

# The development of present-day English spelling

## - a summary

### 1 Old English

#### *Old English and the Roman alphabet*

The earliest writing which the Angles and Saxons brought over from the Continent in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries used runes (section 3.1.1 in *From Old English to Standard English*). Written English began after the establishment of monasteries in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Monks wrote and copied Latin manuscripts and therefore adapted the Roman alphabet for the writing of English. By the 10<sup>th</sup> century a stable spelling system had been established in the West Saxon dialect, which became a standard for written manuscripts throughout the country by the 11<sup>th</sup> century. This standard was lost in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest (chapters 2-3).

Most of the initial difficulty in deciphering OE writing is caused either by differences in the shape of the letters, most noticeably in <g>, <r> (ȝ, ƿ) and the three shapes for letter <s> (ſ, f s), and also by the letters that were added to the Roman alphabet to represent sounds that were not used in Latin, <ȝ>/<ȝ> *yogh*, <p> *wynn*, <þ> *thorn*, <ð> *eth* and <æ> *ash* (section 3.1.2). Letters <j> <v> and <w> were not in use; <q> and <z> were rare.

#### 1.1 Vowel change from OE to MnE

Much of the apparent inconsistency in MnE spelling is caused by the fact that changes in the pronunciation of vowels were not matched by appropriate changes in the spelling.

#### *Long and short vowels in OE*

Short and long vowels were contrastive in OE (section 3.1.3.1), eg *coc* with a short [o] meant *cock*, and with a long [o:] meant *cook*; *ful* with [u] meant *full*, and with [u:] meant *foul*. Sometimes long vowels were written with a double letter, eg *cooc* for *cook* or *fuul* for *foul*, but although we now have plenty of words spelt with <ee> and <oo>, spellings with <aa>, <ii> and <uu> did not survive.

Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, in the midlands and south of England, all the long vowels were affected by the Great Vowel Shift (section 16.5). The ME spelling <oo> in *goos* (*goose*) was originally pronounced [o:<sup>h</sup>] but is now æu:<sup>h</sup>.

#### *Why is English home Scots hame ?*

The OE originals of *home* and *hame* were spelt with letter <a>, *ham*, and spoken with the long vowel [ɑ:], like for example, *an* (*one*), *aþ* (*oath*), *ban* (*bone*), *gat* (*goat*), *halig* (*holy*), and *stan* (*stone*). The pronunciation of [ɑ:] had shifted enough for writers to spell it with <o>, pronounced [ɔ:], and still different from [o:], which was also spelt <o>. This long low back vowel [ɔ:] later shifted to [o:], and finally in present-day RP to the diphthong [əʊ] (section 6.1.4.8).

This “rounding” of [ɑ:] to [o:] did not happen in the north. Instead the pronunciation of the vowel in time moved towards the front of the mouth, [ɑ:] ⇒ [a:] ⇒ [æ:] ⇒ [ɛ:] ⇒ [e:]. Evidence for this today is in Scots pronunciation, in contrast to RP:

OE		MnE RP		Scots	
an	[ɑ:n]	one	[wʌn]	ain	[e:n]
aþ	[ɑ:θ]	oath	[əuθ]	aith	[e:θ]
ban	[bɑ:n]	bone	[bəʊn]	bane	[be:n]
gat	[gɑ:t]	goat	[gəʊt]	gait	[ge:t]
halig	[hɑ:lɪy]	holy	[həʊli]	halie	[he:lɪ]
stan	[stɑ:n]	stone	[stəʊn]	stane	[ste:n]

### *What happened to the OE letter <a>?*

The useful OE letter <a>, which distinguished the front vowel [æ] from the back vowel [ɑ] spelt <a>, ceased to be used in Middle English writing. There were two linked reasons for the loss of the letter. Firstly it was not used in French spelling, and was one of the casualties of the changes brought about in the aftermath of the Norman Conquest. Secondly the sound of the long vowel [æ:] shifted towards [ɛ:], and came to be spelt <e> (section 6.1.4.4).

Examples of OE words with short [æ] which were spelt with <a> in ME are, *æfter*, *æsc*, *cræft*, *græs*, which became *after*, *ash*, *craft*, *grass*. Some OE words with long æƿ:h which were spelt with <e> in ME are, *dæd*, *þræd*, *hær* which are MnE *deed*, *thread*, *hair*.

### *What happened to the OE short [y] and long [y:]?*

The letter <y> in OE represented a vowel which has since dropped out of most dialectal accents of English - it was like the vowel of the French word *mur* [myr]. It shifted and changed in ME. For example, we find OE *hyll* (*hill*) spelt *bill*, *bell* and *bull* in different manuscripts, which is evidence of a different pronunciation in different regions of the country.

