

PRONUNCIATION

The pronunciation of English varied in Shakespeare's day by geography and social class, age, and gender, as it does now. It would be misleading, therefore, to try to describe 'the sound of Early Modern English' as if there were only one form of spoken English at the time. It is, however, possible to make some broad generalisations. Most significantly, Early Modern accents were rhotic, which means that the /r/ in words like 'arm' and 'word' was pronounced. Today, most American English accents are rhotic, while most English English accents are not.

Evidence from spelling, rhyme, and the many contemporary 'orthoepists' who studied the pronunciation of English shows us that the sounds of Early Modern English words could vary greatly: 'is' and 'was' could end with a voiced [z] as today, or an unvoiced [s] (so 'was' can rhyme with 'pass'); some speakers still pronounced the [k] at the start of words like 'knight' and 'know' (though they were considered rather old-fashioned); many speakers had abandoned the velar fricative which the letter-group <gh> tells us was found in 'night' and 'neighbor' (this is the sound heard at the end of Scottish 'loch') – much to the irritation of Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost*, who complains about people who say 'nebor' rather than 'neighbor' (5.1.23). The Great Vowel Shift, a systemic change in the sound of the vowels of English, was underway, and we can [still hear](#) the variation this produced in the difference in vowel sound between Standard English 'house' and Northern and Scottish English 'hoose'.

Recent experiments using 'original pronunciation' in productions are interesting, but they have provoked dubiously subjective romanticisations of the supposedly 'robust' and 'earthy' sounds of Early Modern English.

School of Arts and Scienc..., 4/5/10 12:30

Comment: Should "still" be inserted here?
[accepted]

School of Arts and Scienc..., 4/5/10 12:30

Comment: Should this be "hear"?[accepted]

Jonathan Hope 17/2/09 10:27

Deleted: see

FURTHER READING

The clearest introduction to the sounds of Early Modern English is the chapter on 'Phonology' (pages 103-41) in Barber, Charles, *Early Modern English*. Edinburgh, 1997. Also useful is Nevalainen, Terttu, *An Introduction to Early Modern English*. Edinburgh 2006 (chapter 9, 'Changing Pronunciation'). On original pronunciation productions, see Crystal, David, *Pronouncing Shakespeare: The Globe Experiment*. Cambridge, 2005.

Jonathan Hope