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### In the Mountains They Speak like Shakespeare

Every day thousands of motorists entering North Carolina stop at an Interstate highway welcome center for directions, refreshment, or a break from the road. Until not long ago, while there they could also pick up a complimentary booklet titled *A Dictionary of the Queen's English*, which was produced by the state's Travel and Tourism Division in the mid-1960s. Its preface read as follows:

To outsiders it sounds strange, even uncultured. But what many North Carolinians do to the King's English was done centuries ago by the Queen.

The correspondence and writings of Queen Elizabeth I and such men as Sir Walter Raleigh, Marlowe, Dryden, Bacon and even Shakespeare are sprinkled with words and expressions which today are commonplace in remote regions of North Carolina.

You hear the Queen's English in the coves and hollows of the Blue Ridge and the Great Smoky Mountains and on the windswept Outer Banks where time moves more leisurely.<sup>1</sup>

Even for Americans unacquainted with this publication, its existence probably comes as no surprise. The idea that in isolated pockets somewhere in the country people still use "Elizabethan" or "Shakespearean" speech is widely held, and it is one of the hardier cultural beliefs or myths in the collective American psyche. Yet it lacks a definitive version in print or in any other form and is often couched in vague geographical and chronological terms. Exactly where is such a community and when was it formed? The idea arose in the late nineteenth century and has most often been associated with the southern mountains—the Appalachians of North Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, Virginia, and West

Virginia, and the Ozarks of Arkansas and Missouri.<sup>2</sup> At one extreme it reflects nothing less than our young nation's yearning for a stirring account of its origins, while at the other extreme the incidental fact that English colonization of North America began during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I more than four centuries ago. Two things in particular are responsible for its continued vitality: its romanticism and its political usefulness. Its linguistic validity is another matter entirely. Linguists haven't substantiated it, nor have they tried very hard to do so, since the claim of Elizabethan English is patently based on very little good evidence. But this lack of support is a secondary, if not irrelevant, matter for those who have articulated the Shakespearean English idea in print—popular writers and an occasional academic—for over a century. It has indisputably become a powerful cultural belief and acquired mythic status.

Growing up in East Tennessee, I heard it said from time to time that people somewhere in the nearby mountains still spoke Elizabethan English (the location of the community was specified), but if anything I have met the idea more often since leaving Tennessee thirty years ago. When people learn that I am a linguist who grew up near the mountains, they have frequently asked, "Isn't there supposed to be some place up there where they still speak Old English?" When I have asked, in return, if they could recall where they had heard the idea or where the community was supposed to be, no one could say. That people somewhere used an older form of English was just something that "everybody knows."

In the United States the idea of Shakespearean English often forms part of a general characterization of the southern mountains as being a cultural reservoir and a rugged, but idyllic, locale where people have somehow been slowed in time. Balladry, story telling, traditional dancing, and weaving are just a few of the features cited as preserved by people who have been isolated geographically and socially. An especially dreamy version of this appears in an early article titled "Elizabethan America" by Charles Morrow Wilson.

We know a land of Elizabethan ways—a country of Spenserian speech, Shakespearean people, and of cavaliers and curtsies. It is a land of high hopes and mystic allegiances, where one may stroll through the forests of Arden and find heaths and habits like those of

olden England.

We are speaking of the Southern highlands—Appalachia and Ozarkadia ... Husbandmen and ploughmen in Shakespeare's England and present-day upland farmers could very likely have rubbed shoulders and swapped yarns with few misunderstandings, linguistic or otherwise; for Elizabethan English, as well as Elizabethan England, appears to have survived magnificently in these isolated Southern uplands.

