



Shakespeare: A critical analysis

Shakespeare: Original pronunciation

Narrator

The Globe Theatre, which opened in 1994, very near to its former site, specialises in original productions of Shakespeare. But it wasn't until 2004 that a play was performed in the original pronunciation, known as OP. The play was *Romeo and Juliet*.

David Crystal, Honorary Professor of Linguistics, University of Wales

Well, The Globe is known for its original practises. This is why it is here, to try and recreate the theatre as it was in 1600 and thereabouts. And when they started it off, they decided to do original costume, original music, with original instruments, original movement around the stage, and so on. But they never did original pronunciation, because they thought, quite wrongly, but understandably, they thought nobody would understand it. But it was very, very successful occasion, the seats were packed for that weekend, everybody loved it. And it was such a success that The Globe then decided to a second production the following year, a production of *Troilus and Cressida*.

It transports you back through the centuries. It's a very magical, almost hair-raising experience, especially in this space, to hear that accent, a space that's, sort of, as close as we can get to a 400 year old theatre, and then an accent that's as close as we can get to a 400 year old accent, with a 400 year old play. If anything, it rounds the experience of going to see a Shakespeare play out.

Any period in the history of the English language can be studied from the point of view of how it was pronounced at the time. Old English, Chaucer and so on. In relation to Shakespeare, we're talking about the sound system, or phonology, that was in use in a period called 'early modern English,' and in the period specifically around about the year 1600. Now, it's a period during which pronunciation was changing very, very rapidly, so there isn't just one kind of OP, there's an OP that evolves throughout the period. For example, early on in the period, people are pronouncing the word 'musician,' as 'musisian,' Later in the period, it had evolved into 'musici-an.' And, of course, later still, it became 'musician.'

Narrator

David Crystal and his son, Ben, regularly work together, to demonstrate how original pronunciation differs from modern pronunciation.

Ben Crystal

It's an interesting accent to tune your ear into. So, we're going to run through a few pieces of Shakespeare, first in a modern sort of received pronunciation accent, the accent that you're used to hearing Shakespeare in, and then we'll switch into original pronunciation. Probably Dad will do some and I'll do some, as well, so you get to hear it in a different voice.

Narrator

Their first example comes from *Henry V*. Ben gives the modern pronunciation and David the OP.

Ben Crystal

Oh, for a Muse of fire, that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention.

David Crystal

Oh, for a Muse of fire, that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention.

Ben Crystal

A kingdom for a stage, princes to act and monarchs to behold the swelling scene.

David Crystal

A kingdom for a stage, princes to act and monarchs to behold the swelling scene.

Ben Crystal

Then should the warlike Harry, like himself, assume the port of Mars.

David Crystal

Then should the warlike Harry, like himself, assume the port of Mars.

Ben Crystal

And at his heels, leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire crouch for employment.

David Crystal

And at his heels, leashed in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire crouch for employment.

How do you know that that was original pronunciation?

David Crystal

Well, there are three kinds of evidence that you look for when you're working out the pronunciation of a stage in the history of the language. The first and the most important piece of evidence is the observations made by people who are writing on the language at the time. There were several people who actually commented on how words sounded, which words rhymed, and so on. For example, how do we know that the 'R' is pronounced at such a time? Well, Ben Jonson, the dramatist, actually tells us at one point, he says, 'we pronounce the 'R' after a vowel,' he actually calls it a 'doggy' sound, 'grrr,' or something like that. And so that kind of evidence, when you look at all the sounds, all the vowels, all the consonants, you put it together and that's the first kind.

The second kind of evidence is the spellings that people used at the time. The spellings were a much better guide to pronunciation than spelling is today. So, at one point in *Romeo and Juliet*, the word 'film' is spelt P, H, I, L, O, M, E, therefore, 'philome,' and that's a very important indication. But the third kind of evidence, which is absolutely critical from a dramatic point of view, is that there are rhymes and puns which don't work in modern English that do work in OP. One I remember that we did at The Globe here was the pun that suddenly leapt out at us in the prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*. Can you do that one?

Ben Crystal

Right, right, so, to our swords, both alike in dignity, and 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. And it's the 'loins,' isn't it?

