

## Strategies of Rebuttal in the Spelling Reform Debate: An analysis of Richard Mulcaster's denunciation of the phonemic reformers

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Sharp exchanges, personal as well as political animosities and outright confrontation which frequently degenerated into name calling were a staple in the French spelling reform debate which, “finit en échange d’insultes” (Citton, 1989: 61). Casting aspersions on aims and objectives, reliability, patriotism and moral integrity by subtler means characterised its counterpart in England. Each Messiah, acutely conscious of his status and the possible fate awaiting him if he did not dispatch his merchandise with aplomb went all out to cajole, cosset and court public opinion. Each reformer announced himself as the possessor of truth and pushed his reforms to the detriment of others but, at the same time, rode on the back of his predecessors. The strategies used in the *First Part of the Elementarie*, Richard Mulcaster's 1582 book advocating the conservative path towards spelling reform and published amid the sound and fury of reform on phonemic principles shows the subtle but nevertheless scathing disdain with which other reformers are treated, how their efforts are discredited and the distance separating the two approaches exaggerated. In short, the strategies employed serve as a vehicle for the author's self promotion.

Mulcaster's attempts to sway the reader in his direction at the expense of his rivals are closely embedded within an apparently inoffensive narrative - the sabre beneath the velvet cloak. However, his attack is persistent and relentless, its *tour de force* being the allegory with which he prefaces his proposals. Here he describes the development of spelling in terms of the movement from tyranny to democracy until it finds stability in a system of parliamentary democracy. The close parallels established between the phonemicists and Sound's tyrannical reign identify them as enemies of the state, agents of anarchy and the linguistic equivalent of seditious rebels attempting to disrupt public and civic order. He depicts them as worshipping before the altar of the false god Sound mistaking him for the legitimate ruler, Custom.<sup>1</sup> Mulcaster exploits a terminology of rebellion and disruption. The verbs associated with this group suggest battle and violence: they “thwart”, “force”, “cross” and “hinder”, invoking the spectre of disruption and disorder which so haunted Tudor society and was evident on all levels, from the plot hatching over-ambitious gentry to the lamentable state of Ireland. The allegory is a masterpiece of the stab in the back and I have discussed it elsewhere. In this paper I wish to concentrate on the other strategies that are used to discredit the phonemic reformers and their theoretical positions.

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<sup>1</sup> The political nature of the allegory of the development of writing has been analysed in O'Neill 1997.

Firstly, Mulcaster does not mention anyone by name. Sir Thomas Smith, John Hart, William Bullokar and others of their cohort are referred to collectively as “they”. Leaving them in the cold vaults of anonymity is the first slur on their achievements. He denies them a face of their own in the same way that they had denied it to the letter. This decision was probably motivated by concerns overriding those of ideological difference, however. Sensitive to the thin line between official approbation and displeasure, he was not going to chance his arm and incur the wrath of potentially powerful people. Both Smith and Hart had been high standing diplomats<sup>2</sup> and to come out openly with a criticism of them could have boomeranged against a humble teacher trying to reach the centres of power from the edge. Mulcaster is constantly negotiating this fringe, apologising Uriah Heep style, attempting to put his own view forward without creating enemies, “it entendeth no defense, as against anemie, but a conference, as with a frind”, (92); “I will endeavor my self to perswade them as frinds, then to confute them as foes”; “tho it seme by the inscription to pretend som offence, yet it is nothing moodie at all.”<sup>3</sup> These quotations indicate that at least on the surface, Mulcaster presented himself hat in hand and this fawning, by no means unique to him, was intended both to smooth the path towards the presentation of his own reforms and make the acuity of the condemnation in the allegory more palatable. This strategy also skilfully avoids the *cul de sac* into which Bullokar so recklessly and clumsily drives. His criticism of Smith and Hart for having negatively affected public opinion on the issue does not sit happily with the crumbs of praise he periodically feels obliged to throw in their direction.

Secondly, Mulcaster directs the brunt of his criticism at the theoretical basis of phonemic reform while ingratiating himself to the personalities involved, as pointed out above. Although their efforts have proved fruitless and ill-directed, he concedes that their intentions were praiseworthy, “I allow not the mean, tho I mislike not the men, which deserve great thanks for their good will” (109). This condescending benevolence, however, cannot be taken at face value as it is severely undercut by the previous accusations of treachery, treason, sedition and anarchical tendencies levelled against them in the allegory. It is a curtsy, made out of feigned respect and rings slightly false. He reserves his *coup de grace* for bludgeoning their lack of sound theoretical foundations, consistency and rigour: they have not studied the matter for themselves but have relied blindly on inherited precepts. Mulcaster considers, like Francis Bacon was to do later, that “orderlie seking” and “sufficient observation” should dictate both methodology and theory. He finds this lacking in the phonemic reformers and, “laie[s] the hole falt upon the insufficient observer, for not seking the right in it, by a right waie” (111).

