Questions to Consider

1. Queen Elizabeth I inspired English naval forces with a speech at Tilbury before they faced the Spanish Armada. Which speech has inspired you most in your lifetime?
2. Why do you suppose that the "purity" and "Englishness" of English became such a hot topic at the end of the 16th century? How would you defend or argue against Cheke's proposals?
3. Bragg focuses on Shakespeare's contributions to the language, noting that roughly 2,000 words commonly used today are first recorded in Shakespeare. Aside from Shakespeare's use of language, why do we still read and stage his plays today?
4. Who are your favorite poets? Can you recall some lines of poetry you enjoy?

Featured Experts

Katherine Duncan-Jones Somerville College, Oxford
John Barton Royal Shakespeare Company

EPISODE 5

Highlights

- The Puritans who settled Plimouth Plantation in the 17th century respected and protected the language, because English Scripture formed the foundation of their faith.
- In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Noah Webster's *Blue-Backed Speller* standardized spellings and Americanized pronunciations for generations of schoolchildren.
- Although East Coast residents considered themselves guardians of the language, American English grew vigorously through the 18th and 19th centuries, adding words from explorers, Native American tribes, frontiersmen, cowboys, gamblers, and African slaves.
- Dismissed as "vulgar" by its contemporary critics, Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn captured the music of American dialects along the Mississippi River.

Questions to Consider

1. In this episode, Bragg emphasizes the egalitarianism of English: if something needs saying, the language will adopt it, regardless of its origin in a social class. A farmer or a cowboy can coin a word as easily

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THE EVOLUTION OF THE ENGLISH ALPHABET

Not only has the English language evolved greatly over the last 1500 years, but so has the alphabet itself. Although the modern English alphabet contains 26 familiar letters, it took some fascinating twists, turns, and dead-ends to arrive there.

After the 6th century, when Christian monks began transliterating Anglo-Saxon into Latin characters, they hit a snag. Anglo-Saxon contained a few sounds that Roman letters could not accommodate. So the monks borrowed three old runes: ð (*eth*, usually for the voiced[1] "th" in the middle of a word, as in "breathe"), þ (*thorn,* usually for the unvoiced "th," as in "thumb"), and ƿ (*wynn*, for our *w*). The presence of those runes is just one reason why *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon manuscripts look so strange now. Another, less obvious reason is the absence of *j* and *u*. In this case, though, the monks didn't know what they were missing, since those letters did not exist in the classic Latin alphabet.

We generally have the Normans to thank (or to blame, depending on your viewpoint) for the disappearance of ð, þ, and ƿ. Through their influence, the runic holdovers gradually faded away, although ð still survives today in Ireland. In a way, þ survives, too—albeit in a corrupt form in the names of faux-quaint establishments such as "Ye Olde Ale House." Anglo-Saxons spelled the definite article "þe," and copyists and early typesetters eventually resorted to *y* as a close approximation of þ. As late as the 1600s—well into the era that linguists consider Modern English—y^t often appeared in printed texts as an abbreviation for "þat" ("that"). As for ƿ, copyists had already begun phasing it out even before 1066, substituting *vv* instead; the French-speaking invaders finished it off during the 12th century.

[1] In phonetic terminology, "voiced" indicates that the sound is produced via vibration of the vocal cords, while a voiceless (or unvoiced) sound is not.