THE
ORIGINAL PRONUNCIATION (OP)
OF SHAKESPEARE'S ENGLISH

by
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Based on the work of
David Crystal
in Early Modern English (EME)

with embedded sound files
THE INTERNATIONAL PHONETIC ALPHABET

I have used the symbols of the International Phonetic Alphabet to represent in the text the sounds you hear me making in the recordings. While only a few of my readers may be familiar with this alphabet, I have found that simply seeing the sounds represented visually this way strongly reinforces what you are hearing; and, as its name implies, the IPA, among many phonetic systems, has been the international standard since the early twentieth century.

When I was a student at the Rose Bruford School of Speech and Drama in London, I had a wonderful phonetics teacher, Greta Stevens, who painstakingly demonstrated the sounds in class until her students “fixed” the sounds associated with each symbol. We also were able to purchase the huge, old 78 r.p.m. discs with Daniel Jones, the father of the system, speaking the cardinal vowels. Under Miss Stevens’ superb tutelage, I took my studies as far as I could, culminating in the rigorous proficiency examination administered by the International Phonetics Association. It is a testament to her skill that, among those gaining the IPA Certificate of Proficiency that year, 1968, I was the high scorer. My love of phonetics and its ability to record the way humans speak has never diminished.

Things have come a long way since 1968, and, beginning with the fourth edition of Accents & Dialects for Stage & Screen, I was able to offer an online demonstration of the IPA, created by Professor Eric Armstrong, my colleague at Toronto’s York University. Eric created the Flash animation charts while I voiced all the sounds. My students have found it a delightfully easy way to learn the alphabet, and I am sure you will too. Whenever you want to hear a sound in isolation, or to compare it with a similar sound, these charts are the best way we know for you to accomplish this. You will find them on my Website at:

www.paulmeier.com/ipa/charts.html
The chart above is reproduced courtesy of the International Phonetic Association.
STANDARD LEXICAL SETS

When studying a particular dialect, it helps to know that words in the same *lexical set*, to a large extent, are pronounced with the same vowel. So if you know the signature sound of the set and can assign to that set the word in which you are interested, you can pronounce it with some reasonable confidence of being correct. For example, *last, master, dance, pass, staff, basket, half,* and *demand* are all members of the *bath* lexical set. In Received Pronunciation (RP), for example, they are all pronounced with [æ], and in General American (GenAm) with [æ]. Leading scholar J.C. Wells developed the classification system now widely used by others in the field, and it is his classification and a shortened list of his sample words that follows. You may find the full discussion in his book, *Accents of English, Volume 1*, Cambridge University Press, 1998.

**KIT**: RP [ɪ]; GenAm [ɪ]; *ship, rib, dim, milk, slither, myth, pretty, build, women, busy.*

**DRESS**: RP [ɛ]; GenAm [ɛ]; *step, ebb, hem, shelf, effort, threat, bread, ready, any, friend.*

**TRAP**: RP [æ]; GenAm [æ]; *tap, cab, ham, scalp, arrow, plaid.*

**LOT**: RP [ɔ]; GenAm [ɔ]; *stop, rob, Tom, solve, profit, honest, swan, waffle, knowledge.*

**STRUT**: RP [ʌ]; GenAm [ʌ]; *cup, rub, hum, pulse, butter, done, monk, touch, blood.*

**FOOT**: RP [ʊ]; GenAm [ʊ]; *put, full, cuckoo, good, woman, could.*

**BATH**: RP [æ]; GenAm [æ]; *staff, path, brass, clasp, blast, ask, after, master, basket, fasten, laugh, dance, grant, branch, demand, example, chancel, calf, shan’t, Iraq.*

And some words that, in RP, can be either *trap* or *bath* words: *chaff, plastic, lather, contralto.*

**CLOTH**: RP [ɔ]; GenAm [ɔ] or [ɔθ]; *off, cough, froth, cross, soft, often, Australia, gone, moth, long, accost, foster, wash, origin, borrow, florid, horrid, Morris, sorrow, Lawrence, quarrel.* (N.B. There is great variability in GenAm among these words, which, for many speakers, may fall into the *lot* set, or into no standard lexical set.)

