

**JOHN HART'S
DISCOURSE ON
SPELLING REFORM:
DISEASE AND WAR IN
THE BODY POLITIC**

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John Hart has long been recognised as one of the most accomplished phoneticians of the sixteenth century. The novelty of his spelling reforms has also attracted attention, if not for their rationality, at least as testimony to the changes in pronunciation taking place at the time of writing. However, the discourse in which these are framed and embedded merits as much attention as the linguistic content for the light it sheds on the motivations and objectives of the reform movement. The prologues and epilogues of his work on orthographic reform reveal the social and political weight attached to the issue as well as serving as vehicles for blatant self-promotion. The key to understanding these passages lies in the imagery of disease and war littered throughout.

Firstly, the author postures as a knife-happy physician administering to the disease-riddled body of English spelling. Secondly, the deplorable state of the latter is described in terms of war —war among the letters themselves, and between the reformer and public opinion. Both these images are imported from the currently popular discourse on the body politic and are exploited to suggest the urgency, political and social, of wielding the scalpel and ruthlessly excising diseased members. The tone in which Hart presents his reforms suggest that his humanistic concerns were overridden and underpinned by nationalist and political motivations.

John Hart, phonetician, diplomat and spelling reformer was the author of three works dealing with the teaching and reformation of English spelling in the mid sixteenth century.¹ His standing as a phonetician has consistently been high —his description of the formation of the sounds as a function of the placing of the different organs of the mouth, the degree of opening and the absence or presence of voice is remarkably accurate.² His work on the sound-letter relationship has also been a source for later phonetician's research, providing valuable evidence about the dynamics of the so called Great Vowel Shift. (Ellis 1869-96, Jespersen, 1907, Dobson, 1968). His work as a pedagogue has also

¹*The opening of the unreasonable writing of our english tounge* (1551), *An Orthographie...* (1569) and *A methode or comfortable beginning for all unlearned...* (1570)

²Dobson begins his section on Hart thus, "John Hart deserves to rank with the greatest English phoneticians and authorities on pronunciation" (1968: 62).

merited comment as his system of teaching the letters of the alphabet relating sounds with letters rather than letter names and the use of picture cards in a graded system closely mirrors the present one. Apart from his work in education he was also active in politics, entering the College of Heralds and becoming Chester Herald in 1566. He was aware of the spelling reform movement in France, a factor which was to influence, not only the content and principles on which he would base his reform, but, also, the terms in which his discourse was couched. Having acknowledged the contribution he made to pedagogy, spelling reform and phonology, I would like to turn my attention to the specific terms in which he presents his reforms to his public: the analogies between spelling and the body politic implicit in imagery of disease and war. Through an analysis of these analogies, the extent to which spelling reform was fully and completely inserted into the political debates dominating social-minded reformers and commentators in the mid sixteenth century becomes apparent. As Gramsci has affirmed, "Every time the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore" (1985: 183).

However, the terminology of disease and war also poses a dilemma and it is this —why should a spelling reformer, who by definition bore the whiff of subversion and challenger of tradition, make extensive use of a set of analogies and terminology which were based on the medieval world view of a static, hierarchically structured society, in order to present spelling reforms? Hart's proposal for reform is even more surprising coming from one writing from the centre and in this sense he represents the two contending forces in Tudor society which were, to use Bakhtin's terms, centripetal and centrifugal. In the models of language development proposed by Foucault, Bourdieu and Bakhtin, those in possession of power defend the values at its centre —values which were traditionally conservative and designed to safeguard it from the possible inroads made by those forces encroaching from the edges. Hart would be expected to represent the centripetal forces; the centralisation of power in language and the elimination of difference, dissension and dispersal which he no doubt does when he establishes the language of the Court as a norm. But on the other hand, his reformed spelling was, he states, "for the profite of the multitude," designed to enable "any naturall English reasonable creature to read English" (Hart 1969: 2). This in effect would extend literacy and empower spheres that needed to be kept in their places, that is, his proposals contain the potential to violate hierarchies of power enjoyed by the privileged and perpetuated by the vagaries of English spelling in its current form. This is one of the inherent contradictions in his proposal. There is a further implication, even more destabilizing and "centrifugal," one which concerns the status of the dialects, a point which I will discuss later.