This explains the anomaly in present-day spelling described in section 6.1.4.6. We spell *busy* and *bury*, from OE *bysig* and *byrigean*, with letter <u> but pronounce them [bɪzi] and [bɛri], not [buzi] and [buri]. Spelling and pronunciation each come from different dialectal areas. Usually the spelling of words derived from OE words with <y> corresponds to the particular pronunciation which happens to have come down into Standard English, eg *brycg* (*bridge*), *lyft* (*left*), *blyscan* (*blush*).

Long vowels changed similarly, and like all other long vowels, shifted in the Great Vowel Shift later on, eg, *bryd* (*bride*), *hyf* (*hive*).

The OE verbs *ceosan* (*choose*) and *creopan* (*creep*) were both spelt <eo> for the diphthong [ɛ:ɔ]. This diphthong “smoothed” into a single long vowel, but in *ceosan* it was the end of the “glide” that lengthened to [ɔ:], and in *creopan* the first part that lengthened to [ɛ:]. So the sequence was *ceosan* ⇒ *chosen* ⇒ *chose* ⇒ *choose* and *creopan* ⇒ *crepen* ⇒ *crepe* ⇒ *creep*. Compare *cleofan* (*cleave*), *seoþan* (*seethe*), *freosan* (*freeze*), *fleotan* (*float*), *sceotan* (*shoot*) etc.

## 1.2 Consonants from OE to MnE

Most OE consonants have remained virtually unchanged. By the 11<sup>th</sup> century however, some consonants were pronounced differently from that suggested by the spelling.

If a spelling system becomes standard and widely used, like the West Saxon system, it does not keep up with changes in pronunciation. So, for example, *scyrte* in late OE was pronounced very much like MnE *shirt* (the same word), though it had begun as something like *skirt*, which has also come down to MnE from the ON word which hadn't changed, and now has a different meaning.

### *Some OE consonant spellings*

Consonant changes that were not reflected in the spelling took place in certain phonetic environments:

<i>letter</i>	<i>OE word</i>		<i>MnE</i>	
c = [tʃ]	cese	[tʃe:zə]	cheese	[tʃi:z]
• The original [k] has been “palatalized” to [tʃ] by the following front vowel.				
cg = [dʒ]	mycge	[mydʒə]	midge	[midʒ]
• The <g> had been palatalized in an earlier sound change.				
f = [v]	ofer	[ovər]	over	[əʊvə]
s = [z]	dysig	[dyziʒ]	dizzy	[dɪzi]
þ = [ð]	hwæþer	[hwæðər]	whether	[wɛðə]
• Voiceless fricatives between vowels became voiced.				
g = [j]	gear	[jæər]	year	[jiə]
• <g> was palatalized before & after [i], & (usually) [æ], [e] & [y].				
g = [ɣ]	fugol	[fuyəl]	fowl	[faʊl]
• <g> between back vowels became a fricative consonant.				
sc	scip	[ʃɪp]	ship	[ʃɪp]
• <sc> before front vowels was palatalized to [ʃ]				

### *Consonant clusters in OE*

Every letter in an OE word was pronounced. There were no "silent" letters except where two sounds had assimilated, like <sc> [ʃ], and <cg> [dʒ].

### *The source of a present-day spelling rule*

In OE some consonants, as well as vowels, were contrasted by length. Long consonants were written double, for example <tt>, <ll>, as in the second of these pairs of words,

<i>OE</i>	<i>MnE</i>	<i>OE</i>	<i>MnE</i>
hopian	hope ( <i>vb</i> )	cwelan	= die
hoppian	hop ( <i>vb</i> )	cwellan	= kill ( <i>now</i> quell)

In section 3.1.3.2 we saw that the present tense form of *bledan* (*bleed*) was *blede*, with the long vowel [e:], and that the past tense was *bledde*, also with the long vowel [e:]. We know that long vowels shifted in the Great Vowel Shift, so we have *bleed* with [i:] in MnE, but a short vowel [ɛ] in the past tense *bled*. Therefore the OE long vowel of the past tense must have become short in late OE or early ME. The reason for this must have been that the following long consonant -dd- had affected the pronunciation of the vowel, making it short.

After this had taken place, the fact that vowels before double consonants were pronounced short led to a new spelling convention. Double consonants were no longer pronounced long, but in the spelling system a digraph like <tt> came to indicate that the preceding vowel was short, which is the convention we have today.

In OE, a double consonant in writing signified a contrastive sound. In MnE the second consonant is a diacritic, marking the sound of the preceding vowel.

## 2 After 1066 - Middle English

### *Loss of the standard after the Norman Conquest*

After the Norman Conquest, French or Latin were used in official documents, and little written English has survived from 1100-1300. The West Saxon standard was lost, and the period of Middle

English is known for the wide variety of spellings used in different parts of the country which matched different dialectal pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar.

There is some direct evidence in the continuations of the *Peterborough Chronicle* of language change which the former standard system of West Saxon OE spelling obscured (section 5.3).

