

The Early Modern Period

SOME KEY EVENTS IN THE EARLY MODERN PERIOD

- 1534 The Act of Supremacy established Henry VIII as “Supreme Head of the Church of England,” and thus officially put civil authority above Church authority in England.
- 1549 The Book of Common Prayer was adopted and became an influence on English literary style.
- 1558 At the age of 25, Elizabeth I became queen of England and, as a woman with a Renaissance education and a skill for leadership, began a forty-five-year reign that promoted statecraft, literature, science, exploration, and commerce.
- 1577–80 Sir Francis Drake circumnavigated the globe, the first Englishman to do so, and participated in the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588, thus removing an obstacle to English expansion overseas.
- 1590–1611 William Shakespeare wrote the bulk of his plays, from *Henry VI* to *The Tempest*.
- 1600 The East India Company was chartered to promote trade with Asia, leading eventually to the establishment of the British Raj in India.

- 1604 Robert Cawdrey published the first English dictionary, *A Table Alphabetical*.
- 1607 Jamestown, Virginia, was established as the first permanent English settlement in America.
- 1611 The Authorized or King James Version of the Bible was produced by a committee of scholars and became, with the Prayer Book and the works of Shakespeare, a major influence on English literary style.
- 1619 The first African slaves in North America arrived in Virginia.
- 1642–48 The Puritan Revolution overthrew the monarchy and established a military dictatorship, which lasted until the Restoration of King Charles II in 1660.
- 1660 The Royal Society was founded as the first English organization devoted to the promotion of scientific knowledge and research.
- 1670 Hudson's Bay Company was chartered for promoting trade and settlement in Canada.
- 1688 The Glorious Revolution was a bloodless coup in which Parliament invited William of Orange and his wife, Mary (daughter of the reigning English king), to assume the English throne, resulting in the establishment of Parliament's power over that of the monarchy.

- 1702 The first daily newspaper was published in London, resulting in the expanding power of the press to disseminate information and to form public opinion.
- 1719 Daniel Defoe published *Robinson Crusoe*, sometimes identified as the first modern novel in English.
- 1755 Samuel Johnson published his *Dictionary of the English Language*.
- 1775–83 The American Revolution resulted in the foundation of the first independent nation of English speakers outside the British Isles.



Bible translations in England began in the late seventh century, when Cædmon, a monk of Whitby is said to have made a metrical paraphrase of parts of the Scripture. Other Old English paraphrases exist, dating from the ninth century onward (Genesis, Exodus, Daniel), and there is much poetry on Biblical themes.

⇒ The first hand-written English language Bible manuscripts were produced in the **1380s** by John Wycliff, an Oxford, scholar, theologian, and religious reformer (also called “the morning star of the Reformation”). The translation of the Bible was associated, in the official mind, with the more inflammatory social precepts and practices of the Lollards, as Wycliff’s followers were called. The translation of the Scriptures into English, or even reading such translations, without the permission of the Church authorities, was forbidden.

With the Reformation, a new interest in having the Bible in the vernacular was added: in **1522**, Martin Luther [Wittenberg Cathedral door 95 Theses of Contention in 1517] published his translation into German. Luther’s example inspired **William Tyndale**, an exile in Germany for his Protestant opinions. In **1526**, complete printed copies of the New Testament in English were smuggled into England. Its circulation was still illegal, since it had been made without the sanction of the authorities and it contained unacceptable turns of phrase (often adopted by translations today): “washing” for “baptism”, “love” for “charity”, “congregation” for “church”, “elder” for “priest” – simple words from which the filth of centuries of corrupt practice and insincerity and institutionalism – as Tyndale saw it – had been cleansed.

In **1536**, Tyndale was burned for his beliefs and his practice of them, with the approval of Henry VIII.

Myles Coverdale ⇒ in **1535** he printed the first complete Bible in the English language, making use of Luther's German text and the Latin as sources. Thus, the first complete English Bible was printed on **October 4, 1535**, and is known as the **Coverdale Bible**.

In **1539**, Thomas Cranmer, the Archbishop of Canterbury, hired Myles Coverdale at the bequest of King Henry VIII to publish the "Great Bible". It became the first English Bible authorized for public use, as it was distributed to every church, chained to the pulpit, and a reader was even provided so that the illiterate could hear the Word of God in plain English. Cranmer's Bible, published by Coverdale, was known as the Great Bible due to its great size: a large pulpit folio measuring over 14 inches tall. Seven editions of this version were printed between April of **1539** and December of **1541**.

In **1568**, a revision of the Great Bible known as the Bishops' Bible was introduced.

King James Bible

With the death of Queen Elizabeth I, Prince James VI of Scotland became **King James I of England**. The Protestant clergy approached the new King in **1604** and announced their desire for a new translation to replace the Bishop's Bible first printed in **1568**. This "translation to end all translations" was the result of the combined effort of about fifty scholars. Ultimately it was arranged that six companies of translators should be formed, two at Westminster, two at Oxford, and two at Cambridge. In **1610** the work went to press, and in **1611** the first of the pulpit folios known today as **the 1611 King James Bible** came off the printing press.

