ:th/ in modern Received Pronunciation.

The main point here is that the short sounds of some of the vowel letters have also shifted and changed over the centuries. Many of those changes occurred after the Elizabethan period, so we'll look at those specific developments in future episodes as we come across them in our timeline.

But now, I want to take this discussion one step further and revisit an example I gave in the last episode because it isn't just the 'short A' sound that has changed over time. The 'short O' sound has also changed, and in fact, it had changed so much by the late 1500s that the 'short O' sound almost merged with the 'short A' sound. And that is actually an important development as it relates to Modern English because it not only helps to explain why way certain words are spelled the way they are, but also because it may present some very early signs of a new type of pronunciation which was later to become widespread in American English. So in that regard, it may reveal the beginning of an emerging American accent, or at least a feature that would eventually distinguish American accents from the standard accent of southern Britain.

So let's look a little closer at the 'short O' sound. First of all, it's a back vowel, so that means that the back of the tongue is raised or lowered to make the specific vowel sound. The back vowels include the sounds we associate with the letters O and U. And also, the back vowels in English like /o:/, and /u:/ and /ɔ:/ are all pronounced with the lips rounded. That's another feature that distinguishes the back vowels from the front vowels in English. We don't round our lips when we

make the sounds associated with letters E and I, but we do when we make the sounds associated with the letters O and U. And that rounding of the lips is actually important to this discussion about what happened in the late 1500s.

As it's name suggests, the 'short O' sound was originally a short /o/ sound. So a word like ***hot*** was originally pronounced more like /hot/, and a word like ***top*** was originally more like /top/. But in late Middle English, people started to lower the back of their tongues a bit when they made that sound in words, so the vowel started to shift to a lower rounded vowel – from /o/ to /ɒ/. That's about as low as you can go when pronouncing a back vowel. And through that change, a word like ***hot*** (/hot/) became /hɒt/ and ***top*** (/top/) became /tɒp/. So the pronunciation became close to the pronunciation that we associate with the modern Received Pronunciation of southern England.

But this change meant that the low vowel sound of 'short O,' which was /ɒ/, was very similar to the 'short A' sound, which was /a/. The only really difference was the shape of the lips. The lips were rounded slightly when making the 'short O' sound, but they were not rounded when making the 'short A' sound – so /ɒ/ and /a/, respectively. And that meant those two sounds were close enough in pronunciation that they could be rhymed with each other. And in the last episode, I actually gave a couple of examples from A Midsummer Night's Dream where Shakespeare did just that.

You might remember that I read a passage from that play where he rhymed the words ***crab*** and ***bob*** and the words ***laugh*** and ***cough***. Again, those words don't rhyme today, but we have to turn back the clock and give ***crab*** and ***laugh*** the older 'short A' sounds (/crab/ and /laf/), and we have to give ***bob*** and ***cough*** their rounded 'short O' sounds (/bɒb/ and /cɒf/). And if we do that, we can hear why Shakespeare rhymed those words. Again, /crab/ and /bɒb/ and /laf/ and /cɒf/. The rhymes might not have been perfect, but they would have been close enough to work.

But, here's the interesting thing, there is some evidence from this period that many speakers were no longer rounding their lips when they made that 'short O' sound. And that meant, that when they pronounced the 'short O' sound, instead of saying /ɒ/, they said /a/. In other words, it was essentially the 'short A' sound. Remember that the main thing that distinguished those two sounds was the slight rounding of the lips when making the 'short O' sound. So if people stopped doing that, it essentially became the 'short A' sound. Words like /bɒb/ and /cɒf/ became /bab/ and /caf/. So for those speakers, the 'short O' and 'short A' sounds essentially merged together, and if they had read those passages in A Midsummer Night's Dream, those rhymes would have the exact same vowel sound. So they would have been perfect rhymes.

By the way, in case you didn't notice, that new pronunciation is actually one that we associate with modern American English. Standard American English tends to pronounced words with a 'short O' sound with this same unrounded pronunciation – as /a/ rather than /ɒ/. So whereas RP speakers in England say /hɒt/ and /tɒp/, Americans tend to say /hat/ and /tap/. So in Shakespeare's rhymes we have some early evidence of that same type of pronunciation emerging in Elizabethan England.

But we also have evidence beyond those occasional rhymes. The evidence comes from spellings. Remember that the unrounded sound /a/ was represented with letter A. And the rounded sound /ɒ/ was represented with letter O. Well, in many texts during the Elizabethan period, we find writers and printers spelling words with the 'short O' sound, but instead of spelling those words with their traditional O, they spelled them with an A instead. So a word like ***stop*** (/stɒp/) is sometimes found with an A rather than an O. And that suggests that the person who wrote that word pronounced it as /stap/, much like American English, rather than /stɒp/ which we associate Received Pronunciation. It appears that that type of speaker had stopped rounding his or her lips when pronouncing the 'short O' sound, and that had essentially produced the 'short A' sound in its place, and that's why the letter A was used in place of the letter O.