### *A Middle English sound change*

A further sound change which took place in the early ME period explains another of the spelling conventions of MnE - the lengthening of short vowels in two-syllable words (section 6.1.4.9). A large set of words became monosyllables in pronunciation with the reduction of the second unstressed syllable, many of them retaining the final letter <e> in spelling.

Because the vowels were now long, they all took part in the later Great Vowel Shift. Their spelling remained the same, however, and is another example of the failure of the spelling system to mark change in pronunciation.

<i>OE</i>		<i>ME</i>		<i>MnE</i>
cnafa	⇒	knave	⇒	knave
[knavə]	⇒	[kna:və]	⇒	[nɛɪv]
melu	⇒	mele	⇒	meal
[melu]	⇒	[me:lə]	⇒	[mi:l]
þrote	⇒	throte	⇒	throat
[þrotə]	⇒	[þro:tə]	⇒	[prəʊt]

Their pronunciation today is one of the pieces of evidence that this lengthening had taken place in early ME. For example, the OE verb *bacan* became ME *baken* and then *bake*. If it had remained with a short vowel, it would have been pronounced like *back* today.

Originally, the final <e> was an inflection and had nothing to do with the sound of the preceding vowel. But in the 16<sup>th</sup> C, by which time the vowel had become long and had shifted, the final <e> came to be regarded as a diacritic marker of the preceding vowel or diphthong. Richard Mulcaster writes of <e> in 1582 as:

a letter of maruellous vse in the writing of our tung ... whose absence or presence, sometime altereth the vowel.

This explains the "magic <e>", which is said to make the preceding vowel "sound its name", a simple explanation used by infant teachers when teaching reading.

### *Lack of standard spelling in Middle English*

The notion of a standardized "correct spelling" was unknown. Here, for example, are some of the different spellings of the words *lady* and *lord* from OE to ME that show changes over time as well as variations in dialect.

<i>MnE</i>	<i>OE source</i>	<i>ME spellings</i>
lady	hlæfdige (literally <i>loaf-kneader</i> )	hlæfdi hlefdige hlefdi lefdi læfdi lævedi lafdi laidi ledy
lord	hlaford (originally hlaflowerd, literally <i>loaf-ward</i> , <i>loaf-guardian</i> )	hlaford laford laferde hlouerd laverd leverd lourde lowerd lhord lorde

### *The influence of the French spelling system in ME*

After the Conquest, French-speaking scribes introduced new ways of spelling into English. Many French words were taken into English also, particularly during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. This accounts for a number of conventions which have remained in the spelling system.

- **Initial <h>** - some new French words were spelt with an <h> which was not pronounced.

honour          honest          hour

In some of these the influence of the spelling has re-introduced the [h] in English.

horrible          horror          hospital          host          hostage

In England *hotel* is pronounced with and without the initial [h].

- **<oi>** - a new ME diphthong, eg *employ*.  
Most words with the <oi/oy> diphthong are French in origin, eg *annoy* (OF *anuier*), *boil* (AF *boiler*), *boy* (AF *abuie*), *choice* (OF *chois*), *joy* (OF *joie*), *moist* (OF *moiste*), *poison* (OF *puison*) etc.
- **<c> for [s]**, eg *citadel*.  
The use of <c> for [s] before front vowels [i] and [e] is French, eg *centre* (OF *centre*), *city* (OF *cit *), *evidence* (OF *evidence*). This was transferred to some OE words, eg *ice* (OE *is*), *mice* (OE *mys*). But *mouse* (OE *mus*) has not been changed, an example of the arbitrary nature of some spelling conventions that have been standardised. Letter <c> pronounced [k] before back vowels [a o u] was not ambiguous, as in *cat*, *coat*, *cut*. Letter <k> also came to be used more, as in *king* (OE *cyning*) and *keen* (OE *cene*).
- **<ch> for <c>** = [tʃ], eg *cheese* from OE *cese*.  
The use of <ch> to distinguish [tʃ] from [k] before front vowels was a useful adoption, eg *cheap* (OE *ceap*), *child* (OE *cild*).
- **<qu> for <cw>** = [kw], eg *quell* from OE *cwellan*.  
The digraph <qu> was substituted for the OE <cw> - *queen* (OE *cwen*), *quench* (OE *cwencean*).
- **<sh> for <sc>** = [ʃ], eg *shield* from OE *sciold*.  
OE <sc> for [ʃ] was replaced by a variety of letter forms and digraphs in different dialectal areas - <ss>, <x>, <sch> and <sh>. Although <sch> was the most common in ME, as in *schadewe*, *schal*, *schame*, *scharpe* and *sche*, <sh> eventually became standard.
- **<ou> for <u>** = [u:], eg *mouse* from OE *mus*.  
The use of <ou> for the long vowel [u:] spelt <u> in OE was French in origin, eg *house* for OE *hus* is simply a re-spelling, not a change in pronunciation.
- **<v>** - a new letter, not in OE.  
A new use for letter <u> and the introduction of an alternative form <v> came from the French. In OE, the voiced consonant [v] only occurred as a variant of [f] if there were voiced sounds before and after it, as in *blaford*, [hlav rd], *lufu* [lʊvu], so a different letter was not needed. But with the adoption of French words like *vain*, *valley* and *vary*, a letter for the sound was needed. <u> and <v> were alternative "graphic shapes" for the same letter, eg