**NURSE**: RP [ɜ]; GenAm [ɜ]; *usurp, curb, turn, burnt, shirt, firm, myrrh, assert, verb, term, certain, earth, heard, rehearsal, work, worst, scrounge, attorney.*

**FLEECE**: RP [ɪ]; GenAm [ɪ]; *creep, seed, seem, see, needle, these, shriek, ceiling, be, reap, bead, team, sea, feast, metre, complete, deceive, Caesar, phoeinix, quay, police, mosquito.*

**FACE**: RP [ɛɪ]; GenAm [ɛɪ] or [e]; *tape, babe, name, change, taper, April, bass (in music), gauge, crepe, wait, day, rein, they, weigh, reign, great.*

**PALM**: RP [æ]; GenAm [æ]; *calm, bra, hurrah, Brahms, spa, Shah, cantata, bravado, Zhivago, Dali, llama, candelabra, Koran, khaki, enchilada, almond, Ghana* (N.B. This set is unstable and membership in it varies greatly from dialect to dialect, with *trap* being the leading other set to which words may be assigned.)

**THOUGHT**: RP [ɔ]; GenAm [ɔ]; *taught, naughty, ought, taut, applaud, autumn, gawp, jaw, chalk, all, bald, halt, alter, fault.*
GOAT: RP [əʊ]; GenAm [ou] or [ø]; soap, road, note, robe, hole, so, noble, brooch, bowl, soul, colt, roll, sew, dough.

GOOSE: RP [u]; GenAm [u]: loop, mood, boom, boost, move, tomb, group, dupe, cube, plume, funeral, duty, flu, ludicrous, sleuth, sewage, fruit, view, beauty.

PRICE: RP [aɪ]; GenAm [aɪ]: price, tribe, time, Friday, indict, isle, hi-fi, type, eider, height, fight.

CHOICE: RP [ɔɪ]; GenAm [ɔɪ]: boy, noise, void, coin, poison, buoy, employ, hoist.

MOUTH: RP [ʌʊ]; GenAm [ʌʊ]: out, loud, noun, count, flour, crowd, dowry, bough, MacLeod.

NEAR: RP [ɪə]; GenAm [ɪə]: beer, here, bier, pier, weir, fear, fierce, weird, beard, serious, eerie, and RP and GenAm both use [ɪə] in idea, Korea, European, Sophia, museum, real.

SQUARE: RP [ɛə]; GenAm [ɛə]: care, air, bear, heir, their, there prayer, scarce, vary, canary, Mary, dairy, aerial.

START: RP [ɑʊ]; GenAm [ɑʊ]: far, bazaar, sharp, card, farm, snarl, party, heart, sergeant, aardvark, sari, safari, ari, Sahara, tiara.

NORTH: RP [ɔ]; GenAm [ɔʊ]: for, war, distort, orb, form, porpoise, orbit, normal, quart, Laura.

FORCE: RP [ɔ]; GenAm [ɔʊ]: ore, boar, floor, four, deport, afford, borne, portent, coarse, court, oral, glorious, uproarious. (NOTE: North and force, historically distinct, have merged in many dialects.)

CURE: RP [ʉə]; GenAm [ʉə]: moor, poor, dour, your, allure, gourd, tourist, assurance, mural, centurion, curious, during, Europe.

happy: RP [ɪ]; GenAm [i]; happy, lovely, city, baby, spaghetti, tax, salami, movie, birdie, prairie, committee, coffee, money, valley, Chelsea, Swansea.

letter: RP [æ]; GenAm [ɛ]; father, batter, scorer, sinner, fisher, centre/center, meter/metre, tower, calendar, sugar, liar, mirror, pallor, survivor, odour, flavour, martyr, pressure, measure, failure.

comma: RP [æ]; GenAm [e]; pajama, drama, sofa, quota, vodka, panda, saga.
Well, here’s a story for you: Sarah Perry was a veterinary nurse who had been working daily at an old zoo in a deserted district of the territory, so she was very happy to start a new job at a superb private practice in North Square near the Duke Street Tower. That area was much nearer for her and more to her liking. Even so, on her first morning, she felt stressed. She ate a bowl of porridge, checked herself in the mirror and washed her face in a hurry. Then she put on a plain yellow dress and a fleece jacket, picked up her kit and headed for work. When she got there, there was a woman with a goose waiting for her. The woman gave Sarah an official letter from the vet. The letter implied that the animal could be suffering from a rare form of foot and mouth disease, which was surprising, because normally you would only expect to see it in a dog or a goat. Sarah was sentimental, so this made her feel sorry for the beautiful bird.

Before long, that itchy goose began to strut around the office like a lunatic, which made an unsanitary mess. The goose’s owner, Mary Harrison, kept calling, “Comma, Comma,” which Sarah thought was an odd choice for a name. Comma was strong and huge, so it would take some force to trap her, but Sarah had a different idea. First, she tried gently stroking the goose’s lower back with her palm, then singing a tune to her. Finally, she administered ether. Her efforts were not futile. In no time, the goose began to tire, so Sarah was able to hold onto Comma and give her a relaxing bath.

