



∴ Drama. pars ∴

Here begynneth the Segge of Thebes ful
lamentably tolde By Iohn Lidgate yonke of
Bury anueynge it to ye callys of Caucbry

his quod I. sch of yonre Entesye
I encede am. m to yonre Compayne
And admyced. a tale for to telse
By hym that hath power to compele
I mene oure hoste governere and gyde

If yone etheone. rydenge here by side
Thogh my wit. bareyne be and dulle
I wolle reherce. a story wonderfulle
Toucheinge the segge. and destrucyon
Of worthy Thebes. the myghty royale Toyn
Wile and bygonne. of olde auquite
Vpon the tyme. of worthy Josue
By diligence. of hyge Aluphion
Cheeff cause first. of the foundaoun

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Spell It in English

1 **E**nglish spelling is confusing and chaotic, as any student of English knows all too well. "How can the letters *ough* spell so many different sounding words," they ask, "like *dough*, *bough*, *rough*, and *through*?" And what about a word like *colonel*, which clearly contains no *r* yet pretends it does, and *ache*, with its *k* sound instead of the *chuh* sound of *arch*? And why does *four* have a *u* while *forty* doesn't? There are no simple rules for English spelling, but there is an explanation behind its complexity. We have only to look back in history.

2 Over the centuries, the English language has been like a magnet, attracting words from numerous other languages. It all started with the Britons, an ancient people living in a part of Western Europe that eventually became the British

Isles.¹ The Britons spoke a language called Celtic, which was a combination of the early forms of Irish,² Scottish,³ and Welsh.⁴ When the Britons were conquered by the Romans and later the Germanic tribes, their language was also invaded. The **merging** of the languages gave birth to Old English (an early form of the Modern English we know), and a Latin alphabet replaced, with a few exceptions, the ancient Germanic alphabet. In the ninth century, the conquering Norsemen

1 *the British Isles*: Great Britain (England, Scotland, Wales) and Ireland

2 *Irish*: the language of Ireland

3 *Scottish*: the language of Scotland

4 *Welsh*: the language of Wales

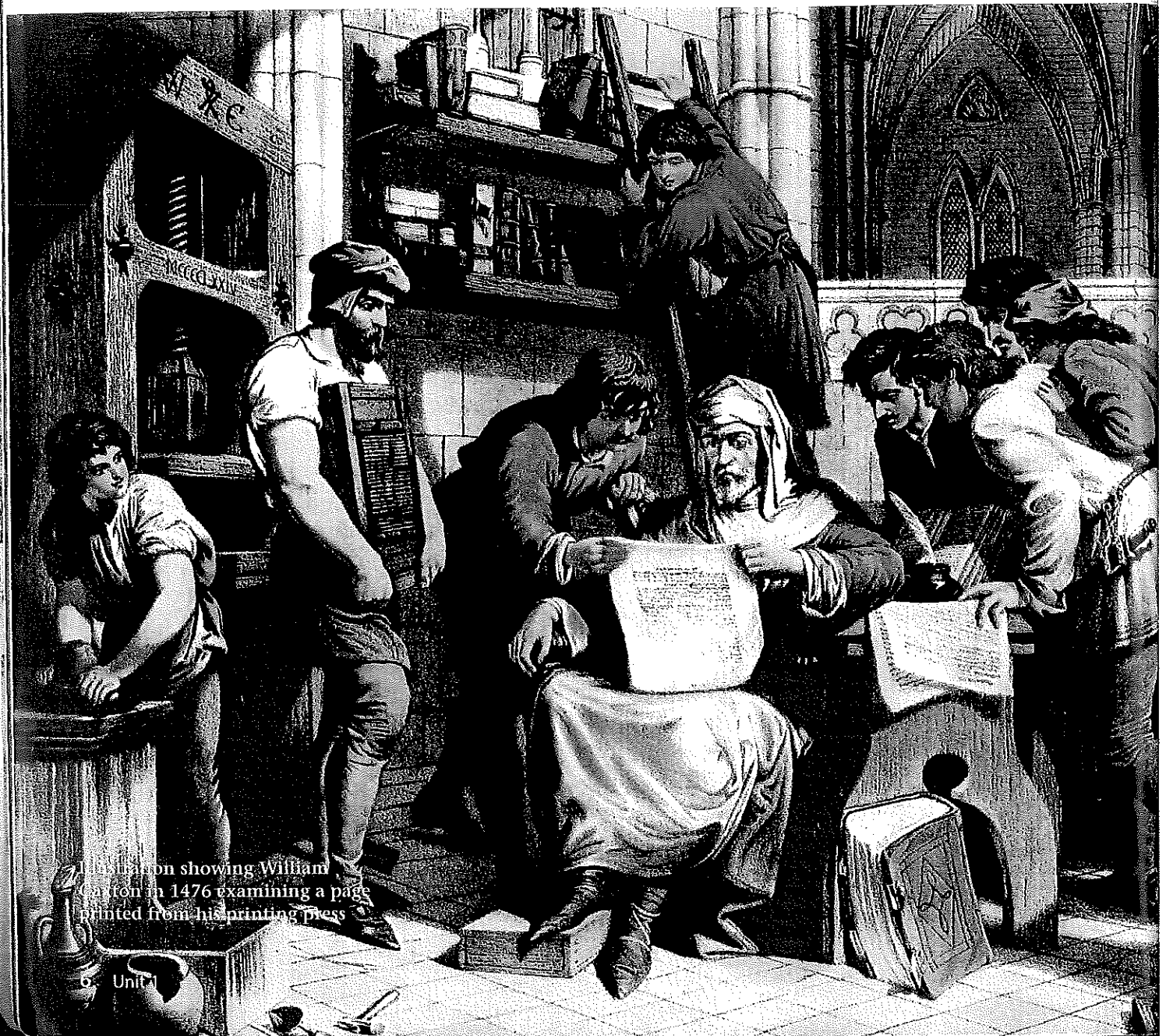


Illustration showing William Caxton in 1476 examining a page printed from his printing press

from Scandinavia added their pinch of language spice,⁵ as did the French in the 11th century.