(i) the consonant [v]

<i>ME</i>	<i>source</i>	<i>MnE</i>
ualeie	AF valey	valley
veiage	AF veiage	voyage
ueond	OE feond	fiend
vers	OE fers	verse

(ii) the vowel [u]

<i>ME</i>	<i>source</i>	<i>MnE</i>
vnwis	OE unwis	unwise
umble	OF umble	humble
vnglad	OE unglæd	unglad = sad
unclene	OE unclæne	unclean

A convention later developed for using <v> word-initial and <u> word-medial and final which survived into printing and handwriting conventions until the late 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### *The influence of Latin spelling - letter <o> for [u]*

Because so much copying by scribes was from Latin, the spelling of Latin also had some effects on the spellings of ME.

The short vowel [u] in OE words like *cuman*, *sum*, *munuc*, *sunu*, *wulf* was spelt with letter <o> - *come*, *some*, *monk*, *son*, *wolf*, probably because <u> was an over-used letter. It represented the sound [v] as well as [u], and <uu> ("double-u") was used for [w]. Letter <u> in book hand writing could also be confused with the "minim" letters <n> and <m>, and letter <o> would have been clearer to read.

### *The beginnings of a new standard – 15<sup>th</sup> C Chancery spelling*

The dominance of London as the political and commercial centre of England led to the establishment of the London educated dialect as a standard in writing. In the early 15<sup>th</sup> C, Henry V encouraged the use of English in official documents rather than French or Latin. So the spelling conventions set up in the Royal Chancery came to be adopted widely as a standard for professional scribes, or "scriveners". It made use of some of the conventions of Anglo-Norman spelling which had been first used in the 12<sup>th</sup> C. They introduced three digraphs for vowels, <ea>, <ie> and <eo>. The spellings are still part of standard spelling today, although the sounds which they represented are not the same:

<ea> - during the 15<sup>th</sup> C scriveners began to use the digraph <ea> for re-spelling words of French origin. (see section 15.5.1.4)

<ie> - "<i> before <e> except after <c>" - this digraph came from Anglo-Norman also, and was sometimes used for the higher of the two front long vowels [e:], which later shifted to [i:]. Its use in French loan-words spread to English words like *thief*, from OE *þeof*.

<eo> - the digraph <eo> was also used for [e:] in French loan-words like *people* (OF *peuple*). So we now have <ea>, <ie> and <eo>, as well as <ee> and <e-e> as signs for the vowel [e:], now pronounced [i:]. Remember that <ea> is, however, very irregular. You cannot deduce from a word spelt with <ea> what the sound of the vowel is.

### *The Great Vowel Shift and the effect on spelling*

All the following ME words had long vowels. Notice their pronunciation compared with that of the MnE words derived from them. All changed by “shifting” higher in their place of articulation in the mouth, or becoming new kinds of diphthong. (Some, for example *blood*, have changed further.)

<i>ME</i>		<i>MnE (RP)</i>		<i>ME</i>		<i>MnE (RP)</i>	
knowen	[o:]	<i>know</i>	[əʊ]	flod	[o:]	<i>flood</i>	[ʌ]
beche	[e:]	<i>beech</i>	[i:]	fode	[o:]	<i>food</i>	[u:]
biten	[i:]	<i>bite</i>	[aɪ]	ground	[u:]	<i>ground</i>	[aʊ]
blod	[o:]	<i>blood</i>	[ʌ]	ise	[i:]	<i>ice</i>	[aɪ]
chesen	[e:]	<i>choose</i>	[u:]	leden	[ɛ:]	<i>lead (vb)</i>	[i:]
crepen	[e:]	<i>creep</i>	[i:]	most	[ɔ:]	<i>most</i>	[əʊ]
cloþ	[ɔ:]	<i>cloth</i>	[ɒ]	prest	[e:]	<i>priest</i>	[i:]
del	[ɛ:]	<i>deal</i>	[i:]	prude	[y:]	<i>pride</i>	[aɪ]
uvel	[y:]	<i>evil</i>	[i:]	siþe	[i:]	<i>scythe</i>	[aɪ]
doun	[u:]	<i>down</i>	[aʊ]	hous	[u:]	<i>house</i>	[aʊ]
even	[ɛ:]	<i>even(ing)</i>	[i:]	hwy	[y:]	<i>why</i>	[aɪ]

### *Words spelt with <ough>*

This is the most often quoted example of the way in which our spelling system has failed to match changes in pronunciation. Here is a list of most of the <-ough> words in present-day English, and the words from which they have derived. Notice that they were spelt in OE with either <g> or <h>, which represented a fricative sound [ɣ] no longer in the language, like a strongly articulated and voiced [h]. This sound was later spelt <gh>, and in different dialects underwent different changes, as did the vowels.