The speech of the Southern mountains is a survival of the language of older days, rather than a degradation of United States English ... [in it] a surprisingly large number of old words have survived, along with a surprisingly large number of old ways, giving a quaint and delightful flavor of olden England. Illustrations are plentiful enough. The most casual of listeners will become conscious of the preponderance of strong preterits in mountain speech: "clum" for "climbed," "drug" for "dragged," "wropped" for "wrapped," "fotch" for "fetched," and "holp" for "helped"—all sound Elizabethanisms to be found in Shakespeare, Lovelace, or King James Bible. The Southern uplander says "fur" (for) with Sir Philip Sidney, "furder" with Lord Bacon and in common with Hakluyt, "allow" for "suppose." Like Chaucer, he forms the plurals of monosyllables ending in "st" by adding "es"—"postes," "beastes," "jystes" (joists), "nestes," and "ghostes." Shakespeareanlike, he probably calls a salad a "sallet," a bag a "poke," "antic" for "careful," and "bobble" for "mix-up."<sup>3</sup>

Wilson's far-fetched description cannot be taken seriously, but this passage is typical in tone of many other writers. As with the miniature North Carolina dictionary cited earlier, he mentions writers and sources other than Shakespeare (especially Chaucer and the Authorized Version of the Bible). Though dating from very different centuries, these are alike in being highly prestigious, universally esteemed for their use of language. However, the "Elizabethan English" that commentators so often cite is not the colorful language of the Stratford bard and his contemporaries, but instead rather common, down-to-earth

verb forms like *clum* and *fotch*. Wilson's list of words is longer than the one offered by most others, but it's typical in being mainly verb past tenses, old-fashioned plurals, and vocabulary that would probably not strike many of us as especially "Shakespearean." Today they would be considered rustic, if not illiterate.

It's not clear exactly when the idea of Elizabethan English in the mountains was first articulated, but William Goodell Frost, President of Berea College in eastern Kentucky, was undoubtedly most influential in promoting and establishing the view that mountain speech and culture were legitimate survivals from older times. His 1899 essay "Our Contemporary Ancestors" was the published form of an address given for years to alumni and contributors to his institution. In it he stated:

The rude language of the mountains is far less a degradation than a survival. The [Old English] pronoun "hit" holds its place almost universally. Strong past tenses, "holp" for helped, "drug" for dragged, and the like, are heard constantly; and the syllabic plural is retained in words in -st and others. The greeting as we ride up to a cabin is "Howdy, strangers. 'Light and hitch your beastes." Quite a vocabulary of Chaucer's words which have been dropped by polite lips, but which linger in these solitudes, has been made out by some of our students. "Pack" for carry, "gorm" for muss, "feisty" for full of life, impertinent, are examples.<sup>4</sup>

As the country experienced large-scale immigration from southern and eastern Europe in the late nineteenth century and its people became increasingly diverse, Frost and other writers focused attention on the fellow citizens of "pure Anglo-Saxon" heritage who had yet to join the "advance of American civilization." It was, they claimed, a misconception to view mountain people as neglected or deprived, because it was they who had preserved much of the language and culture of early settlers from the British Isles, which the dominant mainstream neither recognized nor valued, even though most of its own ancestors had presumably spoken in a similar manner.

The Shakespearean English idea was formulated and promoted by people born and bred outside

the mountains, first by educators and clergymen (Frost was both) and later by journalists, travel writers, and amateur philologists. Often these were individuals who, having come to know mountain people firsthand, wished to identify their positive qualities to a wider audience, to combat the distorted, negative images of mountain people so common in the press. In the late nineteenth century, newspapers from time to time ran sensational stories about feuding and moonshining, just as today they periodically feature accounts of snake handling religion, high homicide rates, and endemic social deprivation, suggesting strongly that individual cases typify large parts of the mountains. Modern-day Hollywood movies like *Deliverance* have done nothing to counter this problem of negative images. Entering the mountains with such stereotypes, outsiders are surprised when they "discover" that the "true" nature of mountain speech is quite different. Then they write as if this were a revelation. In the mid-1990s the Lexington (Ky.) *Press-Herald* ran an article by a Midwestern schoolteacher who had taken a job in a tiny eastern Kentucky community and found that his pupils to his amazement used many "Shakespearean" and "Chaucerian" expressions. For these "counter-propagandists," as we might call them, the Elizabethan nature of mountain speech can be supported by citing a very small handful of words. For them the issue is one of perceptions and public relations, not of linguistics. Actually, the contention that mountaineers talk like Shakespeare can withstand little objective scrutiny. Here are some reasons why:

First, supporting examples are few and selective, often only half a dozen in number used to make far-reaching assertions about mountain language in general. Words are labeled as being "Shakespearean" or "Chaucerian" with almost never an accompanying quotation showing that those authors used them. *Poke* "sack," sometimes cited as an example, does not occur with this meaning in Shakespeare. Some are not traceable to the sixteenth century (for instance, the *Dictionary of Queen's English* cites *tee-toncey* "tiny," in "I'll have just a tee-toncey piece of pie" as Elizabethan).