David Crystal

It's the 'loins,' 'from forth the fatal loins.' Now, the thing is, 'loins' was pronounced 'lines,' and the word 'lines' was pronounced 'lines,' so there is a pun.

Ben Crystal

There's a double meaning.

David Crystal

Yeah, a pun on loins and lines, genealogical lines on the one hand and physical loins on the other, which is completely missed if you do it in the modern English. It's a good example.

Narrator

David and Ben have also discovered that nearly two-thirds of Shakespeare's sonnets have rhymes that don't work in modern English but do work in OP.

David Crystal

It's a good one, 116.

Ben Crystal

I think, you know, 116 is interesting, because lots of people have it at their weddings and they think of it as being a very sort of, you know, high-falutin' sonnet, 'let me not the marriage of true minds admit impediments,' but it completely changes in OP, particularly because of the rhymes. 'Love's not time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks within his bending sickle's compass come. Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom. If this be error and upon me proved, I never writ nor no man ever loved.'

David Crystal

Yeah, 'proved' and 'loved,' it's a lovely ending, isn't it? 'Proo-ved' and 'loved,' it suddenly doesn't work.

Ben Crystal

It completely alters it, 'if this be error and upon me proo-ved, I never write nor no man ever loved.' It doesn't quite work.

Narrator

When Romeo and Juliet was performed at The Globe, David and Ben were advisors on the production.

David Crystal

One of the most interesting things was the way in which the actors all said that the OP altered their performance quite fundamentally. You have to remember the play was being done in two versions that year, there was a modern English version and an OP version, as well, the actors had to learn the thing twice. And it just changed the way they perceived their characters, didn't it, Ben?

Ben Crystal

It did. Well, I mean, it's a lot faster, the accent, you know, with modern Shakespeare it's often very reverential in the way that we pronounce it, you know, 'assume the port of Mars.' It's much faster in OP, it's 'assume the port of Mars.' The OP Romeo and Juliet was 10 minutes faster. And it does something else to you, as well, or to me, it drops my voice, I use my bottom register a lot more, you know, 'assume the port of Mars,' it makes me sort of hunker down, it doesn't sort of seem so cut off from the neck, you know, 'oh, for a muse of fire,' it connects with the body a bit more, for some reason. It's an earthier accent.

Narrator

The experience of Romeo and Juliet also demonstrated that far from making Shakespeare more difficult to understand, it can actually make the original meaning clearer, as can be seen in this extract from 'As You Like It.'

Ben Crystal

'And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, and then from hour to hour, we rot and rot. And thereby hangs a tale.' It's a really, really rude sex joke. He's talking about, you know, prostitutes and, you know, the King's evil and all that kind of thing. It's completely missed when you do it in a modern accent. The last time I saw 'As You Like It,' the actor came to the front and said, 'and so from hour and hour, we ripe and ripe, and from hour to hour, we rot and rot, and thereby hangs a tale.' Anyway, the gag is completely missed.

David Crystal

What we see is a joke working that doesn't work in modern English, and it's all based on one very simple sound shift. The pronunciation of 'whore' as 'ore.' You'll notice two things about it, the 'h' drops at the beginning, 'h' often dropped in early modern English in that way, and you get this other change, 'hour,' in modern English, becoming 'ore' in the earlier version, and the combination of the two changes together produces a coming together of the two words and therefore a perfect pun.

Ben Crystal

There's something about working our way back to Shakespeare, rather than dragging him into the 21st century. When you're standing on The Globe stage, they always light the theatre as if it's daylight, because Shakespeare's plays would have been performed at about two o'clock in the afternoon, and that means that you can make direct eye contact with every single member of the audience. And then suddenly going to see a Shakespeare play becomes a two-way dynamic, a complicity. It means that, as an actor, as Hamlet, I can come out and ask you what should I do? Should I kill Claudius? You know, I don't know what to do, everything's really confusing, help me, you know, that's what Shakespeare's monologues were about. So, if you can sort of imagine that there's that extra dimension when you're working in a space like this, you get a similar sort of extra dimension when you use Shakespeare's accent.