And I gave that example of the word ***stop*** for a reason. That's because one of the best examples of that type of spelling change during this period involves that word. And it comes from someone you might not expect. It comes from Queen Elizabeth herself. In 1590, just a few years before Romeo and Juliet was written, Elizabeth wrote a letter to her cousin James – the King of Scotland. Of course, he would eventually succeeded her on the English throne. Well, at the time, Elizabeth was facing increasing opposition from Puritans who wanted more drastic Protestant reforms. Elizabeth was accustomed to Catholic opposition on one side, but now she was starting to face intense opposition from the Puritans on the other side. She had tried to crack down on them, and some of her Puritan critics had fled to Scotland. In this letter to James, she warned him about the increasing threats from Puritan ministers. She wrote, "I pray you stap the mouthes, or make shorter the toungz, of suche ministers . . ." But when she wrote that line, she spelled the word ***stop*** 's-t-a-p.' That suggests that she pronounced the word with the unrounded A vowel rather than the rounded O vowel. In other words, she pronounced it as /stap/, more like modern American English, not /stɒp/ like Received Pronunciation. [*SOURCE: The Origins and Development of the English Language, Algeo and Pyles, p. 163.*]

In fact, this type of letter substitution in words with a 'short O' sound can be found in the works of many writers of this period. It even appears in Shakespeare's works. In Hamlet, he makes a pun with the word ***trap*** and the word ***tropically***. And in an early printed quarto version of the play, the word ***tropically*** is spelled with an A instead of an O. So it is spelled with an A just like ***trap***. Again, the pun itself and the modified spelling suggests that the word was pronounced with the 'short A' vowel as /trapically/.

The rhyming also suggests that Shakespeare sometimes recognized this vowel merger. We looked at his rhymes in A Midsummer Night's Dream in which he seems to suggests that ***bob*** and ***cough*** were pronounced with the /a/ vowel. And in his early poem The Rape of Lucrece, he rhymes the word ***dally*** with the word ***folly***, again suggesting that the words were pronounced /dally/ and /fally/ with the 'short A' vowel.

Again, the significance of all of this is that the so-called 'short' sounds of the letters A and O were very similar to each other in the Elizabethan era, so much so that some speakers actually merged them together, at least in certain words.

While we have limited evidence of that convergence in the late 1500s, the evidence becomes more apparent over the course of the 1600s with more spelling evidence and even commentary evidence acknowledging the unrounded pronunciation of the 'short O' vowel. As settlers migrated to North America in the 1600s and 1700s, some of those speakers brought that pronunciation with them. It was probably still a limited pronunciation, but it was almost certainly there.

The first real evidence of this pronunciation in American English comes in the early 1800s. Among the first writers to acknowledge that unrounded pronunciation was Noah Webster. He noted that some early Americans pronounced their 'short O's in that way, though it wasn't the pronunciation of most people at the time. But over the course of the following century or so, it gradually became the dominant pronunciation in Standard American English. So this limited pronunciation that was starting to emerge in the Elizabethan period never became fully ingrained in England, but it did gradually emerge as the dominant pronunciation in North America. So in that sense, we can detect the emergence of that later American accent feature in these early documents from the 1590s.

That development in North America means that the 'short O' sound in Standard American English is often pronounced the same way as the 'A' sound in words that retain that older /a/ vowel sound. So words like ***hot***, and ***stop*** and ***job*** – all spelled with an O – have the same vowel sound as words spelled with an A like ***watch***, ***spa***, ***lava***, ***taco***, ***pasta***, ***lager***, ***father*** and so on. So at least in American English, there had been a convergence of the 'short A' and 'short O' sounds in many words, and that convergence can be traced back to some of these linguistic developments in Elizabethan England.

Now this entire discussion about 'short' A and O sounds began with the scene where Friar Lawrence agreed to conduct the wedding ceremony for Romeo and Juliet. So let's return to the play as we move closer to the lovers' inevitable fate.

The following scene takes place on a street where Romeo's friends Benvolio and Mercutio are hanging out and wondering where Romeo is. When Romeo arrives, Mercutio assumes that he has been with a woman all night. The two friends start to tease each other, and it turns into a series of witty exchanges. At one point in the exchange, Mercutio refers to Romeo's wits running the 'wild-goose chase.' And that comment is notable because it is the first recorded use of the term 'wild goose chase' in an English document. But what exactly is a wild goose chase?