<i>borough</i>	[bʌrɜ:]	OE burg/burh	<i>plough</i>	[plau]	OE plog/ploh
<i>bough</i>	[bau]	OE bog/boh	<i>rough</i>	[rʌf]	OE ruh
<i>bought</i>	[bɔt]	OE boht OE broht	<i>slough</i>	[slau]	OE slog/sloh
<i>brought</i>	[brɔt]	OE brohte	<i>sought</i>	[sɔt]	OE soht
<i>chough</i>	[tʃʌf]	ME imitative	<i>thorough</i>	[θʌrə]	OE þuruh
<i>cough</i>	[kɒf]	ME coghe	<i>though</i>	[ðəʊ]	ON þoh
<i>dough</i>	[dəʊ]	OE dag/dah	<i>thought</i>	[θɔt]	OE þoht
<i>fought</i>	[fɔt]	OE fuht	<i>through</i>	[θru:]	OE þurh
<i>hiccough</i>	[hɪkʌp]	imitative origin - hiccup	<i>tough</i>	[tʌf]	OE toh
<i>nought</i>	[nɔt]	OE noht	<i>trough</i>	[trɒf]	OE trog/troh
<i>ought</i>	[ɔt]	OE ahte	<i>wrought</i>	[rɔt]	OE worht

The following sentence contains words that illustrate every pronunciation:

A rough-coated dough-faced ploughboy strode coughing and hiccoughing thoughtfully through the streets of the borough.

Later sound changes have left us with a very diversified set because there were regional and social dialectal differences in the pronunciations which developed. For example, there is evidence in Smollett's novel *Humphry Clinker* (1771), that *though* and *ought* were pronounced with [f]. Two characters say,

"but he would never be fatisfied, even **tho'f** fhe fould fwheat blood and water in his fervice..."

"But then they **oft** to have fome confcience..."

*Though* and *ought* are both spoken by servants, and so their pronunciation represents the "vulgar tongue". Pronunciations varied widely from dialect to dialect and class to class, and the eventual "standard" choice is arbitrary. Some established pronunciations today, like *cough* and *trough* in fact came from "vulgar" as against "polite" usage.

### 3 Early Modern English

#### *The effects of the printing press*

William Caxton set up the first English printing press in 1476. He himself translated many of the books he printed, and wrote prefaces for them, but although the shift of the long vowels (the Great Vowel Shift) was under way, Caxton's spelling did not reflect any changes. It was also inconsistent, and matched the patterns he would have learned as a boy in the early 15<sup>th</sup> century. His spelling does not follow that of the professional scribes. Here, for example, are words inconsistently spelt:

al/all	Ilond/y lond
childeren/children	lond/londe
englissh/englysshe	people/peple
ffor/for/fore	scole/Scoolmaysters
fro/from	soune/sowne

Another cause of variability of the spelling in Caxton's printed books was that he employed foreign compositors. They would accept the spelling of the written copy they were setting up, but also introduced some foreign conventions, like <gh> for <g>, the consonant [g]. One survival of this practice explains the spelling *ghost*, from OE *gast*, ME *gost*.

Caxton's orthography influenced the patterns that in time became standard, but the stable spelling system that was eventually established by printers by the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century was established more by the many books on spelling and pronunciation that had been published throughout the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.

#### *New spelling - <oa>*

One innovation of the mid-16<sup>th</sup> C was the use of a digraph <oa> to distinguish [ɔ:], the lower of two long back vowels, from [o:], spelt <oo> (see section 16.5.1.5). Like all long vowels, these had shifted from their ME sounds. The vowel [ɔ:] was in process of shifting to [o:], and [o:] to [u:]. This explains the spelling and pronunciation of, for example, *food* and *goose*, as against *foam* and *load*.

But just as spellings with <ea> are varied in pronunciation now, so are those with <oa> eg, *broad*, *board*, *board* [ɔ:] and *broach*, *coach*, *poach* [əʊ], and with <oo>, eg *blood* [ʌ], *good* [ʊ], *food* [u:], *brooch* [əʊ]. These are the result of later changes, and variable pronunciation in social and regional dialects. Like the use of <ea> in contrast to <ee>, <oa> and <oo> usefully represented contrastive sounds, but later changes have rendered the distinction invalid, leaving us with rather a complicated mess in our spelling system.

#### *Continuing variation in spelling in the 15th & 16th centuries*

Inconsistencies and variants in spelling are evident into the 17<sup>th</sup> C:



- Letters <i> and <y> were generally interchangeable within a word, and <y>, <ie> or <ye> at the end.
- The doubling of consonants after short vowels was inconsistent.
- A random final <e> continued to be added to words. This was sometimes done to justify a line of type.