Even the most superficial reading of *An Orthographie* (1569),³ on which I will base the greater part of my analysis reveals that there are three predominant sets of imagery used —those of disease, war and painting. This paper will concentrate on the first two. It should be acknowledged that this imaging of spelling reform was probably an inheritance from what Hart had observed in the French debate and, more specifically, the figure of Meigret whose influence he acknowledges thus, “a worthy man well learned in Greek and Latin named Louis Meigret of Lyon [whose] reasons and arguments I do herebefore partly use as he did Quintilian” (1969: 53). In addition to having championed spelling reform on phonemic principles, Meigret also set the tone for the debate; rancid, highly conflictive and frequently degenerating into personal invective. This has also left its mark on Hart's discourse although he steers clear of direct personal attack, in large part because the conservative ranks of spelling reform were poorly represented in England and are not supported by any major treatise until Richard Mulcaster's *Elementarie* in 1582 which, coming well towards the end of the century when the issue had exhausted itself and virtually petered out, did not engage immediate antipathies.

The tone and terms of Hart's presentation of his reforms in the prefaces, prologues and scattered throughout the text underline the profoundly political nature of the debate. When choosing the metaphor of disease and illness to describe the abuses within English spelling and how they were to be remedied —cleansing, amputation, excision and the restoration of harmony— Hart was drawing on a long tradition of political writing and the established organic analogy between state and body —the body politic. This analogy was developed on two levels. Political and social harmony was considered analogous to that of the body where each limb and organ had a well defined task to perform: the proper functioning of the whole depended on each part fulfilling its assigned duty. Secondly, equilibrium between the humours in the body was likened to those in a healthy state. As Tillyard points out, in the Middle Ages it was, “a persistent political commonplace, tending to discipline and social stability” (1943: 102-103). It served to reinforce the essentially, hierarchically based concept of the “commonweal.” This basically medieval concept, although it gradually lost its vitality, enjoyed currency until the seventeenth century.⁴

The most immediate predecessors of Hart's analogy can be found in the proliferation of tracts among his contemporaries which aimed to point out the abuses within the state and suggest ways in which these could be healed or

³It was originally written in 1551 but publication was delayed, possibly due to the hostile attitudes to spelling reform.

⁴Hale (1971) traces the rise and fall of this analogy and concludes that its frequency declines in the 17th century parallel to the rise in the belief in constitutional monarchy. The onset of the Civil War put paid to its vigour and relevance.

eliminated. The sixteenth century was what A.B. Ferguson (1965, 1979) calls that of the “articulate citizen” when writers imbued with a new sense of historical change publicly and vociferously expressed critical views on all aspects of social, cultural, political and economic life. They frequently invoked the body politic analogy. Thomas Starkey is perhaps one of commentators who most insistently and thoroughly exploits this analogy in *Dialogue between Reginald Pole and Thomas Lupset* (1533/1536) but it is also a recurring key metaphor in a host of lesser known tracts such as those by William Cholmeley, *Suite of a True-hearted Englishman* (1553) and *A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England*, an anonymous tract sometimes attributed to Thomas Smith,⁵ to mention just two.

Given Hart’s basic proposition, that we “write as we speake” (1569: 6) and that each sound should be represented by one letter and one letter only, this was a most fitting metaphor by which to express the desired harmony between the two systems of representation, written and spoken. Like the political analysts, Hart finds the body orthographical diseased and stresses how this will affect and infect the state. Like his contemporaries, he appeals to monarchical authority to take the appropriate steps to remedy the situation.⁶ By appropriating the language of political discourse, Hart brings the theme of spelling reform up front on centre stage, rubbing shoulders with such controversial issues as monetary regulation, the nature of monarchical power and social control. He attempts to move the issue from the narrow confines of the classroom to a wider forum by underlining the deep-rooted consequences a reformed spelling would have for the economic and political life of the nation. By analogy, it would contribute to the commonweal, the ideal of harmony and prosperity.

One example will serve to illustrate the close parallel between the nature of the discourse deployed in politically motivated texts and that of Hart. Richard Morison in *A Remedy for Sediton* (1536), commenting on the uprisings which had occurred in the previous years, advises the monarch on how to rid the state of this festering sore as follows:

to cut away the branches of sediton... his highness intendeth to pull away the root. He seeth it not possible to cure this sore, which indeed Plato calleth the greatest sickness, that can come to a commonwealth, except he search out, both where it ariseth and what things most nourisheth it, and then do as physicians are wont, which oft times lay not their medicines to the part, that

⁵*A Discourse of the Common Weal of this Realm of England* (1581) was signed W.S. Its authorship has been attributed variously to William Shakespeare and Sir Thomas Smith among others.