Well, interestingly, it might not be what you think. The term 'wild goose chase' actually referred to a type of horse race at the time. In order to explain this term, we have to consider the fact that when geese are flying, there is typically a leader in the front, and the other geese follow behind no matter where the original goose goes. Well in the 1500s, a type of horse race was devised where a rider would take his horse around on a complicated course and the rider of a second horse would follow behind and try to keep up. Because of its resemblance to the way geese follow each other, that type of horse race was called a 'wild goose chase.' Even though Romeo and Juliet contains the first recorded use of the term, the term started to pop up in other documents a short time later, and those references reveal the true meaning of the term at the time. So Mercutio's reference to the 'wild goose chase' was in regard to the exchange of banter and the attempt by

one to keep up with the other. Of course, today, we use the term to refer to any situation where someone follows or pursues an erratic course of action with little chance of success. We tend to think of it as a pursuit of something that is about as likely to succeed as the capture of a wild goose, but that isn't the original sense of the term. Again, it was originally a type of horse race.

Now shortly after this scene where Romeo and Mercutio banter with each other, we have the actual marriage of Romeo and Juliet. It's a secret marriage hidden from the their respective families. And that concludes the second act of the play.

Act 3 opens in a public venue. Romeo is with his friends Mercutio and Benvolio when he is confronted by Juliet's Capulet cousin named Tybalt. Tybalt had observed Romeo at the Capulet party earlier, and now he tries to pick a fight Romeo. But Romeo resists. He knows that the Prince of Verona has ordered the execution of anyone who disturbs the streets. And of course, he is now secretly married to Juliet, which will presumably be revealed to their respective families at some point soon. But Tybalt continues to insist on a fight. Romeo's friend Mercutio finally reaches a breaking point, and he pulls out his sword to fight Tybalt himself. Romeo tries to intervene, but Tybalt stabs Mercutio with his sword, mortally wounding him.

As Mercutio utters his dying words, Shakespeare couldn't resist including a pun. When Romeo says that the wound doesn't look that bad, Mercutio replies, "ask me for tomorrow, and you shall find me a grave man." Of course, he means that it is 'grave' in the sense of a serious wound, and he also means that he will be in his grave tomorrow. He then utters a curse which has passed down to history. He is neither a Capulet nor a Montague, so he curses both of them by saying "a plague on both your houses." That would have been a terrible curse at the time. To wish the plague on someone would have been to wish death on them. Remember that the city of London had just been racked by plague.

Mercutio then dies. His killer Tybalt had briefly fled the scene, but now he returns. And in a fit of anger, Romeo attacks Tybalt and kills him. So Romeo gets his revenge, but he knows he is now a marked man for violating the Prince's orders to maintain the peace. When the Prince is told of the fight and the murders, he learns that Romeo was avenging his friend's death, so rather than ordering Romeo's execution, he requires that Romeo be exiled instead.

Now this has all happened within hours of Romeo's secret marriage to Juliet. Meanwhile, Juliet is back at home waiting for the nighttime when Romeo is supposed to sneak into her room so they can consummate their marriage.

Though Juliet waits, Romeo doesn't appear. Her Nurse comes to her room. The Nurse is called that because she was Juliet's wet nurse as a baby, but at this point, she is really more of a personal servant in the Capulet house. And she informs Juliet that Romeo has killed Tybalt and has been banished. Juliet breaks down in despair. The Nurse consoles her by saying, "There's no trust, No faith, no honesty in men.' Then she adds, "Give me some aqua vitae." Now I mention that passage because she uses the Latin term ***aqua vitae***. which was a reference to various types of distilled alcohol or spirits. The term literally meant 'water of life.' So here, the Nurse is saying that she needs a drink of alcohol. Now, this wasn't the first recorded use of that Latin term in English, but

I wanted to make note of it here because it is ultimately the source of our modern word ***whiskey***. That Latin term was adopted by Celtic speakers in Ireland and Scotland, where it was translated in the Gaelic language of Ireland and the Scots Gaelic language in Scotland. The Irish version ***uisge beatha*** was later adopted into English. But it was reduced to the first word ***uisge***, which was later anglicized to ***whiskey***. So ***whiskey*** is derived from a Gaelic term, which was itself a translation of the Latin term ***aqua vitae*** meaning 'water of life.'

Now the Nurse needed a drink to deal with the situation which had left Juliet distraught and wishing to die. The Nurse tells Juliet that she knows where Romeo has likely gone. He has probably gone to see Friar Lawrence, so the Nurse says that she will go there to find him. Romeo is indeed there, and he is also distraught – contemplating suicide. The Nurse arrives, and she convinces him to return to see Juliet.

Meanwhile, Juliet's father thinks she is distraught because of the death of her cousin Tybalt. In an effort to cheer her up, he decides to proceed with an arranged marriage between Juliet and that man I mentioned earlier named Paris, who she obviously doesn't love. And of course, her father doesn't know that she is already married to Romeo.