Forms of the word *city* (from OF *cit *) recorded in the *Oxford English Dictionary* illustrate these and other features of former irregularities in spelling:

cyte, cite, scite, cety, cytee, site, citee, cete, cetie, sete, citie, cittie, citte, cytte, syttey, sittey, ciete, cyete, scitie, citty, chitty

The modern practice of printing older texts after Chaucer in modernised spelling has completely obscured the nature of the development of the spelling system. Students of language, however, need to be aware of how our spelling has evolved, so that they can understand its present inconsistencies.

### *Spelling and printing conventions in William Tyndale's New Testament (1526)*

Here is a facsimile of the first page of St John's Gospel from William Tyndale's translation of the *New Testament*, first printed in 1526, in which you can observe the following features in the printing which derived from the handwriting practices of the preceding centuries:

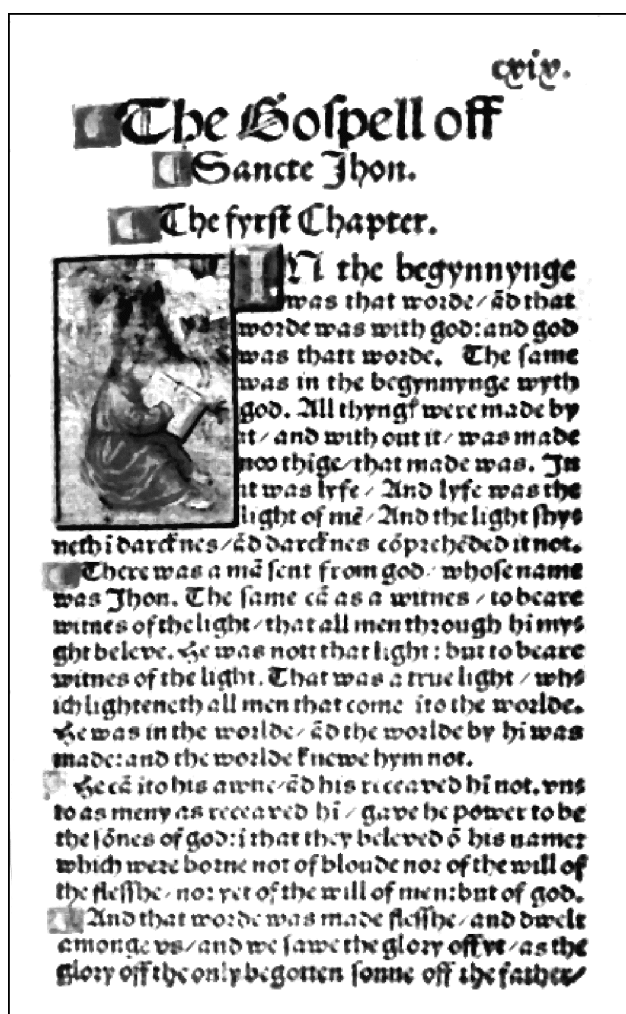
- **<n> and <m>**  
One convention was the use of a macron over a vowel to mark a following nasal consonant <n> or <m>, as in *ād, thīge mē, fōnes, hī* for *and, thinge, men, sonnes, him*.
- **<i> and <y>**  
Both consonant letters are used for [i] or [I] - *begynnyngē, lyfē, light, will, yt, with*.
- **<u> and <v>**  
<u> and <v> continued as different forms of the same letter (from Latin usage) well into the 17<sup>th</sup> C, and both were used for either vowel or consonant. The convention was established that the form <v> was used at the beginning of a word, as in *vnto, & vs* and <u> medially, as in *true, & bloude* (there are only a few examples in this facsimile). The distinction between <u> for the vowel and <v> for the consonant, which we use today, dates from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> C.
- **Long <ſ> and short <s>**  
There were two forms of <s>, derived from handwriting, of which the long, used initially and medially in a word, has not survived, for example, *fame, ſhyneth, ſent, whoſe, fōnes, fleſſhe*.
- **<i> and <j>**  
Until the 17<sup>th</sup> C letter <i> was used for both the vowel [i] and the consonant [j], but there are no examples in this facsimile. Spellings such as *iuell, iourneys, reioysed* for *jewel, journeys, rejoiced* illustrate this convention.
- **<r>**  
The 2-form of letter <r> after <o> is used in this printer's font - <or>
- **Punctuation**  
The **prick** (full-stop) and colon are used, but the most common divider of clauses is the **virgule** </>. The comma is not yet in use.

These spellings were purely graphic, and make the language of texts from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries look stranger than it really is.

### *A note on Tyndale's life*

William Tyndale was born c.1494 and is known for his English translation of the Bible, a dangerous project at the time and proscribed by the Church. In 1524, after failing to find patronage for his proposed translation in England, he moved to Germany. He began printing his translation of the *New Testament* in Cologne, but was interrupted by legal injunction and completed the work in Worms in 1526, where it was printed. He was denounced by the church in England as a heretic. Tyndale therefore lived most of the time abroad in Antwerp, where he revised his *New Testament* and printed translations of the *Pentateuch* and of *Jonah*. In 1535 he was arrested and imprisoned near Brussels, condemned for heresy and executed on October 6<sup>th</sup> 1536.

