

# 6 Early Modern English

## 6.1 Historical background of Early Modern English

Early Modern English is the stage of development of the English language from the late 15th century to the late 17th century. The period from 1700 (in some sources from 1800) to the present day is denoted as Modern English. The Early Modern English period coincides roughly with the reign of the House of Tudor (1485–1603) and the House of Stuart (1603–1714). The establishment of the Tudor dynasty under Henry VII in 1485 after the battle of Bosworth, which ended the Wars of the Roses, resulted in a greater centralization of government in England.

The 16th century was a century of the Reformation initiated in the 1530s under the reign of Henry VIII by a series of Parliament acts, which weakened England's religious and political bonds with Catholic Europe. Though Roman Catholicism was restored during the reign of Henry VIII's daughter Mary I (Bloody Mary), who persecuted Protestants, Reformation gradually spread throughout the country and the Church of England strengthened its position.

The 17th century, in which England was governed by the House of Stuart, was a century of learning and discovery. The spread of the new science was promoted by the works of Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and by the Royal Society of London, a scientific society chartered in 1662 by King Charles II. The English colonial empire founded in the late 16th century expanded significantly during the 17th century. The colonization of North America, which started in the early seventeenth century, gave rise to American English.

The Early Modern English period was concluded by the religious and political settlement of the Glorious Revolution (in 1688), the rise of Augustan literature during the reign of Queen Anne (1702–14), and the adoption of the Act of Union between England and Scotland (1707), which established a political unity within the British Isles.

The Early Modern English period was marked by a rapid growth of the printing industry. The art of printing was introduced into England by William Caxton, who set up the first printing press at Westminster in 1476. Printing made books cheaper, facilitated dissemination of texts written in English, and supported literacy among the population of England. It was one of the most important factors in the process of the standardization

of the English language. Most publishing houses in the 16th and 17th centuries were located in London, therefore Standard English developed from the London dialect. The major grammatical changes that started during the Middle English period were completed during the 16th century, and in 1604, Robert Cawdery published the first dictionary of the English language entitled *A Table Alphabetical*. By the late 16th or early 17th century, when William Shakespeare wrote his works, the language had acquired most of its Modern English features.

During the Late Middle English and Early Modern English periods, English pronunciation changed quite dramatically owing to extensive sound changes, especially the Great Vowel Shift. However, spelling was mostly standardized before the completion of the Great Vowel Shift (see Chapter 7). Since no major orthographic reform has been successfully implemented, the present day English spelling reflects pronunciation patterns that were in use 500 years ago.

Below are two examples of Early Modern English texts.

## 6.2 Early Modern English texts

### A Letter of John Dee to Elizabeth I (1588)

Most Gracious Soueraine Lady, The God of heaven and earth, (Who hath mightilie, and evidently, given vnto your most excellent Royall Maiestie, this wunderfull Triumphant Victorie, against your mortall enemies) be allwaies, thanked, praysed, and glorified; And the same God Almighty, euermore direct and defend your most Royall Highnes from all evill and encumbrance: and finish and confirme in your most excellent Maiestie Royall, the blessings, long since, both decreed and offred: yea, euen into your most gracious Royall bosom, and Lap. Happy are they, that can perceyue, and so obey the pleasant call, of the mightie Ladie, OPPORTUNITIE. And, Therefore, finding our dueties concurrent with a most secret beck, of the said Gracious Princess. Ladie OPPORTUNITIE, NOW to embrace, and enioye, your most excellent Royall Maiesties high favor, and gracious great Clemencie, of CALLING me, Mr. Kelley, and our families, hoame, into your Brytish Earthly Paradise, and Monarchie incomparable: (and, that, abowt an yere since: by Master Customer Yong, his letters,) I, and myne, (by God his fauor and help, and after the most convenient manner, we can, will, from hencefurth, endeuour our selues, faithfully, loyally, carefully, warily, and diligently, to ryd and vntangle our selues from hence: And so, very devowtely, and Sowndlie, at your Sacred Maiesties feet, to offer our selues, and all, wherein, we are, or may be hable, to serve God, and your most Excellent Royall Maiestie.