At this point, Juliet is unaware of her father's plans. Romeo arrives, and the newly-married couple spend their first night together, despite all of the surrounding drama. But the next morning, Romeo has to leave due to his banishment. And then Juliet discovers her father's plans to have her marry Paris. She doesn't know what to do, so she flees to visit Friar Lawrence to seek his advice.

As we saw earlier, the Friar is a bit of alchemist, so he has an extensive knowledge of medicines, poisons and potions. And he devises a plan involving one of his potions, which mimics the symptoms of death for 42 hours. He advises Juliet to return home and drink the potion. Her family will assume she is dead, and she will be placed in family's cemetery vault. Meanwhile, the Friar will contact Romeo and inform him of the plan. Romeo and the Friar will then travel to the vault in secret and be there when Juliet wakes so that the two lovers can escape together.

Juliet then returns home, and that evening, she drinks the potion. When the Nurse finds Juliet the next morning, she appears to be dead. The Nurse calls Juliet's mother. The Nurse cries out, "she's dead; alack the day!" And Juliet's mother repeats the statement, saying "Alack the day, she's dead."

Now I mentioned those two lines because they contain the Elizabethan expression 'Alack the day,' which was a common expression at the time to express grief or concern or regret. Now even though it's a very old expression, it actually still survives today, but you might not recognize it in its modern form. 'Alack the day' eventually became 'lack-a-day' with much of the same meaning. And then 'lack-a-day' became 'lack-a-daisy,' perhaps on the model of 'ups-a-daisy.' But that gave English the term 'lack-a-daisy' again, still used as an expression of grief, remorse or regret. And from there, 'lack-a-daisy' was converted into an adjective by altering the ending to 'lackadaisical.' And as an adjective, the sense shifted slightly to the demeanor of someone who expresses grief, remorse or regret. So today, it is used to describe someone who is listless or mopes around or isn't really committed to what they're doing. So ultimately, ***lackadaisical*** can be traced back to

that older expression of grief 'alack-the-day,' which is used by both the Nurse and Juliet's mother when they find Juliet after taking the potion. As planned, Juliet is placed in the Capulet family vault since she is presumed to be dead.

Now, of course, this entire plan depends on Romeo being informed that Juliet is not really dead. And Friar Lawrence sends his friend Friar John to deliver the message. But Friar John is detained in Verona due to the plague. He is forced to quarantine and misses his chance to meet with Romeo. Again, we have another reference here to the plague which harkens back to the plague that had just ravaged London, and may even suggest that parts of this play were composed a few years earlier while the theaters were closed and Shakespeare himself may have been quarantined for a while.

So when the news of Juliet's supposed death reaches Romeo, he assumes that she has actually died. He heads to Verona to visit her vault – and to take his own life since he feels that he cannot live without her. When he reaches Juliet's vault, he finds Paris there. That was the man that her parents wanted her to marry. Of course, Romeo isn't supposed to be in Verona since he has been banished by the prince. He and Paris start to fight, and Romeo kills Paris. Romeo then lies down beside Juliet and commits suicide by drinking a poison.

Meanwhile, Friar Lawrence arrives at the vault anticipating that Romeo is on his way there, but he is too late, and Romeo has already taken his life. Juliet then wakes, and sees that Romeo is dead. The plan to escape with her husband has been foiled because he never received the message that she was merely sleeping. Distraught, Juliet grabs Romeo's dagger and kills herself.

Townspeople soon gather at the vault, including the Prince and the heads of the Capulet and Montague families. As they come to realize what has happened, all of the parties realize that the family feud has brought nothing but destruction, and they all agree that the rivalry should come to end. The death of the young lovers has finally brought an end to the family conflict.

Now this play is generally classified as a tragedy, even though it isn't a traditional tragedy. We don't really have the story of a hero with a tragic flaw that leads to his downfall. In this play, the downfall is caused by the circumstances that surround the lovers and the way they respond to those circumstances. Their death was ultimately their fate. And their fate brings an end to the family conflict that runs throughout the play.

Again, the story itself doesn't really belong to Shakespeare, but his poetry and language took the story to another level, and made this one of the most popular love stories of all time.

So I hope you enjoyed that look at Romeo and Juliet, and the linguistic evidence it provides about the Elizabethan period.

Next time, we'll conclude our look at the 1500s, and we'll make the transition to a new century – a century that brought the first permanent English settlements in the New World. Those settlements brought some of the emerging accent features that we explored in this episode to North America, and that helped to lay the foundation for a new variety of English. So next time,

as we transition to a new century, we'll draw the curtains on one era and we'll open the curtains on a new one. And speaking of that, we'll also see how the language of playhouses shaped the English language during this period.

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