Second, the evidence is not persuasive. Although they may not be known to educated, middle-class, city-dwelling outsiders who write about Shakespearean English, the terms they cite can usually be found in many parts of North America and the British Isles. Here are three examples, the second of which is especially common: *afeard* "afraid" (*Midsummer's Night Dream* III i 25: "Will not the ladies be

*afear'd* of the lion?"), *learn* "teach" (*Romeo and Juliet* III ii 12: "Learn me how to lose a winning match"), and *holp* "helped" (*King Richard the Third* I ii 107: "Let him thank me that holp to send him hither"). According to the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, the first two of these are widespread (especially *learn*), while the third is now old-fashioned in the South in general. Such shortcomings in using limited evidence of questionable validity do not restrain those who advocate the Shakespearean idea. It is not empirically based or systematically induced from facts.

Third, these accounts mix facts and images, places and times, even immigrant groups from very different parts of the British Isles. For instance, the English are sometimes lumped together with the Scotch-Irish, which even amateur historians and genealogists would not do, as in the following passage, again from Charles Morrow Wilson:

Broadly speaking, the Southern highlanders are an Old England folk, English and Scotch-Irish, whose forebears came forth from Elizabethan England, a nation of young life which had just found its prime, a nation of energy and daring, a nation leaping from childhood into manhood. And the spirit of Elizabethan England has long survived the weathering to time. The first settlers brought with them Elizabethan ways of living, and these ways have lasted in a country of magnificent isolation, one little touched by the ways of a modern world.

"Elizabethan" is not used here in the sense of "the literary world of southern England in the latter half of the sixteenth century" or even "England during the Renaissance." Not only are immigrants from Ireland sometimes subsumed with those from England, but Chaucer (who flourished in the late fourteenth century), Dryden (in the late seventeenth) and writers from other periods in between are regularly cited as having used terms now employed by mountaineers. What the wide-ranging authors and texts referred to have in common is that they are widely known and prestigious, and they used to be required reading in the schoolroom. (Thus the citations of them reveal more about the reading experience of promoters of the

Shakespearean idea than about mountain speakers.)

Shakespeare and Elizabeth I lived four centuries ago, but the southern mountains have been populated by Europeans only a little more than half that long. The settlers who came to North America during Elizabeth's reign either did not survive or did not stay (the first permanent colony, Jamestown, was founded under her successor, James I). Since few, if any, settlers came directly from Britain to the Appalachians, one wonders how well they preserved their English during the intervening period in the initial settlements. The more one reads and thinks about it, the less exact meaning "Elizabethan" and "Shakespearean" have. In the popular mind they appear to mean nothing more than "old-fashioned."

Fourth, writers make other sweeping and improbable statements, such as that mountain children have a natural affinity for Shakespeare. Early in the twentieth century one commentator stated that

It is said that when the mountaineer begins to read at all, he displays so marked a preference for Shakespeare that it is invariably the works of that poet that have most frequently to be rebound in any library to which he has access. The reason he himself gives for this predilection is that the things Shakespeare makes his characters do always seem so "natural."<sup>5</sup>

More recently a flatlander took a schoolteaching job in the North Carolina mountains, becoming convinced of the Elizabethan English idea and giving his first-grade pupils Shakespeare to read, with predictably dismal results, and a scholar writing a book on producing Shakespeare in North Carolina found that theater directors and critics believed that Shakespearean language was most intelligible in the western part of the state because it was closer to the everyday speech there.<sup>6</sup>

Fifth, writers routinely characterize large areas of the mountains as homogeneous, as though there were no regional and social differences among the people there. Though Elizabethan speech came to Appalachia indirectly, if it came at all, this has not cautioned commentators from often labeling it "pure." In North Carolina, according to one writer, mountaineers use a variety of English that has forms

reminiscent of Shakespeare and Chaucer and is at the same time "purely `American'."<sup>7</sup> In Kentucky, according to another, "the purest English on earth" is spoken.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the Shakespearean English idea ignores many things that linguists know to be true. All varieties of language change, even isolated ones, and contrary to popular impression mountain culture has been far from isolated over the past two centuries.<sup>9</sup> In vocabulary, mountain speech actually has far more innovations (terms not known in the old country) than holdovers from the British Isles. The Shakespeare myth reflects only simplistic popular views about the static nature of traditional folk cultures, especially those in out-of-the-way places.