Once Sarah had managed to bathe the goose, she wiped her off with a cloth and laid her on her right side. Then Sarah confirmed the vet’s diagnosis. Almost immediately, she remembered an effective treatment that required her to measure out a lot of medicine. Sarah warned that this course of treatment might be expensive – either five or six times the cost of penicillin. I can’t imagine paying so much, but Mrs. Harrison – a millionaire lawyer – thought it was a fair price for a cure.

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ORIGINAl PRONUNCIATION

THE ORIGINAL PRONUNCIATION (OP) DIALECT

INTRODUCTION

Based entirely on David Crystal’s analysis, this is how the best scholars on the topic consider the Early Modern English (EME) of Shakespeare's own day to have been spoken. Read Crystal’s full account of the fascinating experiment in OP performance at Shakespeare's Globe in England in his book, Pronouncing Shakespeare, and at his Website, where you may also hear him demonstrate the dialect.

The question everyone asks: How do we know how people pronounced English in Shakespeare’s day? Crystal answers this in full in his book, citing a combination of evidence based on (a) the rhymes and puns which work in OP but not in modern English, (b) the idiosyncratic spellings in the First Folio and Quarto, and (c) the descriptions of contemporary orthoepists, who often give real detail about how pronunciations were in those days.

(To play the accompanying sound track, click the following link.)

SOUND TRACK 1

SIGNATURE SOUNDS

1. Use of /r/. What surprises many is that Early Modern English (EME) was a rhotic dialect, with heavy r-coloration of vowels that are followed by /r/. The silent /r/ of today's Received Pronunciation (Standard British English) is a more recent development.

   EXAMPLES: nurse, start, north, force, letter, air, flower, Orsino, Ferdinand

2. The mouth lexical set. This diphthong had a centered onset and started with the schwa, or neutral vowel, [ə], resulting in [əʊ].

   EXAMPLES: out, loud, noun, count, crowd, bough

3. The price and choice lexical sets. This diphthong, too, had a centered onset and started with the schwa, or neutral vowel, [ə], resulting in [æɪ].

   EXAMPLES: price, tribe, time, Friday, isle, eider, fight, Viola; AND choice, point, boil, toy, ahoy, royal
4. The goat, near, square, face, and cure sets. These vowels, diphthongs (two-stage vowels) in RP and GenAm, were more monophthongal in EME. We would have heard [go:t, fɪː˞, skʍɛː˞, fɛːs, kçuː˞].

**EXAMPLES:** goat, home, near, beer, square, bare, bear, face, stay, fatal, cure, tour, poor

5. The happy lexical set. Crystal tells us that this unstressed syllable also had a neutral onset, like price, choice, and mouth. The result: [əɪ]

**EXAMPLES:** happy, lovely, city, baby, money, Feste, valley

6. The strut lexical set. Crystal suggests that the close-mid, back, unrounded vowel [ʌ] captures the likely quality of this vowel.

**EXAMPLES:** cup, rub, butter, love, monk, blood, hum, summer

7. The trap lexical set. Crystal suggests a more open, front vowel than today’s [æ], similar to the [a] vowel we hear in the dialects of Northern England. He includes any and many in this, although they fall into the RP dress set today. Any and many are still pronounced today in much Irish English as they were in OP.

**EXAMPLES:** trap, ham, scalp, arrow, Capulet, Malvolio, Andrew, battery, action

8. Since the lot and thought lexical sets were pronounced without the lip-rounding of today's RP, Crystal directs us to the less rounded version spoken in mainstream American English. [ɑ] is the vowel he suggests.

**EXAMPLES:** lot, stop, rob, profit, honest, swan, knowledge, want, watch AND daughter, awkward, ought, call, stalk

9. Crystal cautions us to retain the lip-rounding of conservative RP [u̹] in the goose lexical set, though he lists several words like fool, conclude, tooth, proof (today part of the goose set) for which he recommends [ʊ], which allows puns such as
that in *thou full dish of fool* [ðəʊ fʊl dɪʃ əv fʊl]. This creates some difficulty over words like *blood* and other double-o words that are today part of *strut*. Confusion with words in the *foot* set (like *put, full, cuckoo, good, woman, could*) is also possible. Proceed with caution! It is probable that both pronunciations would have been current in Shakespeare’s time.

