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Resurrecting rhymes, reasons, and (no) rhotics Reconstructing Keats' pronunciation

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1

Why reconstruct sounds?

- For linguistic study:
 - Understand past language states and attitudes
 - Test theories of phonology and language change
 - Expand our knowledge of what languages can and cannot do
- And beyond:
 - Hallmark of literature, esp. poetry: conveying meaning and emotion through sound
 - Even in silent reading due to 'inner speech' (Rayner & Pollatsek 1989)
 - Bring to life the past, akin to reconstructing sights, buildings, art, noises, smells, tastes
 - e.g. Beal & Sen's (2017, 2021) reading of an extract from Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer* (1773) in reconstructed pronunciation: <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/ecep/reading>;
 - Crystal's OP website (<http://www.originalpronunciation.com>) and work with the Globe Theatre on OP productions of Shakespeare

2

Keats



John Keats
by William Hilton, after Joseph Severn
oil on canvas, based on a work of circa 1822
NPG 194
© National Portrait Gallery, London

- Event to mark bicentenary of death 23/2/21
 - <http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/keatsshelley-bicentennial>
- CGI Keats read *Bright Star* in original pronunciation (OP)
- Linguistic detective work!

3

Follow the breadcrumbs... Pronouncing dictionaries

- Heyday in late 18th century: ECEP <https://www.dhi.ac.uk/ecep/>
 - Plus elocution manuals, orthoepists' work
- Walker (1791) the most influential; a long shadow
 - Very many editions, throughout 19th cent.
 - 6th edition (1809 stereotype) used
 - Courtesy of Jean-Louis Duchet & Nicolas Trapateau (University of Poitiers)
- But if 18th cent. is partly the century of do's...
- The 19th cent. is more the century of don'ts (Jones 2006: 273)
 - Savage (1833), *The vulgarities and improprieties of the English language*
 - Smith (1866), *Mind your H's and take care of your R's*
- A significant normative effect on pronunciation
- Excellent evidence for how people are actually talking!

4

E.g. from *Bright Star*

- The mountains and the *moors*
 - Walker gives variants /mu:r/ ('more correct') or /mo:r/ ('sometimes heard')

³¹¹. *Moor*, a black man, is regular in polite pronunciation, and like *more* in vulgar. *Moor*, a marf, is sometimes heard rhyming with *fore*; but more correct speakers pronounce it regularly, rhyming with *poor*.

- Which is it in Keats?
- Rhymes with *earth's human shores*
 - So we reconstruct /mo:z/ to rhyme with *shores* /ʃo:z/
 - More on the /r/ later

5

Keats denounced: Cockney!

- Lockhart (1818), 'Cockney school of poetry', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*
- Similar denunciations in the review of *Endymion* in the *Quarterly Review* (1818)
 - 'the most worthless and affected versifiers of our time.'
 - 'himself, and some others of the rising brood of *Cockneys*'... 'most vulgar of *Cockney* poetasters'
 - 'uneducated and flimsy striplings' ('fanciful dreaming tea-drinkers')
 - 'distinguish between the written language of Englishmen and the spoken jargon of *Cockneys*', 'the *Cockney* school of versification, *morality and politics*'
 - 'His *Endymion* is not a Greek shepherd... he is merely a young *Cockney* rhymeaster'
 - Hunt and Keats are 'the two *Cockneys*', 'the *Cockney* poets', writing 'as might be expected from *persons of their education*'
 - 'loose, nerveless versification, and *Cockney* rhymes'
 - 'Keats belongs to the *Cockney School of Politics*, as well as the *Cockney School of Poetry*'
- → Keats did not conform to prescribed pronunciations

6

But was Keats really Cockney?

- Probably not outrageously, but with London features
- 'Cockney' used by critics as a catch-all value-judgment for 'aspirational vulgar' (Sylvia Adamson p.c.) rather than a dialectal designation
- Those with non-Eton/Harrow/Oxbridge/aristocratic backgrounds aspiring to the pursuits traditionally enjoyed by those from those backgrounds
- Places Keats on a 'Proto-RP ↔ London' cline

7

What **was** Cockney in early 1800s? And what features do we give Keats?

- Not then, but now: **t-glottaling**
 - *the fat cat sat on the mat; better bit of butter*
 - First mentions in later 19th cent., e.g. Henry Sweet
- → So NOT in Keats

8

Sound familiar?