With so many misconceptions and problems, no wonder that American scholars have had little interest in assessing just how "Elizabethan" Appalachian speech is. They would say that mountain speech has more archaic usages than other types of American English, but that's about all. They certainly wouldn't put a label like "Elizabethan" on it. But believers have no logical difficulty generalizing from a few words to a blanket label. Especially for them the idea of Shakespearean English has become a combination of an origin myth claiming to explain where mountain culture came from and a myth of the noble savage, which satisfies their nostalgia for a simpler, purer, more self-reliant past that may never have existed but that they nevertheless long for because of the complexities and ambiguities of modern life. All of this helps innumerable Americans who have no direct experience of the southern mountains and who consider themselves to be thoroughly rational people to believe that Elizabethan English is spoken there.

The idea that somewhere in the hills there's a lost colony preserving a type of speech from days of yore is more than just a romanticization of mountain life by outsiders. Many natives believe it too, associating it with the mountains in general or at least with older, less-educated people. Most likely they have picked up the notion from schoolteachers or the media, and sometimes they turn it to their advantage. A few years ago I asked Charles Bradley, the mayor of Gatlinburg, Tennessee (the self-styled "Capital of the Smoky Mountains") what distinguished mountain people, and he said immediately that they've hung onto Elizabethan English. For insiders, the claim fills a variety of purposes, especially the

affirmation that their culture has roots that are respectable, even reputable, or promotion of tourism, a college (William Goodell Frost), or even a political career. In his autobiography, *The Mountains Within Me*, Zell Miller, recently retired U.S. Senator from Georgia, names the community he describes and claims that he talks like Shakespeare himself because he grew up there:

If Shakespeare could have been reincarnated in Nineteenth Century Choestoe [Georgia], he would have felt right at home. The open fireplaces, spinning wheels, handmade looms, Greek lamps and good, if sometimes ungrammatical, Elizabethan English would all have been quite familiar to the Bard of Avon and, with the exception of having to adapt to homespun clothes, he would have had little difficulty assimilating into mountain society ... It no longer bothers me to be kidded about my mountain expressions. In fact, I have come to regard them as status symbols because who else do we have running around in public life today who speaks the language of Chaucer and Shakespeare as distilled, literally and figuratively, by two centuries of Georgia Mountain usage?<sup>10</sup>

For mountain people the belief appears to be as prevalent as ever.

The Shakespearean English idea argues that isolation and the lack of modern education have caused words and meanings to survive in the mountains identical to ones used in the Elizabethan period, often considered the liveliest and richest flowering of literature in the language. These have either disappeared from mainstream culture or become labeled as illiterate or vulgar by it. Because their ancestry is forgotten or misunderstood, the modern-day users of such language are wrongly labeled. At the same time, mainstream culture has lost awareness of its own roots, those who espouse the Shakespearean idea seem to be saying.

Being a cultural repository has helped regions like Appalachia and the Ozarks define themselves against mainstream cultures that possess immense socioeconomic power and dominance. Though lacking a cultural memory and having no conscious roots of its own other than a few two-dimensional, textbook

images, mass American culture has created an ideology that subjugates regional and ethnic cultures and articulates and promotes a value system through the media, educational systems, and a variety of institutions. Less well endowed economically and usually absent from the pages of the nation's history, regional cultures find themselves marginalized by modern nation states (especially in Europe), centralized institutions, and educational establishments. Consequently, their speech is viewed by those in power as backward and inferior. As much as anything else, it is this lack of status (both in North America and the British Isles—where it is most commonly associated with Ireland) that has led people to elaborate and advocate the "Shakespearean myth" to bring recognition to regional cultures that otherwise do not get much respect.