The Authorized Version sums up in itself all the aspects on English Bible translation: its strong conservatism and traditionalism; its determination to present the very words of Scripture in a form as simple and as near the language in which they were originally written, so that their sanctity, not any hallowing and mystery conferred on them by the Church, will carry them direct to the minds and souls of the readers.

The King James Bible has contributed far more to English in the way of idiomatic or quasi-proverbial expressions than any other literary source:

KJB	Book	Meaning / Derived expression
To spy out the land	Numbers 13	you try to get knowledge of something before you do something
The apple of his eye	Deuteronomy 32	
Go from strength to strength	Psalm 24	to gradually become more successful
strait is the gate and narrow is the way	Matthew 7	straight and narrow
Out of the mouth of the babes	Matthew 21	
the sign of the times	Matthew 16	
In the twinkling of an eye	1 Corinthians 15	
Rule with a rod of iron	Revelation 2	

THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT

Old and Middle English were written in the Latin alphabet and the vowels were represented by the letters assigned to the sounds in Latin. For example, Middle English “long e” in Chaucer’s “sheep” had the value of Latin “e” (and sounded like Modern English “shape” [ɛ] in the International Phonetic Alphabet [IPA]). It had much the same value as written “long e” has in most modern European languages. Consequently, one can read Chaucer’s long vowels with the same values as in Latin or any continental European language and come pretty close to the Middle English values.

The Great Vowels Shift changed all that; by the end of the sixteenth century the “e” in “sheep” sounded like that in Modern English “sheep” or “meet” [i:]. To many it seemed that the pronunciation of English had moved so far from its visual representation that a new alphabet was needed, and in the sixteenth century we have the first attempts to “reform” English spellings, a movement still active today. In 1569 John Hart (in his *Orthography*) went so far as to devise a new phonetic alphabet to remedy what he considered a fatal flaw in the system of language.

The long vowels can be heard today in the pronunciation of words like *seat* (as opposed to the short vowel of *sit*) and *lose* (vs *loss*). In Middle English, there were seven such vowels. Their values are shown in the table below, along with an approximate equivalent in modern pronunciation:

Word	Vowel quality in c. 1400	Nearest PDE vowel
<i>time</i>	/i:/	<i>teem /i:/</i>
<i>see</i>	/e:/	first part of <i>say /ei/</i>
<i>sea</i>	/ɛ:/	first part of <i>Sarah /ɛə/</i>
<i>fame</i>	/a:/	<i>farm /ɑ:/</i>
<i>so</i>	/ɔ:/	<i>saw /ɔ:/</i>
<i>do</i>	/o:/	first part of <i>doe /ou/</i>
<i>now</i>	/u:/	<i>new /u:/</i>

MIDDLE
ENG.

[i:]	→	[ay]
[u:]	→	[aw]
[e:]	→	[i:]
[o:]	→	[u:]
[ɛ:]	→	[e:]
[ɔ:]	→	[o:]
[a:]	→	[e:]

MODERN
ENG.MIDDLE
ENG.

[mi:s]	→	[mays]
[mu:s]	→	[maws]
[ge:s]	→	[gi:s]
[go:s]	→	[gu:s]
[bre:ken]	→	[bre:k]
[bro:ken]	→	[bro:k]
[na:mə]	→	[ne:m]

MODERN
ENG.

<i>mice</i>
<i>mouse</i>
<i>geese</i>
<i>goose</i>
<i>break</i>
<i>broke</i>
<i>name</i>

By diagraming the Great Vowel Shift on a vowel chart (Figure 9-2), we can see that each long vowel underwent an increase in tongue height, with the highest vowels [i:] and [u:] “falling off” to become the diphthongs [ay] and [aw]. In addition, [a] was “fronted.”