⁶His first tract in 1551 was dedicated to Edward VI and he appeals to some higher authority in *An Orthographie* to intervene and right (write) the wrongs of English spelling.

is diseased, but to that rather, from whence the disease first came, and is like to come still, unless it be there stopped. (sig.D2v)⁷

There are a number of similarities between the above passage and references to be found in *An Orthographie*. Firstly, there is the combination of both gardening and surgical imagery. Morison advises the king to “cut away the branches of sedition,” to pull away the root. Hart similarly announces that in order to restore harmony to the alphabet it will be necessary that the, “the vicious parts thereof [be] cut away as are the vyle and offensive members, in a politike common welth” (1969:12). Turning to the imagery of disease in his mixed metaphor, Morison outlines the process to be followed in curing the sore: diagnosis, location and surgery, with the proviso that it is not at first obvious what the real source is. The structure of *An Orthographie* follows this same procedure: diagnosis of the ills afflicting the alphabet (four in all), remedy and prognosis. Hart then poses as a surgeon who will restore health and equilibrium to this lopsided lumbering giant, the “monstrous figure” (1969: 12) that is English spelling. The gardening imagery reflects Hart’s attempt to naturalise English spelling by returning it to its originary state but to do so he must amputate the vile parts as one does with “trees or vines.” It is significant that he poses as both surgeon and physician, moderating his initial intent of making extensive and intensive repair work (cutting off) to less intrusive procedures, “to administer purgations to the vicious humors, with certaine remedies and then prescribe the pacient to a wholesome diet” (1969: 10-11). Likewise, his function as gardener vacillates between the radical (replanting and uprooting) and the less intrusive pruning and cutting back. Both analogies represent the attempt to combine the aggressive and the caring, the radical and the moderate in the same way his reforms do by incorporating existent letters with revivals and inventions. To stun and appease; provoke and placate were double, if not completely contradictory objectives and this goes some way to explaining the apparent dichotomy between the potential ultimate consequences of his project and the medieval imagery used to present it. It is also symptomatic of his attempt to combine the rebellious and the conservative, the innovative and the tried and trusted; a characteristic shared by most social and political commentators of the time and one which was modelled on the very monarchy itself which walked the tightrope between the medieval and the modern.

As for the diagnosis of the major diseases of English spelling, they are based on the principles of harmony and hierarchy synonymous with the healthy body politic. Usurpation, superfluity, deviance and deficiency are the four major abuses he identifies and all have overtly political overtones.

⁷Quotation taken from material supplied at a plenary lecture, “Sedition in John Bale’s *King Johan*,” given by Dr Dermot Cavanagh at The Tudor Symposium, Newcastle, April 16, 1998.

In what amounts to a Picasso-like evocation, in his discussion of usurpation Hart complains that, “In the place of eares, we doe use to paint eyes” (1969: 28), referring to the fact that each part has a function to fulfil and one cannot do the job of another. The term had also got political and social roots. During the sixteenth century, the policy of the monarchy and economic conditions led to the increasing blurring of the lines between social classes and the aspiration to social advancement was making inroads into the hithertofore untouchable ranks of the aristocracy. Note the numerous tracts which alerted them to the fact that their hegemony was daily being challenged and their authority eroded in order to spur them on to take on a more responsible and active role.⁸ From within the centres of power there was a decidedly ambivalent attitude to these classes —on the one hand, considerable and often violent revulsion towards those who sought advancement on the basis of merit—they were accused of disrupting the harmony of the state in an attempt to play out parts not assigned to them. Hart makes direct references to the idea of proportion and harmony when he refers to the absurdity of a play where the family members are duplicated and the father is now the son, now the daughter.

John Baret, author of *An Alvearie* (1570) shares Hart’s preoccupations. Discussing the letter <c>, he wonders, “howe it got this third place of honour, or how it hath so absurdely thus long usurped that dignitie” (K3v). As with Hart, the failure of a letter to keep to its proper place leads to strong moral and political language. As a mere consonant, it seems pushy insofar as consonants were seen as being inferior to vowels. Holofernes in *Love’s Labour’s Lost* depreciatingly refers to Mote, a lower character, as a “consonant.”