- Routledge (1866) anecdote:
 - 'a fiery old gentleman, asked by a waiter, what he'd take with his 'am, shouts out "The letter H, sir"'
 - 'Why, even in the House of Commons, country members, may be heard talking about the *Hindian Hempire*, and agitating their honourable friends to give their attention to some *hawful* violation of the *hancient* rights of the "ouse"'
- *Plus ça change...* Catullus poem 84 (1st cent BC, Rome)
 - *Chommoda dicebat si quando commoda vellet dicere*
 - '[Arrius] used to say 'hadvantages' whenever he wished to say 'advantages'

9

What **was** Cockney in early 1800s? And what features do we give Keats?

- Same as now: **h-dropping**
 - *hard hat* → 'ard 'at
 - But with strong associations with lower-class speech
 - Smart (1810): 'a very bad habit prevails, chiefly among the people of London, of sinking it at the beginning of words'
- → Not reconstructed for Keats; no evidence from poems

10

What **was** Cockney in early 1800s? And what features do we give Keats?

- Then considered 'London', but now standard (1):
- **Non-rhoticity (coda r-deletion)**
 - *sorts, thorn, farce*
- By no means restricted to London, but:
- Smart (1810): 'In London we often pronounce the smooth r with so little exertion of the organs as to make it scarcely anything more than the vowel sound [neutral schwa [ə]]'
- Did Keats do this?

11

Yes! Rhymes!

- Keats rhymes pairs of words with and without earlier /r/ (as seen in the their spelling):
 - thorn – fawn
 - higher – Thalia
 - ear – Cytherea
- All explicitly cited by Lockhart in his denunciation of Keats's poetry as 'Cockney' – this is the key feature in terms of pronunciation, despite not being restricted to London
- Also:
 - thoughts – sorts
 - grass – farce
- → Reconstructed for Keats, e.g. *Bright **Star***

12

What **was** Cockney in early 1800s? And what features do we give Keats?

- Then considered 'Cockney', but now standard (2):
- **Retraction of the BATH vowel**: /a:/ to more like present-day (southern British) /ɑ:/
 - Smart (1836): 'metropolitan usage', so more 'London'
- Did Keats do this? Yes! Rhymes!
 - Ode on Indolence:
 - grass – farce
 - coda r-deletion in *farce*: retraction more common in this context, so if it rhymes with *grass*, retraction there too
- → feature reconstructed for Keats, e.g. ***steadfast***

13

13

What **was** Cockney in early 1800s? And what features do we give Keats?

- **Diphthong in PRICE more like /ʌɪ/** rather than /aɪ/
 - Smart (1836): 'In the mouth of the well-bred Londoner'
 - Batchelor (1809): 'the sound is exactly shown in *buy* and *guy*'
- → Feature reconstructed for Keats (educated Londoner)
 - E.g. ***Bright Star***

14

14

Other features of Keats' English

- The present-day diphthongs in FACE and GOAT began as monophthongal long vowels /e:/ and /o:/, so:
- **Monophthongal FACE vowel**
 - Like northern British English, e.g. *Nature's patient...*
- But **slightly diphthongised GOAT vowel**
 - But still very rounded, e.g. *lone, snow*
 - To reflect the fact that the latter was ahead of the former (but both had started)
- **Yod-insertion** after /k g/ before a front vowel
 - Batchelor (1809): 'can, get, begin, &c. sound as if they were written cyan, gyet, begyn, &c.'
 - E.g. *gazing*

15

Bright Star in OP

Bright Star, would I were stedfast as thou art—
 Not in lone splendour hung aloft the night
 And watching, with eternal lids apart,
 Like *natures patient*, sleepless *Demite*,
 The moving waters at their *rustling* task,
 Of pure ablutions round *earth's human shores*,
 Or *gazing* on the new soft *fallen* *maeze*
 Of *snow* upon the *mountains* and the *moors*.
 No—yet still *stedfast*, still *unchangeable*
 Pillow'd upon *my fair love's* *reposing* breast,
 To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,
 Awake for ever in a *sweet* *unrest*,
 Still, still to hear her *lencier* *taken* *breath*,
 And so live *over* or *else* *sworn* to *death*.