### *Text 194 - William Tyndale's New Testament (1526) - facsimile*



### *"Tinkering with the orthography" in the 16th C*

Some oddities of our spelling can be explained by the habit of re-spelling of words in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in order (sometimes wrongly) to mark their derivation from one of the classical languages, Latin and Greek, although the new spelling did not match the pronunciation. Some of these re-spellings have become standard. Shakespeare satirizes this habit in the character of Holofernes the Pedant, criticising Don Armado in *Loues Labors Lost*:

He draweth out the thred of his verbotitie, finer then the staple of his argument. I abhorre such phanatticall phantafims, such infociable and poynt deuise companions, such rackers of ortagraphie, as to speake dout sine b, when he should fay doubt; det, when he should

pronounce debt; d e b t, not d e t: he clepeth a Calfe, Caufe: halfe, haufe: neighbour vocatur nebour; neigh abreuiated ne: this is abhominable, which he would call abbominable, it insinuateth me of infanire: ne intelligis domine, to make frantique lunatique.

The sources of the words mentioned by Holofernes are:

<i>doubt</i>	ME doute f. OF doute f. L dubitare	<i>half</i>	OE healf
<i>debt</i>	ME det(te) f. OF dette f. L debitum	<i>neighbour</i>	OE neahgebur
<i>calf</i>	OE cælf	<i>abominable</i>	ME f. OF f. L abominabilis

### More 16<sup>th</sup> century re-spellings

Here are some more examples of these "etymological" changes in spelling:

16 <sup>th</sup> C re-spelling	Middle English	OE/OF	Latin or Greek source
theatre	teatre	OF teatre	Gk theatron
anthem	antefne	OE antefn	L antiphona
apothecary	apotecarie	OF apotecaire	L apothecarius
comptroller	counteroller	AF contrerollour	L contrarotulare
receipt	receit	AF receite	L recepta
indict	endite	AF enditer	L indictare
victual	vitaile	OF vitaille	L victualia
parliament	parlement	OF parlement	L paraulare + ment
fault	faute	OF faute	L fallita
vault	vaute	OF vaute	L voluta
throne	trone	OF trone	Gk thronos
author	autour	OF autor	L auctor

These words were respelt during the 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> centuries:

	<i>Derivation</i>	<i>re-spelling</i>
<i>amirail</i>	OF a(d)mira(i)l . f. med L a(d)miralis, f. Arabic amir <i>commander</i>	<b>admiral</b>
<i>amonest</i>	OF amonester f. L admonere	<b>admonish</b>
<i>ancre</i>	OE ancor f. L anchora f. Gk agkura	<b>anchor</b>
<i>assoil</i>	L absolvere	<b>absolve</b>
<i>avauncen</i>	OF avancer f. LL abante <i>in front</i> f. L ab <i>away</i> + ante <i>before</i>	<b>advance</b>
<i>avauntage</i>	OF avantage f. avant <i>in front</i> f. LL abante: ( <i>see advance</i> )	<b>advantage</b>
<i>aventure</i>	OF aventure, aventurer f. L adventurus	<b>adventure</b>
<i>avice</i>	OF avis f. L ad <i>to</i> + visum	<b>advice</b>
<i>caitif</i>	L captivus	<b>captive</b>
<i>cedule</i>	OF cedula f. LL schedula	<b>schedule</b>
<i>ceptre</i>	OF (s)ceptre f. L sceptrum f. Gk skeptron	<b>sceptre</b>
<i>colere</i>	OF colere <i>bile, anger</i> f. L cholera f. Gk kholera	<b>cholera</b>
<i>cors</i>	ME corps, <i>variant spelling of cors (corse)</i> , f. OF cors f. L corpus	<b>corpse</b>
<i>crume</i>	OE cruma	<b>crumb</b>
<i>descryve</i>	L describere	<b>describe</b>
<i>faucon</i>	OF faucon f. LL falco -onis, perhaps. f. L falx	<b>falcon</b>
<i>langage</i>	OF langage ultimately f. L lingua	<b>language</b>
<i>neveu</i>	OF neveu f. L nepos	<b>nephew</b>

<i>perfit</i>	ME and OF parfit, perfet f. L perfectus	<b>perfect</b>
<i>samon</i>	AF sa(u)moun, OF saumon f. L salmo -onis	<b>salmon</b>
<i>sent</i>	ME sent f. OF sentir <i>perceive, smell</i> , f. L sentire; addition of <c> unexplained	<b>scent</b>
<i>sisoures</i>	ME sisoures f. OF cisoires f. LL cisoria, associated with L scindere	<b>scissors</b>
<i>sithe</i>	OE siþe	<b>scythe</b>
<i>yland</i>	OE igland f. ig <i>island</i> + land: first syllable influenced by <i>isle</i> , ME ile f. OF ile	<b>island</b>