**EXAMPLES:** *loop, mood, dupe, Juliet, funeral, duty, fruit, beauty*

10. Crystal addresses the *bath* and *start* sets together, telling us that [a] is the target (though r-colored [ɑ] in the case of *start* words, of course). Interestingly, words like *warm, war, quarter, and warn* – today members of the *north/force* set – were pronounced in EME identically to *start* words, which are all spelled with the letter /a/. He also lists *daughter* (now a *thought*-set word, and suggests [dɑ:təˀ].

**EXAMPLES:** *staff, path, brass, blast, ask, master, basket, AND start, heart, barn, sergeant*

11. Although we covered the heavy r-coloration of this dialect in signature sound #1, Crystal additionally asks for a slightly different vowel shape for the *nurse* set – slightly more open. [ɐˀ] is his suggested target.

**EXAMPLES:** *usurp, turn, mercy, shirt, assert, earth, worst, scourge*

12. The *fleece* lexical set (whose spelling nearly always involves the letter /e/) calls for the slightly more open vowel [e] or one even closer [ɛ].

**EXAMPLES:** *see, field, be, people, breathe, complete, Caesar, Phoenix*
ADDITIONAL FEATURES

a. Crystal encourages us to be more casual in our diction than is the fashion in today’s British stage speech, using lots of elision, weak forms, etc. For examples, the following words in unstressed positions should involve the weakest form possible (as indicated): and [ən], as [əz], being [bɪŋ, bən], for [fə:], he [ə], I [ə], my [mɪ], mine [mɪn], thine [ðɪn], must [mʊst], of [ə], or [ə], them [əm], thou [ðə], thee [ðɪ], thy [ðɪ], to [tə]. The speech is generally rapid – “trippingly upon the tongue,” as Hamlet counsels.

b. Initial /h/ on he, he’s, him, his, him, her, her’s, in unstressed positions will be dropped. Hence: what’s his name [wæts iz neːm], who’s her best friend [hʊz əˈbes fɪɛn]. Crystal recommends /h/ dropping on more substantial words too, on occasion. He tells us that /h/ was very variable: It would be dropped by lower-class speakers generally, but upper-class speakers might drop it too without being penalized; everything would depend on the extent to which they had learned to pronounce following the spelling, as Holofernes¹ recommends.

c. Medial /v/ and voiced /θ/ [ð] consonants in some common words will be elided. Hence: heaven [heʊn], even [ɪən], seven [sən], eleven [əlɪn], devil [dɪəl], hither [hɪə], thither [θɪə].

d. Abundant elision of vowels. Crystal cites the following examples: the unworthiest [dənərˈdʒɛst], delivery [dɛlɪvəri], leavening [lɛvnɪŋ], venomous [vənəməs], everybody [ˈɛvəbdi]. Often scansion of the verse line will alert you to a likely elision.

e. -ing suffixes should be reduced to [ɪŋ]. No connotation of reduced social status attaches to this, as is often the case today. Hence: calling [kəlɪn], singing [sɪŋɪŋ], praying [prɪŋ].

f. /w/ should be aspirated in words like which [wɪtʃ], when [wɛn], why [wə], whither [wɪðə], whence [wɛns], etc., where today’s dominant pronunciation is [w]. (Who [hu], whom [həm], whole [həl], etc., today pronounced with [h] do not get this treatment, of course.)

g. Many polysyllabic words have a different stress pattern today than in EME. Particularly when these words are part of a verse line, the OP rhythm becomes important. Consider the three examples Crystal cites: canonize, advertize,

¹ Holofernes is the pedantic schoolmaster that Shakespeare satirizes so cleverly in Love’s Labour’s Lost.
gallantry. There’s a very full list of such polysyllabic words in Shakespeare’s Pronunciation\(^2\).

h. Fuller soundings of -sion and -tion spellings [sɪən] instead of [ʃən].

(To play the accompanying sound track, click the following link.)

**SOUND TRACK 3**

**SIGNATURE SOUNDS IN SENTENCE CONTEXT**
(Each sentence corresponds to the number of the signature sound on Track 1.)

1. Her father burned the letters in the barn on Saturday.
2. How now? Down in the mouth?
3. Annoying flies might fly noisily at night.
4. No fear where faint heart endures.
5. Silly Wally dallied near happy Sally.
6. Much luck becomes the one who loves.
7. Clarence married Anne and had a happy family.
8. I thought I’d stop at lots of naughty chocolate shops.
9. Whose new blue shoes do you view on Tuesday.
10. The master started asking his heart to dance.
11. Wordy Bert burned the dirty shirts on purpose.
12. He seemed deceived by brief dreams at sea.