The term “usurpation” also had political overtones which were equally forceful. They concern the constant plots being hatched and then aborted to overthrow the monarch. These came especially from the border counties, from dissatisfied courtiers hungry for advancement and, of course, from the religious dissidents who had fled to the Continent and were in cahoots with the champions of the Counter-reformation. In this respect, Hart found himself in somewhat of a *cul de sac*. According to his principle of writing as one spoke, the dialects were *de facto* legitimised, a principle which went against the centralisation he called for by recognising Court English as “the flower.” He may have been aware of this bind as he is forced to circumscribe the use of dialectal forms to their own regions. There is little doubt about Hart’s loyalty to the monarch given his post as pursuivant and his boasting about having received the King’s “gracious liberalitie” although no independent sources can back up this claim with hard facts. Secondly the body-state analogy taken to its

⁸Sir Thomas Elyot and Roger Ascham severely chastised the ruling classes and warned that their powers were in danger of being appropriated by the rising meritocracy unless they reformed and became more serious.

logical conclusion would deny the provinces any degree of federal style autonomy such as Hart suggested.

Superfluity and deficiency are two additional defects Hart sees in English spelling, referring to the fact that more than one letter represented the same sound <c> and <s> for example both representing the phoneme /s/. On other occasions, one letter was called upon to deploy different roles; the much maligned <c> is again pilloried as a major offender. These were also defects that had been diagnosed for the social structure. Starkey found society both top heavy with an idle aristocracy and lacking in skilled craftsmen who could lift the cloth making industry especially from the dire straits in which it found itself. It is telling that the infamous letter <e> was frequently branded as “idle,” an epithet similar to that used to describe members of the aristocracy and the church. The analogy also makes reference to the lack of equilibrium between the humours within the body, which, according to conventional wisdom, was also a cause of disease.

By appropriating this language of political reform Hart attempts to legitimise what he knew could be branded as breaking the conservative ranks. Changing spelling would in fact change the nature of the monarchy and sweep from under its feet the legitimacy on which it was founded. The Tudor dynasty more than any other, relied on the word in several senses, but not without ambivalence. The histories that they had encouraged to be written were blatant attempts at consolidation and legitimisation. The break with Rome elevated the word—the vernacular—to the status of Latin; the treason acts which abounded in an atmosphere of conspiracy and counter-conspiracy all point to the power of the word—even the spoken word could become motive from accusation and conviction of treason. Added to this was the increasing power of the printing press.

In order to offset the possible conspiratorial and revolutionary motives which could be attributed to him, Hart uses the argument of reason and logic in the first place—the old allies of humanist debates but more significantly he reverts to the language of the conservative and hierarchical view of society which would place him not in the revolutionary role he feared but as a defender of the state, the established order and guardian of the *status quo*. But here, yet again, Hart flounders in waters deeper than he perhaps first contemplated because, while the Tudors attempted to create a tradition for themselves, they also tried to appear as harbingers of change. He imitated this model and exploited its ambiguity just as many of his contemporaries did in an attempt to hedge his bets and cover his shoulders.

Another motive for adopting the imagery of disease was to drive home the far reaching benefits of standardised spelling for the health of the nation. It

would increase the prestige of the language among its vernacular counterparts and facilitate its learning abroad. It would be “very commodious for any straunger that desireth to learne our tongue” (1969: 5). Thus it could be claimed that Hart was one of the first to become aware of the potential of the language for colonisation. He could not have been aware of the cultural hegemony it would eventually lever, that it could become an agent for foreign domination but, on the other hand, it cannot be denied that one of his apparent aims was not without intellectual generosity insofar as what he was proposing was what would eventually evolve into an international phonetic alphabet which could, with minor adaptation be used with any language, “Other nations can also use this system” (1969: 5).

Hart had to wage war on three fronts simultaneously: against unruly letters, against the tenacious forces of custom and against the users of the language, “men grieved at the amendment of any thing” (1969: 12). He was aware that his posture was provocative, stating in the dedicatory to Edward VII, that he has been attacked as an “inventer of troubles.” This sense of being beleaguered seeps into the text at all levels. As mentioned previously, this warlike imagery may have been inherited in part from Meigret and the altercations of the French spelling reform debate and was introduced into Hart’s text even though there was no immediate figure which could serve as a target —no organised or even half-articulate champion of the conservative cause. The majority of the texts at our disposition —Cheke’s, Bullokar’s and Baret’s— favour some kind of reform.

