

Poetic evidence and “silent e”

In present-day English spelling, final orthographic < e > after a consonant has no sound of its own, but instead modifies the pronunciation of the preceding vowel letter, e.g., < *hid mad rod* > [hɪd mæd rad] vs. < *hide made rode* > [hɑjd mejd rowd]. Has what is now “silent e” ever had its own sound? Here are some examples of English poems that provide evidence.

- (1) 1609: William Shakespeare, Sonnet LXII

Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye
And all my soul, and all my every part;
And for this sin there is no remedy,
It is so grounded inward in my heart.
Methinks no face so gracious is as mine,
No shape so true, no truth of such account;
And for myself mine own worth do define,
As I all other in all worths surmount.
But when my glass shows me myself indeed
Beated and chopp'd with tanned antiquity,
Mine own self-love quite contrary I read;
Self so self-loving were iniquity.
'Tis thee,—myself,—that for myself I praise,
Painting my age with beauty of thy days.

- (2) 1546: Anne Askew, ballad written in Newgate Prison, 25–32.

More enmyes now I have
Than hairs upon my head.
Let them not me deprave
But fight thou in my stead.
On thee my care I cast.
For all their cruel spight
I set not by their haste
For thou art my delight.

- (3) ca. 1400: Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Merchant's Tale*, 678–684.

A bryde shal nat eten in the halle
Til dayes foure, or thre dayes atte leeste,
Ypassed been; thanne lat hire go to feeste.
The fourthe day compleet fro noon to noon,
Whan that the heighe masse was ydoon,
In halle sit this Januarie and May,
As fressh as is the bryghte someres day.

- (4) 1390: John Gower, *Confessio Amantis*, III, 1028–1032.

And thus betwen the wel and wo
To schip he goth, his wif with childe,
The which was evere meke and mylde
And wolde nocht departe him fro,
Such love was betwen hem tuo.

(problem by E. Moreton)