

One of the many highlights of the Annual Study Meeting was the session led by David Crystal on OP - Original Pronunciation. During a fascinating couple of hours, David gave us extraordinary insight into the language Shakespeare used and how his texts would have been spoken.

Comprehension of this pronunciation gives us greater understanding of meanings, clarifies wordplay, exploits humour. Puns can be fully appreciated and rhymes, actually rhyme. Ever since Shakespeare's Globe, with David as Master of Pronunciation, staged a weekend of Romeo and Juliet performed in OP in 2004, a fascination with how Shakespeare 'sounded' in the 16th and early 17th centuries has grown.

How illuminating it was to listen to David 'translate' from RP to OP lines from Henry V. We heard how vowels would have been spoken and how an extra syllable would be sounded in words such as invention = inven-s-ion. (This explains why some lines seem to be 'a syllable short of an iambic'. Thanks to Eluned Owen for that observation.)

Many textual clues can be found in spelling, puns and rhymes - especially closing couplets that do not appear to rhyme on the page. For instance Puck's mischievous account to Oberon about the effect his love potion had on the Queen of Fairies ends.....

'And in that moment so it came to pass
Titania waked and straightway loved an ass'.

Impact is lost unless both the final vowels are flat.

David has written more than 100 books on language and Shakespeare. But it is his latest publication, The Oxford Dictionary of Original Shakespearean Pronunciation (2016) that really unlocks the meanings of every word in the First Folio. In addition there is an accompanying audio transcription of 40,000 words that took 5 days to record!

There are still 22 plays still to be performed in OP. When asked which he would like to work on next David said after a brief hesita-s-ion (see what I did there) Richard II or Richard III. I for one can't wait to see and, more importantly, hear them.

Cally Foster