The imagery of war between letters themselves can be traced back to Erasmus’ *De recta Graeci et Latini sermonis pronunciacione* (1528). In his etiological fable on their birth, Erasmus says that after Cadmus had planted the teeth of a dead snake, from this seed, “there suddenly leapt up two lines of men, armed with helmets and spears who destroyed themselves by dealing each other mortal wounds” (34). This sense of potential anarchy pervades most writings on writing. Even Mulcaster who favoured the conservative approach to spelling states that letters are “elves and brats” (1925: 102). Johnson was to return to this idea in the *Preface to the Dictionary* when he speaks of the “wild exuberance” of the language and its orthographical confusion.

Thirdly the metaphor can be applied to the position of the author himself and the conceptualisation of the presentation of his project. As was true for many spelling reformers he was highly conscious of the public reception his amendments would receive and whether consciously or not, saw it in terms of a battle between custom —stubborn and irrational in many cases— and logic or reason. In this confrontation what Hart and his like-minded contemporaries were doing was to divest the projects they championed of the personal and place

them on the level of principle. So, Hart paradoxically grafts onto his fairly revolutionary reform proposals, made from the heart of centralised and hegemonic power, to maintain the *status quo* an annex which offers another interpretation more attuned to those progressive members of society. He is trying to have his cake and eat it, it seems. He would represent the avant-garde but only up to a certain point. He was hedging his bets, treading the line of ambivalence but not producing a definitive stance—leaving his options open as one forged in the smithy of hard-headed political options.

Let us turn to analyse in more detail some of the war-related images that occur in Hart's text and see what significance they hold for the presentation and interpretation of the text itself and how it can be related to the context in which it appears. Like an army general, Hart aims to impose discipline on the wayward alphabet. He is particularly militant in relation to borrowed terms, referring to them as mercenaries which, when under pay from a prince must wear his colours, no matter what their original precedence, referring to the fact that borrowed terms should be naturalised and not reveal their etymological origin. Why choose this image when, beginning with Elyot, the terms in which they were interpreted were diplomatic—denizens or Mulcaster's "enfranchised citizens"? Indeed, many references to borrowing resort to the judicial or parliamentary—Samuel Daniel objects to them as they have snook into the language "without a Parliament, without any consent or allowance" (Smith, 1904: 384) and George Gascoigne makes a similar complaint that they have not been approved by a system of verification. Hart seems to waive this judicial procedure and grants them validity through necessity. It is not that they are desirable but that they are necessary and like Mulcaster he shears them of any precedence, any claim to origins, putting them at the service of the English language. It is a declaration of the supremacy of the English language, of its dominion over others and, as I have indicated above, smacks of an intuition that English will become a power to be reckoned with in the future. He was right.

This imagery also had immediate contemporary relevance. Ireland was a persistent thorn in the side of the Tudor monarchy. The border counties and Scotland were constantly threatening to splinter the illusion of national unity which was repeatedly invoked to rally forces in order to wage battles against enemies on the continent. The vision of a nation besieged on all fronts is the impression given in all texts, be they linguistically orientated or of a more economic and political nature.

Goldberg claims that Hart, writing from a position of centralised power (political) ironically, by proposing a new alphabet, undermines the very establishment he attempted to consolidate. This is true insofar as his own theory of sound-equals-letter gave an autonomy to the dialectical versions of English,

those very dialectical versions which were equated with political insubmission and potential sources of discontent and lack of harmony. Therefore, in the larger project he envisioned, Hart found himself in the unenviable position that what had started out as a centralising or centripetal project ended up as a centrifugal one, of dispersal and fragmentation. His use of the age old imagery of disease and warfare, of the invoking of the body politic was an attempt to palliate this decentralisation and to invoke the forces of order while his reforms were at the same time promoting segmentation, dispersion and diffusion, one of the main objections raised by Mulcaster against phonemic based spelling. Hart's continued use of the body politic imagery of war and disease was a ploy used by him in order to sweeten the medicine he had to administer and to lull the audience into a state of acceptance, banishing phantoms of disorder in the name of order, regularity and standardisation. Because, however much he might have protested, the basis of Hart's spelling proposals signalled the fissures that would develop into a breach in the English nation in future centuries.

Hart's proposals are therefore typical of those of his epoch and represent not by any means a failure or "mingle mangle" but a negotiation between custom, tradition and a medieval world view and a new dynamic social register which would have to contemplate diversity within standardisation.

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