

Pronunciation: Why bother?

I have been startled recently by the number of active Arelates who have shown that they are not simply playing the part of 'Advocati Diaboli' for their own personal amusement in seriously questioning the proposition that it is worth while reading the Latin and Greek classics at all, it's worth the effort and more intellectually honest to try to pronounce them as accurately as possible. At the risk of boring the converted, (who may well be advised to skip the rest of this article), I am therefore undertaking a rationale of the 'Phonetic' school of thought.

The word 'accurately', of course, raises the question 'Which period?' We have to draw the line somewhere: we cannot hope to achieve a strictly accurate pronunciation of Latin and Greek at every period – nor, perhaps, should we want to. There is also another side to this question: even if we can obtain a fairly clear picture of the pronunciation of, say, the Latin of Ovid's time, or the Attic Greek of Demosthenes, there must still be quite a lot that escapes us even on the theoretical plane, (e.g. the tonic qualities of Latin, and its sentence-stress, if any). Moreover can the average English speaker of today achieve the phonemes of Latin and Greek, together with their stress and intonation patterns, with sufficient confidence to make the effort seem worthwhile?

On these objections, which were given a fair airing at this year's Summer School, much can be said. Perhaps the most interesting point of departure lies in the consideration of our own language and literature. It is argued by the 'anti-phonetists' that if we pronounce and perform the works of Shakespeare in a Modern English pronunciation, why should we try to adapt ourselves to the Latin and Greek pronunciations of Classical times? Two points can be made in reply. First, we have a modern pronunciation of English: there is no equivalent in the case of Latin. Greek, indeed, is still spoken, and there is a school of thought which favours pronouncing Ancient Greek like Modern, though the two versions of the language are, admittedly, mutually incomprehensible in the written form, especially in the more natural Demotic version, where we can compare and contrast them without undergoing controversy. It might be fairer to regard Modern and Ancient Greek, on the grounds of this mutual incomprehensibility, as separate languages, just as Anglo-Saxon and Modern English, Old High German and Modern German, and, more obviously, Latin, and on the other hand, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese, have to be treated. I think this question of comprehensibility, or the lack of it is the generally accepted criterion in determining the separateness of languages – I can think of no other. By this criterion, of course, North American English and the various forms of British English are one language, as indeed our experience proves.

But in the case of older English, Chaucer's works, and the attitude of students of Chaucer, contrast most interestingly with our handling of Shakespeare. The reason for the usual insistence on a phonetically reconstituted reading of Chaucer, (which seems to me quite justified), is that the language of Chaucer is by no means obviously our own, and that if you attempt to read