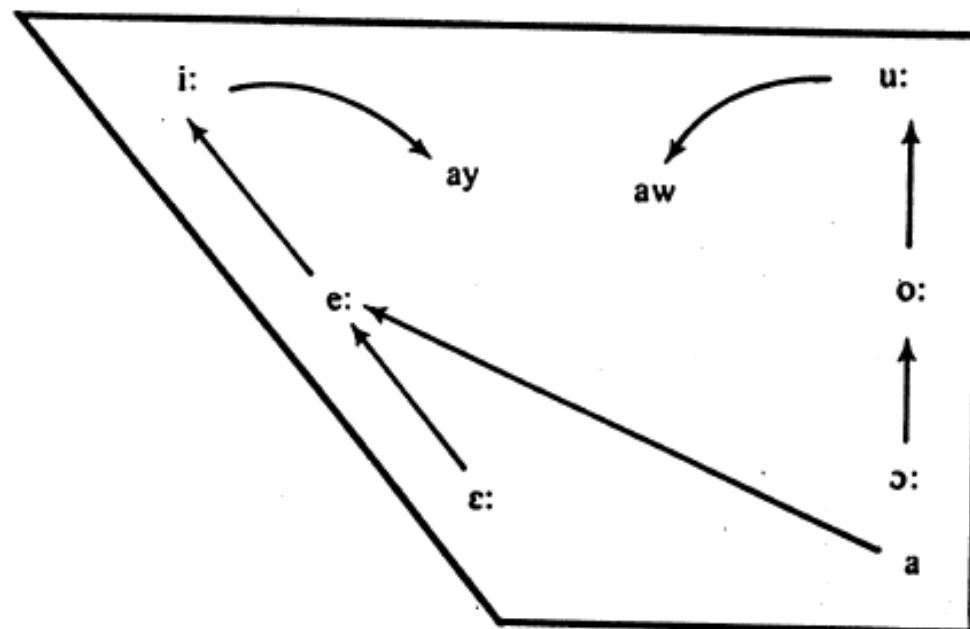


Figure 9-2 The Great Vowel Shift.

	FRONT	CENTRE	BACK
HIGH	/i:/ [Modern "beet"]		/u:/ [Modern "boot"]
MID	/e:/ [Modern "bait"]		/o:/ [Modern "boat"]
LOW	/æ:/ [Modern "bag"]	/a:/ [Modern "father"]	/ɔ/ [Modern "bought"]

The Great Vowel shift involved a regular movement of the places of articulation. The front vowels each moved up a notch, except for /i:/, which formed a diphthong. Likewise the back vowels moved up, except for /u:/, which formed another diphthong:

	POSITION	MIDDLE ENGLISH	MODERN ENGLISH
FRONT VOWELS	HIGH	/i:/	/ai/
	MID (CLOSED)	/e:/	/i:/
	LOW (OPEN)	/æ:/	/e:/ later /i:/
CENTRAL VOWELS	LOW	/a:/	/e:/
BACK VOWELS	HIGH	/u:/	/aʊ:/
	MID	/o:/	/u:/
	LOW	/ɔ/	/o:/

The cumulative difference is striking. A sentence such as

We do make time to go now

would have roughly sounded, in Chaucerian pronunciation, as

Way doe mahk teem to gaw noo.

The phenomenon is traditionally called the '**Great Vowel Shift**', but the label is misleading in its suggestion that it was a single shift operating at a standard rate. The evidence of spelling, rhymes, and commentaries by contemporary language pundits (i.e. sources of opinion) suggests that it operated in more than one stage, affected vowels at different rates in different parts of the country, and took over 200 years to complete. Nor did it apply in the same way everywhere.

The /u:/ value became a diphthong in most parts of England, as we hear in modern *now* and *house*, but this change did not happen in the north-east, or in Scotland, where the fifteenth-century value may still be heard, as can be seen in such Scots spellings as *noo* and *hoose*.

Not a creature was stirring
Not even a Moose



EARLY MODERN ENGLISH PRONOUNS

	First-person	Second-person	Third-person
<i>Subject</i>			
Singular	I	thou	he/she/it*
Plural	we	ye	they
<i>Object</i>			
Singular	me	thee	him/her/it
Plural	us	you	them
<i>Possessive</i>			
Singular	mine	thine	his/hers/ his
Plural	ours	yours	theirs

The social basis of the *thou/you* distinction was established by the sixteenth century.

The *you* forms would normally be used:

- ✓ by people of lower social status to those above them (e.g., ordinary people to nobles, children to parents, servants to masters);
- ✓ by the upper classes when talking to each other, even if they were closely related;
- ✓ as a sign of a change (contrasting with *thou*) in the emotional temperature of an interaction.

The *thou* forms would normally be used:

- ✓ by people of higher social status to those below them (e.g., nobles to ordinary people, parents to children, masters to servants);
- ✓ by the lower classes when talking to each other;
- ✓ in addressing God;
- ✓ in talking to ghosts, witches, and other supernatural beings;
- ✓ in an imaginary address to someone who was absent;
- ✓ as a sign of a change (contrasting with *you*) in the emotional temperature of an interaction.

EARLY MODERN ENGLISH VERBS

WEAK VERBS

	Singular	Plural		
	Person	Past	Present	Past
First-person	I walke	I walked	we walke	we walked
Second-person	thou walk(e)st	thou walkedst	ye walke	ye walked
Third-person	he/she hit walketh	he/she hit walked	they walke	they walked

EARLY MODERN ENGLISH VERBS

STRONG VERBS

	Singular		Plural	
	Person	Past	Present	Past
First-person	I giue	I gaue	we giue	we gaue
Second-person	thou giu(s)t	thou gau(e)st	ye giue	ye gaue
Third-person	he/she hit giueth	he/she hit gaue	they giue	they gaue

The process of regularization affected also the transformation of many strong verbs which over time became weak verbs. In some cases, however, they had both a strong and a weak form in Early Modern English:

EMod base form	Strong past tense	Weak past tense
help	holp	helped
melte	molte	melted
swell	swole	swelled
climb	clamb/clomb	climbed