The same accusation of incompetence and lack of acquaintance with solid facts is expressed through the analogy he establishes between them and the captain of the ship who takes to sea without either knowledge of navigation or the ability to read and interpret the compass or the map. The fairly conventional image of the state as a ship which needs informed direction and collaboration in order to survive is invoked and linked to linguistic questions. By branding his rivals as inept captains, Mulcaster refers indirectly to the Laws of Oleron which stipulated that such a

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<sup>2</sup> Smith had served as ambassador to France on two occasions, 1562 - 64 and again in the 1570's. He was first Secretary from 1572 to 1576 and participated in the Irish venture from 1571 to 1576. Hart, for his part had also served as ambassador in France and held the title Chester Herald.

<sup>3</sup> All citations from the *Elementarie* are from Campagnac's 1925 edition.

leader has no binding authority and those he attempts to control have no moral or social obligation to obey. Thus by invoking the very images that they themselves had used to represent their endeavours, (Hart develops this image in *An Orthographie*) he succeeds in undercutting their authority and credibility as their plans for reform rest on the flimsy authority of the ear and no more.

The second weapon in Mulcaster's arsenal of attack is to play on the imagery and terms that figured prominently in both Hart and Bullokar's work. He takes up the gardening image, affirming that, unlike Hart who will "replant" the whole garden of orthography, his aim is less ambitious, less disruptive and confined to "reasonable prouing" (108). This is justified by his statement that what he seeks is relative perfection, "our commonlie so, and not their alwaie so" (113). The opposition of the two pronominal forms, "our" and "their" serves to identify his enterprise with the public good, dismissing the others as a splinter group.

Hart is obviously the target for criticism in the references to the imagery of disease and healing. He had donned the garb of the surgeon and doctor who would diagnose and remedy the ills of the language. His diagnosis is called into question and the similarity between the spelling reformer and the surgeon is demonstrated as being presumptuous, if not totally erroneous. Hart's medical skills like his linguistic ones, fall short of the mark. What he identifies as symptoms of infirmity are, in fact, part of the genetic idiosyncrasy of the language; apparently dysfunctional elements which, far from being manifestations of disease are indicative of health.

Mulcaster identifies three main defects in English spelling, all three - too few, too many and too diverse letters echo those described by Hart - superfluity, deficiency and usurpation. Mulcaster, however, does not elaborate them into laws as does Hart. They are briefly illustrated, incorporated into the Generall rule and accounted for in the section on Prerogative. Therefore, while there is consensus as to certain defects, the enormity and importance attributed to them differs greatly. For Hart they become the cornerstone for his reform proposals, the scaffolding or framework around which he builds up his system. Mulcaster, on the other hand accounts for them under the blanket term Prerogative where they take on a positive value and are assigned a basic and irrefutable role in language development. Defects become virtues; and weaknesses, strengths when a functional view of writing as communication replaces that of writing as a mere shadow of sound. Hence, he casts doubts on, "these pretended infirmities in our tung, whose pysyking I like not this waie" (110) and can conclude that, "the remedie itself is more dangerous then the disease" (107). The discussion of the defects of the language demonstrates that Mulcaster uses Hart's treatise as a platform from which to launch his own alternative theory so he is indebted to his predecessors in a way similar to that in which Hart and Bullokar are but in opposition rather than agreement.

A similar process of inverting the established meanings of terms which were closely associated with his rivals can be detected in the use of the adjectives "perfect" and "absolute". The former is an epithet which Bullokar overworked to the point of exhaustion. It occurs three times in the title of chapter three in *Book at Large* (1581). For Bullokar perfection meant fixity, stability and complete phonemic identity by analogy with Latin. Mulcaster challenges the meaning of the word on linguistic terms and converts it, not into an ideal but into a synonym of

death. Using Latin as an example, he argues that perfection implies lack of change. Change, as history testifies is not only inevitable but also evolutionary in a living language. No change, no life. Claims to have created a perfect spelling system are therefore either spurious or paramount to having administered the kiss of death.

Moreover, Mulcaster was one of the few to realise that Latin had never been the fully phonemic language that it was claimed to have been. When Bullokar speaks about perfection he is calling into play absolute concepts with eternal validity. Mulcaster's approach is based on the relative and the circumstantial, not the perfect and the absolute. Bullokar's proud claims that, once the perfect orthography (that is, HIS version) were established it would be beyond the reaches of the fingers of change lie in stark contrast to Mulcaster's appropriately self-defeating admission that his own contribution to normalising spelling would inevitably fall into the lap of obsolescence.