3 By the 14th century, English, with its mix of at least five languages, had **evolved** into what is called Middle English and had become Britain's official language. At that time, however, its spellings were far from consistent or rational. Many dialects had developed over the centuries, and sometimes people adopted the spelling used in one part of the country and the pronunciation used in another. For instance, today we use the western English spellings for *busy* and *bury*, but we give the first the London pronunciation *bizzy* and the second the Kentish⁶ pronunciation *berry*. Of course, this all happened when English was primarily a spoken language,

and only scholars knew how to read and write. Even they appear to have been quite **indifferent** to matters of consistency in spelling and were known to spell the same word several different ways in a single sentence.

4 Even after William Caxton set up England's first printing press in the late 15th century and the written word became available to everyone, standard spelling wasn't considered very important. As a matter of fact, the typesetters in the 1500s made things even worse by being very careless about spelling. If a blank space needed to be filled in or a line was too long, they simply changed the spellings of words to make them fit. Moreover, many of the early printers in England were from Germany or Holland and didn't know English very well. If they didn't know the spelling of a word, they made one up! Different printers each had their favorite spellings, so one word might be spelled five or six different ways, depending on who printed the passage.

5 Throughout this period, names and words appear in many different forms. For instance, *where* can be found as *wher*, *whair*, *wair*, *wheare*, *were*, and so on. People were even very **liberal** about their names. More than 80 spellings of Shakespeare's name have been found, among them *Shagsspeare*, *Shakspeare*, and even *Shakestaffe*. Shakespeare himself didn't spell his name the same way in any two of his six known signatures—he even spelled his name two different ways in his will.

⁵ *pinch of language spice*: a little bit of variety in the language

⁶ *Kentish*: of Kent, a county in southeast England



- 6 By the late 16th century and early 17th century, some progress had been made in standardizing spelling due to the work of various scholars. By then, however, English spelling was far from a simple phonetic system. For one thing, word pronunciations had changed too rapidly for a truly phonetic spelling to keep up. Also, English had borrowed from many languages and ended up having far too many sounds (more than 40) for the 26 letters in its Roman alphabet. By the time printing houses finally began to agree on standard spellings, many of these written forms were only a shadow of their spoken selves. In other words, spelling and pronunciation sometimes had little in common.
- 7 Finally, in 1755, Samuel Johnson gave English its first great dictionary. His choice of spellings may not have always been the best or the easiest, but the book helped to make the spellings of most English words uniform. Eventually, people became aware of the need for “correct” spelling. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, Noah Webster was standardizing American English in his *An American Dictionary of the English Language* and *The American Spelling Book*. Although the British had been complaining about the messiness of English spelling for some time, it was the Americans, with their **fanaticism** for efficiency, who screamed the loudest. Webster not only favored a simplified, more phonetic spelling system, but also tried to persuade Congress to pass a law making the use of nonstandard spelling a punishable offense.
- 8 Mark Twain⁷ was of the same mind—but laziness figured into his opinion. He wasn’t concerned so much with the difficulty of spelling words as with the trouble in writing them. He became a fan of the “phonographic alphabet,” created by Isaac Pitman, the inventor of shorthand—a system in which symbols represent words, phrases, and letters. “To write the word ‘laugh,’” Twain wrote in *A Simplified Alphabet*, “the pen has to make fourteen strokes—no labor is saved to penman.” But to write the same word in the phonographic alphabet, Twain continued, the pen had to make just three strokes. As much as Twain would have loved it, Pitman’s phonographic alphabet never caught on.
- 9 Interest in reforming English spelling continued to **gain momentum** on both sides of the Atlantic. For a while, it seemed as if every famous writer and scholar had jumped on the spelling bandwagon.⁸ Spelling reform associations began to pop up everywhere. In 1876, the American Philological Association called for the “urgent” adoption of 11 new spellings: *liv, tho, thru, wisht, catalog, definit, gard, giv, hav, infinit,* and *ar*. In the same year, the Spelling Reform Association was formed, followed three years later by a British version.

⁷ *Mark Twain*: an American author (1835–1910) who wrote many books, including *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

⁸ *jump on the bandwagon*: join a popular movement

- 10 In 1906, the philanthropist Andrew Carnegie gave \$250,000 to help establish the Simplified Spelling Board. The board quickly issued a list of 300 words that were commonly spelled two ways, such as *ax* and *axe*, and called for using the simpler of the two. The board helped to gain acceptance for quite a few American spellings, including *catalog*, *demagog*, and *program*.
- 11 Eventually the Simplified Spelling Board got carried away with its work, calling for such spellings as *tuff*, *def*, *troble*, and *yu*. The call for simplified spelling quickly went out of fashion, particularly with the onset of World War I and the death of Andrew Carnegie. The movement never died out completely, however. Spelling reform continued to be an ongoing, if less dramatic, process, and many words have shed useless letters. *Deposite* has lost its *e*, as have *fossile* and *secretariate*. *Musick* and *physick* have dropped their needless *ks*, and *catalogue* and *dialogue* have shed their last two vowels.
- 12 As long as the world goes around, language will continue to change. New words will be added to English; spellings will be altered. But because people are most comfortable with the familiar, it's not likely that we'll ever see a major change in the way most words are spelled. Anyway, what would we do without the challenge of English spelling?