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\(^2\) Shakespeare’s Pronunciation is the seminal work by Helge Kökeritz.
COORDINATION EXERCISES

(To play the accompanying sound track, click the following link.)

SOUND TRACK 4

1. Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?
   ʃal əi kəmpeː di ə suməz ə di:

2. But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?
   bɔt saft wət ləit θəndə wɪndə bɾɛks

3. If music be the food of love, play on.
   ɪf mjuːzɪk bi ðə fuːd ə lɤv plɛː ən

4. How happy some o’er other some can be.
   əʊ apəɪ sɤm ə ðə sɤm ən kən be:

5. Now all the youth of England are on fire.
   nəʊ ɑːl ðə juθ əv ɪŋglənd a ən fəɪə

6. Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.
   ɤneːzəɪ ləɪz əkɹə ə kɹəʊn

7. Love looks not with the eyes but with the mind.
   lɤv lʊks nət wɪ di əɪz bət wɪ ðə məɪnd

8. The quality of mercy is not strained.
   ðə kʍɑlɪtəɪ ə mɐ˞səɪ ɪz nɑt stɹɛːnd
9. The man that hath no music in himself ... Is fit for treasons, strategems and spoils.

ðə man ðət aθ noː mju̹ːzɪk ɪn ɪmsɛɫf ɪz fit fə tɹeːzn̩z stɹatəd͡ʒəmz n̩ spəɪlz

10. How sharper than a serpent’s tooth it is / To have a thankless child.

əʊ ʃa˞pə˞ ðə ə sɐ˞pənts t͡ʃə th ɪ iz tə av ə ðəŋkəs ɪəlð

(To play the accompanying sound track, click the following link.)

SOUND TRACK 5

MONOLOGUE ONE
From King Lear, Act 1, Scene 2

EDMUND

Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law

ðəʊ nɛːtʰə˞ a˞t mɪ gɑdɛs thə ðəɪ lɑː

My services are bound. Wherefore should I

mɪ sərˈvɪz ə bəʊnd məˈfɛ ɪ ɬ

Stand in the plague of custom, and permit

stand ɪ ðə pʰleːg ə kʰrəstəm ən pʰəmɪtʰ

The curiosity of nations to deprive me,

muş nɪərˈdɪpʰərə+jɪnˈsaːn ə tʰə zjuːnˈsɛʃən ə ɪər ə kʰˈʃɪrɪzɪŋ thə ɪə lə
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines

Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?

When my dimensions are as well compact,

My mind as generous, and my shape as true,

As honest madam’s issue? Why brand they us

With base? with baseness? bastardy? base, base?
(To play the accompanying sound track, click the following link)

**SOUND TRACK 6**

**MONOLOGUE TWO**

From *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 2, Scene 1

**TITANIA**

These are the forgeries of jealousy:

\[\text{ðeːz} \ \text{a} \ \text{ðə foːdəˈʐɛəɾɪz} \ \text{ə dʒɛləsəɪ}\]

And never, since the middle summer’s spring,

\[\text{ənvəˈsɪns} \ \text{də miːdəˈmoːz} \ \text{sprɪŋ}\]

Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,

\[\text{mɛt} \ \text{weː} \ \text{æn} \ \text{ɪl} \ \text{ɪn} \ \text{dɛːl} \ \text{fərɪst} \ \text{ə} \ \text{meːd}\]

By paved fountain or by rushy brook,

\[\text{bɪ pɛːvɪd} \ \text{fəʊntən} \ \text{ə} \ \text{bɪ ɹʊʃəɪ} \ \text{bɹʊk}\]

Or in the beached margent of the sea,

\[\text{ə} \ \text{ɪn} \ \text{də} \ \text{beːtʃɪd} \ \text{mædʒənt} \ \text{ə} \ \text{də} \ \text{seː}\]

To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,

\[\text{tɛ} \ \text{dans} \ \text{ə} \ \text{rɪŋlɛts} \ \text{tɛ} \ \text{də} \ \text{miːlɪn} \ \text{wɪnd}\]

\[\text{spoken by Amy Virginia Buchanan.}\]
But with thy brawls thou hast disturb’d our sport.

Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,

As in revenge, have suck’d up from the sea

Contagious fogs; which falling in the land

Have every pelting river made so proud

That they have overborne their continents.

WHAT NEXT?

For deeper work in acting Shakespeare, and to hear further speeches in OP, Paul’s eBook, *Voicing Shakespeare*, is available at:

http://www.paulmeier.com/shakespeare.html