The Lord of Hoasts, be our help, and gwyde, therein: and graunt vnto your most excellent Royall Maiestie, the Incomparablest Triumphant Raigne, and Monarchie, that euer was, since mans creation. Amen.

Trebon in the kingdome of Boemia,  
the 10th of Nouebre: A.Dm: 1588

Your Sacred and most excellent Royall Maiesties  
most humble and dutifull Subject, and Servant,  
John Dee

Source:

Hladký, Josef (2003). *A Guide to Pre-Modern English*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, pp. 301–302.

### William Shakespeare – Sonnet 18

(Original text with standard typographical modifications and a phonetic transcription after Hladký 2003)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
'ʃæl əi kəm'pe:ɪ ði: 'tʊ ə 'sʌməɪz 'de:

Thou are more lovely and more temperate:  
ðəʊ 'a:ɪt mo:ɪ 'lʌvlɪ 'ən(d) mo:ɪ 'tɛmpə're(:)t

Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
'rʌf 'wɪn(d)z du 'ʃɛ:k ðə 'da:ɪlən 'bʌdz əv 'me:

And summer's lease hath all too short a date:  
ən(d) 'sʌməɪz 'le:s əθ 'o:l tu: 'ʃo:ɪt ə 'de:t

Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
sʌm'təɪm tu: 'hɒt ðɪ 'əi əv 'he(:)vn 'ʃəɪnz

And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
ən(d) 'o:fn 'ɪz ɪz 'gɔ:ld kəm'plɛkʃn 'dɪm'd

And every fair from fair sometimes declines,  
ən(d) 'ɛvrɪ 'fe:ɪ frəm 'fe:ɪ sʌm'təɪm dɪ'kləɪnz

By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
 bɪ 'tʃæ:ns əɪ 'ne:tʃəɪz 'tʃe:n(d)ʒɪŋ 'ko:ɪs ʌn'trɪmɪd

But thy eternal summer shall not fade  
 bət 'ðəɪ ɪ'ta:ɪnəl 'sʌməɪ 'ʃæl nɒt 'fe:d

Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
 nɔ:ɪ 'lu:z pə'zɛʃn 'ɔv ðæt 'fe:ɪ ðəʊ 'o:st

Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
 'no:ɪ ʃæl 'de(:)θ 'bræg ðəʊ 'wʌndəɪst ɪn ɪz 'ʃe(:)d

When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:  
 'hwɛn ɪn ɪ'ta:ɪnəl 'lɛɪnz tə 'təɪm ðəʊ 'grɔ:st

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
 so: 'lɒŋ əz 'mɛn kən 'bre:ð əɪ 'əɪz kən 'si:

So long lives this; and this gives life to thee.  
 so: 'lɒŋ lɪvz 'ðɪs ən(d) 'ðɪs ɡɪvz 'ləɪf tə 'ði:

Source:

Hladký, Josef (2003). *A Guide to Pre-Modern English*. Brno: Masarykova univerzita, pp. 291–292.

## Sonnet 18

(Czech translation by Erik A. Saudek)

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?  
 Thou art more lovely and more temperate:  
 Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,  
 And summer's lease hath all too short a date;  
 Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,  
 And often is his gold complexion dimm'd;  
 And every fair from fair sometime declines,  
 By chance or nature's changing course untrimm'd;  
 But thy eternal summer shall not fade,  
 Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st;  
 Nor shall Death brag thou wander'st in his shade,  
 When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st:  
     So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,  
     So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Mám říci o tobě, žes letní den?  
 Je v tobě míry víc a hlubší něha:  
 blaženství léta trvá krátko jen  
 a často vichr kvítí máje šlehá.  
 Přespříliš sálá někdy oko dne  
 a někdy chřadnouc jeho zlat' se kalí  
 a všechno krásné z krásy opadne,  
 když náhlý mráz či staroba to spálí.  
 Tvé léto je však věčné, nezemdlí  
 a nevadnoucí podrží tvou krásu,  
 smrt o ní neřekne: „V mém stínu dlí!“  
 leč růst ji spatří do plnosti času:  
     duch dokud dýchat bude, oko zřít,  
     žít bude toto, ty v tom budeš žít!

Source:

Shakespeare, W. (1976). *Sonnets | Sonety*. Praha: Československý spisovatel, p. 23.

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*Wikipedia:*

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