All this perhaps explains why for Appalachia there have been so many expositions of the same idea decade after decade. Advancing the idea, improbable as it is, that mountain people speak like Shakespeare counters the prevailing thinking fostered by the classroom and society at large that unfairly handicaps rural mountain people as uneducated and unpolished and that considers their speech to be a corruption of proper English. This dominant ideology, the backdrop against which the Shakespearean myth is framed, turns the history of the language on its head by dismissing its own "ancient legitimate lineage," as one writer has called it.<sup>11</sup>

One interesting aspect of the subject is the contrast between images, at least in Appalachia. Even today the name of the region brings to mind poor diets, proneness to violence, and countless other chronic ills, and social psychologists into the present generation have labored to analyze the region in terms of deprivation theory (which has been rejected by most sociologists and psychologists). Heavily romanticized images and jarringly negative ones can co-exist because both are a product of highly selected features.

Without a memory, mainstream society has little perspective to understand the true origin of mountain culture, whether this might be Elizabethan or anything else, and as a result it sometimes makes profound misjudgments. This calls for cultural education, which should begin locally but which at some point will probably run counter to mainstream society because it is the latter which usually chooses what

is to be valued and what is not. Regional or ethnic cultures have little, if any, role in evaluating themselves and often have evaluations imposed on them by mass society. The frequent result is schizophrenia, especially among upwardly mobile members of a regional or minority culture as they are asked to choose between two competing and often conflicting value systems and ways of talking. At home they are told one thing, but in the marketplace and other public arenas quite another. Teachers may tell them that mountain people may talk like Shakespeare, but in the schoolroom the message, often bought by children and their parents, is that nothing should be permitted but "standard English."

At the beginning of this essay the idea of Shakespearean English being spoken today, after the dawn of the third millennium, might have appeared to be half-nostalgia and half-fable. But it persists, and commentators over a century ago did identify the crux of the matter—that natives of the mountains deserve esteem as culture bearers—even though these commentators did not contextualize their case in terms of a socioeconomic dynamic. They recognized some of its educational implications, however wishful its validity. Today Americans have almost no awareness of the roots of their English, and whatever respect they may have for regional cultures often does not extend to regional speech. While people in neither Appalachia nor in America at large have much need for an artificial linkage to Elizabethan speech patterns, there is definite usefulness in stressing the historical validity of mountain speech, as an educational and political tool for the foreseeable future, to counter negative stereotypes and to help people better appreciate the past as well as cultural differences today. Since it reflects only a small portion of reality, it would be wise for linguists to play a role in working out the pedagogical applications of the Elizabethan idea, but even they must appreciate that it has achieved the status of a myth that is here to stay.

#### Notes

1. *A Dictionary of the Queen's English* (Raleigh: North Carolina Travel and Promotion Division, c1965), 2-3.
2. Most published items on Elizabethan speech have dealt with Appalachia and the Ozarks, but William

T. Thom's 1883 essay, "Some Parallelisms between Shakespeare's English and the Negro-English of the U.S." in the first volume of the journal *Shakespeariana* may have been the initial treatment of the idea for any variety of American English. Over the years there have been occasional statements about Elizabethan relics in African American English, Gullah (the creole English spoken along the coast of South Carolina and Georgia), and the English of the islands of the Outer Banks of North Carolina or the Chesapeake Bay of Virginia and Maryland. Elsewhere it has enjoyed currency in Newfoundland and in Ireland, especially in Ulster.

3. Charles Morrow Wilson, "Elizabethan America," *Atlantic Monthly* 144 (1929), 238-39.
4. William Goodell Frost, "Our Contemporary Ancestors," *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (March 1899), 313.
5. William Aspenwall Bradley, "In Shakespeare's America," *Harper's* 131 (1915), 436.
6. Larry S. Champion, "'Bold to Play': Shakespeare in North Carolina," *Shakespeare in the South*, ed. by Philip C. Kolin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983), 231-46.
7. Margaret W. Morley, "The Speech of the Mountains," *The Carolina Mountains* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913).
8. Bradley, op. cit.
9. Michael Montgomery, "The Idea of Appalachian Isolation," *Appalachian Heritage* 28.2 (2000), 20-31.
10. Zell Miller, "Mountain Dialect," *The Mountains within Me* (Toccoa, Ga.: Commercial), 76-88.
11. William S. Hays, "Mountain Language and the English Classics," *Mountain Review* 2.1 (1975), 13.