Some of these re-spelt words were in time pronounced differently, according to the letters introduced by analogy with the presumed derivation. In some there was an added consonant:

a <b>d</b> miral	a <b>d</b> vantage	s <b>ch</b> edule	perfe <b>c</b> t
a <b>d</b> monish	a <b>d</b> venture	cor <b>p</b> se	
a <b>b</b> solve	a <b>d</b> vice	descri <b>b</b> e	
a <b>d</b> vance	ca <b>p</b> tive	fa <b>l</b> con	

whereas in others the re-spelling resulted in words with “silent letters”:

**“Silent letters”**

ceptre s <b>c</b> eptre	samon sa <b>l</b> mon	sisoures s <b>c</b>	yland i <b>s</b> land
colere c <b>h</b> oler	sent s <b>c</b> ent	issors	
crume crum <b>b</b>		sithe s <b>c</b> ythe	

These words were in addition to others derived from OE whose pronunciation had changed as a result of the loss of spoken consonants. Words in OE beginning with certain pairs of consonants were simplified during the ME and EMnE periods - <cn - gn - hl - hn - hr - hw - wl - wr>. For some of these, beginning with <kn - gn - wr>, the spelling has remained unchanged. Here is a selection of those words, most of which have come down from OE into MnE:

<i>OE word</i>	<i>pronunciation</i>	<i>MnE reflex</i>	<i>OE word</i>	<i>pronunciation</i>	<i>MnE reflex</i>
cnafa	[knɑvə]	knave	hrycg	[hrydʒ]	ridge
cneo	[kne:ə]	knee	hwa	[hwa:]	who
cnif	[kni:f]	knife	hwæl	[hwæl]	whale
cniht	[kniçt]	knight	hwær	[hwæ:r]	where
cnyll	[knyll]	knell	hwæs	[hwæs]	whose
			hwæt	[hwæt]	what
gnætt	[gnætt]	gnat	hwæte	[hwæ:tə]	wheat
gnagan	[gnɑɣən]	gnaw	hweol	[hwe: əl]	wheel
			hwettan	[hwet: ən]	whet
hladan	[hlɑdən]	load	hwil	[hwi:l]	while
hlædel	[hlædəl]	ladle	hwinan	[hwi:nən]	whine
hlæfdige	[hlæ:fdijə]	lady	hwit	[hwi:t]	white
hlaford	[hlɑ:vɔrd]	lord	hwy	[hwy:]	why
hlaf	[hlɑ:f]	loaf			
			wlisp	[wɪsp]	lisp
hnægan	[hnæɣən]	neigh	wlanc ( <i>proud</i> )	[wlank]	-
hnutu	[hnutu]	nut	wlitan ( <i>to look</i> )	[wli:tən]	-
			wlitig ( <i>beautiful</i> )	[wɪtɪj]	-
hræfn	[hrævən]	raven			
hreac	[hrɛ:ək]	rick	wrænna	[wræn:ə]	wren
hring	[hrɪŋ]	ring	wræþþo	[wræð:ə]	wrath
hroc	[hro:k]	rook	wræstlian	[wræ:stliən]	wrestle
hrof	[hro:f]	roof	wrist	[wrɪst]	wrist

*Another sound change not marked in the spelling - loss of post-vocalic <r>*

Today some English and most American dialects are **rhotic** - that is, the <r> which follows a vowel in words like *hear* and *flour* (post-vocalic <r>) is pronounced. All dialects of ME were rhotic. Present-day RP is non-rhotic.

During the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries post-vocalic <r> first of all began to affect the pronunciation of its preceding vowel, and then disappeared in some dialects. Spelling was not changed, however. This accounts for the pronunciation in RP and other non-rhotic accents of eg, *arm* [ɑ:m], *person* [pɜ:sən], *dirt* [dɜ:t], *turf* [tɜ:f]. The <r> is no longer pronounced, and the vowels have lengthened or become diphthongs.

## 23.4 Correct spelling today

The stabilisation of the spelling system was complete by about 1700 in printing, though handwritten spellings remained relatively unstandardised for some time. Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, published in 1755, became a standard reference for private use. There have been few changes since the 18<sup>th</sup> century (see section 21.1.2).

Today most words have one fixed spelling which can be looked up in the dictionaries. The demand for accuracy in spelling is a social and educational fact of life and some questions about the necessity for consistency in spelling are worth debating.

The aim of this chapter has been to show that our present standardized spelling system

- dates back a thousand years or more in its basic patterning,
  - reflects the pronunciation of English in the 14<sup>th</sup> century rather than today - that is, it ignores the Great Vowel Shift,
  - also ignores many other subsequent changes in pronunciation that have taken place,
  - takes its letter/sound correspondences from several sources, and
  - makes arbitrary choices from available dialectal variants.
-