

spelling crystallized from its fluid form to a rigid form -- that is, the *h* was pronounced -- at least in some places.

Most words ending in *-tion* had a more florid, complex pronunciation than the abbreviated one we use today. For example, *conception* would be pronounced, “con-sep-see-un,” rather than our “con-sep-chun” or “con-sep-shun.” (Interestingly, this is very similar to the pronunciation of the same word in modern Spanish.) Similarly, the *-sion* words such as *vision* and *compassion* would be “viz-ee-un” and “com-pass-ee-un,” rather than “vi-zhun” and “com-pash-un.” (This is easily explained by a quick look at the spelling employed in William Caxton’s *Æneid*, published circa 1474: “destruction” is written as “destruccyon.” Some modern words retain an “x” in its place, for example: complexion, crucifixion, and the Victorian English spelling of “connexion.”) It sounds affected, but their speech was less hurried, and probably far more carefully considered, than ours is now.

The “r” sound is **not** trilled with the tongue, as is often heard in modern upper-class English accents. Rather, it’s a thick, meaty sound, like the proverbial “Arrrrr!” of pirate dialect. Get into it when rehearsing: exaggerate it and really have fun! Then back it down to a more natural level for performance. (As a theatrical decision, I’m sticking with the West Country rhotic usage here, rather than the eastern non-rhotic use.)

Many people have laughed at the “outrageous accents” of the Frenchmen in the movie, “Monty Python and the Holy Grail,” especially where King Arthur’s knights are called “k-niggets.” After chuckling, some reenactors will solemnly turn to each other and aver, “You know, it really was pronounced that way.” This is half right. In Anglo-Saxon and Middle English, the *k* in *knave*, *knee*, and *knife* would have indeed been pronounced -- but the *-ight* would have a fricative, like the *ch* in German “*ich*”. The word would thus sound like “k-nicht,” so close to its German cousin *knecht* that there is almost no difference.

That’s the case up to Middle English. There is some disagreement among scholars as to exactly when the *k* became silent, but Shakespeare did make a pun relating “knight” to “night,” which strongly suggests that it may have been silent by his time. For that matter, the “gh” also lost its fricative at some point in the same frame -- again, it’s probably impossible to say exactly when, since dialectal change spread so slowly.

Some similarly controversial “disappearing” consonants include: the “f” in “calm” or “walk;” and the “g” in “gnaw” and “gnat.” Either of these should, or should not, be pronounced, depending on which scholar you ask. Likewise, terminal “g” in words like “sing” and “king,” which was a hard “g” at one time, but seems to have softened to the modern sound sometime “in Early Modern English.”

In the case of any of these, you can use the modern pronunciation, or you can opt for the more flavorful older choice. Dialectal variances make either one plausible. The former is easier, but the latter is likely to be more fun.