

through all the stages of its development retained this characteristic to a greater extent than modern English has done. In one of the publications of the Philological Society of England it is stated that though "Etymological spellings of French became common in England about the time of Caxton," nevertheless "English spelling continued to be in principle, mainly phonetic up to the seventeenth century." And Professor Skeat says in the "Introduction" to his "Specimens of English Literature from A.D. 1394 to A.D. 1579":

"It is a common error to look upon the spelling of Old English as utterly lawless, and unworthy of notice. Because it is not *uniform*, the conclusion is at once rushed to that it cannot be of much service. No mistake could well be worse. It is frequently far better than our modern spelling, and helps to show how badly we spell now, in spite of the *uniformity* introduced by printers for the sake of convenience. Old English spelling was conducted on an intelligible principle, whereas our modern spelling exhibits no principle at all; but merely illustrates the inconvenience of separating symbols from sounds. The intelligible principle of Old English spelling is that it was intended to be *phonetic*. Bound by no particular laws, each scribe did the best he could to represent the sounds he heard, and the notion of putting in letters that were not sounded was (except in the case of final *e*) almost unknown. The very variations are of value, because they help to render more clear in each case what the sound was which the scribes were attempting to represent. But to bear in mind that the spelling was *phonetic* is to hold the clue to it."

By means of the variations referred to, Mr. A. J. Ellis, Mr. Sweet and other phonologists have been enabled to exhibit, with an approximation to correctness, the manner in which English words were pronounced in the time of Chaucer and even earlier. It will not be possible for the phonologists of the future to enlighten their contemporaries in the same way with respect to the manner in which English words are pronounced in the Victorian age, for it is strictly and literally true that no man can pronounce with certainty a word he has never heard, or spell with certainty a word he has never seen. With us spelling has been largely divorced from pronunciation, and all the philologists agree in attributing this much to be regretted separation to the invention of printing, which has crystallized our spelling, while our pronunciation is left subject to the modifying influences of time and place.

The defects in English spelling have been the subject of spasmodic attempts at reform for many generations, but not till within the past few years has any systematic, sustained, and widespread effort been made to bring English spelling into harmony with English pronunciation, in other words, to make English spelling more phonetic, or rather to restore to it its old phonetic character. Benjamin Franklin brought to bear upon the problem his great intellect and strong common sense, but his time was too much occupied with the duties of statemanship, and meanwhile his contemporary Samuel Johnson, was laboring successfully to fix and perpetuate bad orthographical forms. Noah Webster attempted in his dictionary to banish some anomalies, but he was uncritical in his knowledge, and scholars declined to follow his guidance while

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