PRICE

BATH/
r-lossFACE/
GOAT

Y-insert

Other
features

16


16



17

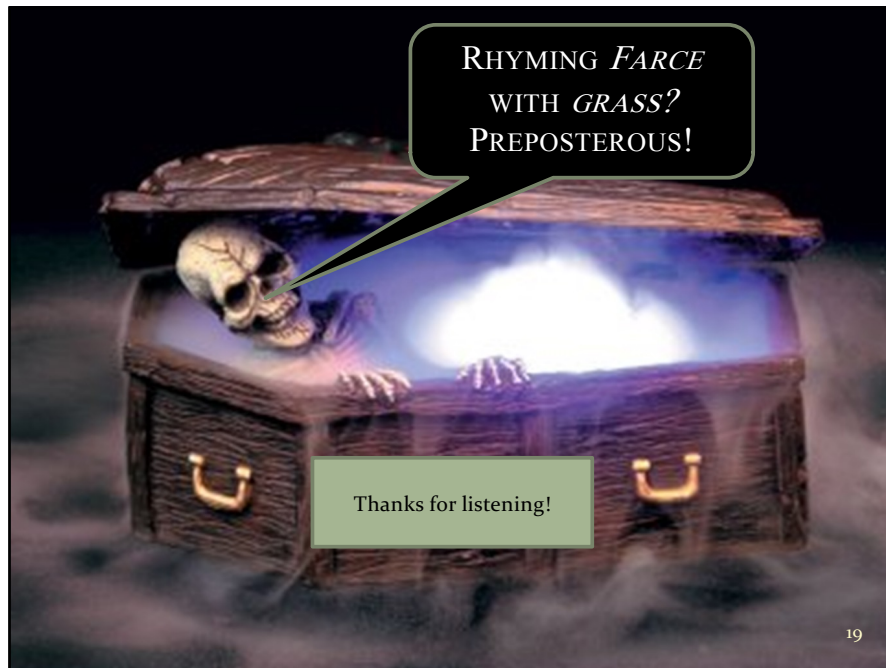
So what does this tell us about Keats?

- A poet proud to be of his time, not backward-looking
 - coda r-deletion, retraction of BATH vowel
- Perhaps even though he would have known this would draw criticism

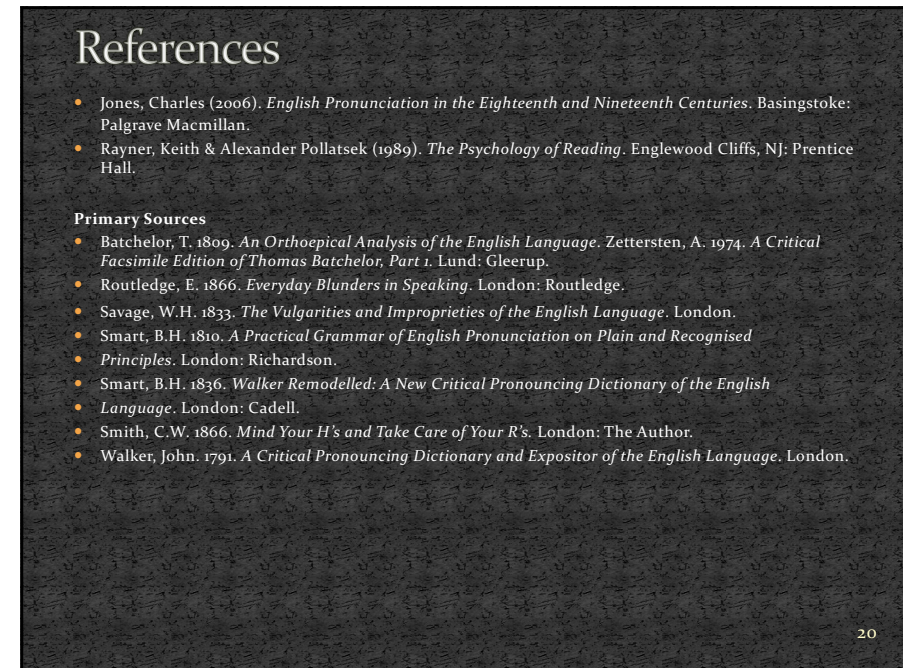


18

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19



20