A deliberate attempt is made to avoid the terminology used by the phonemicists. Mulcaster consistently uses the term "right writing" as opposed to "correct" or "true" writing. This had a double effect. In the first place it restates his belief that writing must be guided by relative not absolute values - right does not bear the connotations of absolutism that the other terms imply. Secondly the pun on right/write makes direct reference to Hart's theory of homophones which he refused to recognise in writing. Yet again, his avoidance of the term "voice" as synonym of "letter", consistently using the word "force" reinforces his refusal to equate letter with sound. Moreover, Mulcaster refers to words as if they were characters or personages in their own right, granting them a unique physical presence and character of their own. Thus, he can criticise the introduction of new letter forms in the following way: they, "bring us in new faces, of verie strange lineaments, how well favoured to behold, I am sure I know not" (106).

The gauntlet is thrown down to what had become the slogan of the phonemic reformers, Smith's dictum, "*ut pictura, orthographia*" - a statement which defined the philosophy and aims of the phonemic group: to write as one spoke, to have as many letters as there were sounds, on the basis that letters were mirrors or reflections of phonemes. Mulcaster will have none of this as he perceives the sound and grapheme systems as belonging to two different systems. Those who would describe writing as simply the visual depiction of sound mistake representation for presentation. The function of letters is not to duplicate sound but, pertaining to the realm of art, "the truth of writing lies in likeness, not life; artifice, not nature" (110). Writing is guided by a different set of rules as it is a system closed in itself, subject to convention and consensus, and with only a tenuous and primitive link with the natural sound system. The function of the pen is "not life but likeness" (110).

The fact that the reformers were elbowing and shoving each other in a race to prove which one was best equipped to advance the glory of the country is evident from the fact that all spelling reformers were careful to place themselves on the side of the country, the majority and the common good, although Mulcaster, unlike Hart and Bullokar stops short of enlisting God. He presents his refusal to simplify as a vote of confidence in the intellectual capacity of the nation and accuses the reformers of arrogance, and of speaking down from a podium of superiority to their countrymen, "He calleth his own credite into som question, which taketh his cuntrye to be blind" (112).

He imputes sinister motives to those who challenge custom, alleging that their aims reach much further than merely altering the spelling. He obliquely suggests that they are involved in a conspiracy to overthrow, not only the newly established religion but also the laws and policies of the state. To rewrite the language in which the state "hath set down hir relligion, hir lawes, hir privat and publik dealings" (108), was, given Mulcaster's belief in the primacy of writing, paramount to treason; a covert plot aimed at destabilisation and guilty of disrespect for ones' ancestors. He goes on to suggest that, lurking beneath an apparently innocent, civic and intellectual initiative there lay a more sinister and hostile motive, "But theie will saie that theie mean not anie so main a change" (109). His objections to a new system of writing reach into territory with appeals to issues of deeper consequence that those concerning the most obvious and well-worn arguments about publishing pragmatics and cost. He insinuates that the political implications of "replanting" would not be, as Hart had hoped, a force of cohesion in a divided state but its corollary. He it is who waves the banner of order, the loyal knight at arms who upholds the monarchy in the person of Elizabeth I. He recognised the bind in which Hart found himself. While advocating stability, his proposals actually undercut the stability of the state.

Adding insult to injury, the phonemic reformers are accused of seeking to advance their particular and personal ends rather than that of the common weal. It is overweening pride that gives them the audacity to challenge the institutions of the state with, "a new right of his own conceiving" (112). By accusing them of placing the private and personal above the common good, Mulcaster uses terms which was bandied about throughout the Tudor period, especially applied to the rising mercantile and artisan classes who were treated in the most disparaging terms by social commentators and self-appointed guardians of law and order. They were seen as social pariahs or as Mulcaster, whose contempt for their ambitious, profiteering was deep, said in somewhat more vehement terms, maggots on a dunghill. Linking the phonemic spellers with a universally despised social class whose hall-mark was a disregard for the common weal was intended to place upon them the mark of Cain. What Hart terms "publycke profit", Mulcaster interprets as "private conceit". The authority of the language with all its variations and versions is above any individual prerogative, To assert otherwise is to indirectly but effectively challenge the monarchy and its authority. The connection he attempts to establish between the two groups was designed to cast the phonemic reformers in the most unfavourable light possible.

Finally, while the phonemic reformers sold their wares on the basis of ease and speed in the acquisition of knowledge and reading skills, Mulcaster firmly defends the opposite standpoint. Reading is not easy; it requires effort and practice. Moreover, he implies that those who lower the level of the discourse to accommodate the less learned are doing an injustice both to the capabilities of human understanding and to the language - a double fratricide. As opposed to Hart's claim that the time needed to learn to read could be reduced by three quarters, Mulcaster stresses the fact that it is use and practice that must acquaint the learner with spelling practices, "Familiaritie & acquaintance will cause facilitie, both in matter and words" (281). The point he is making here is that reading itself has no inherent difficulty. It is the theme and how it is dealt with that occasion problems and this argument had particular relevance as English was branching out into new areas of knowledge.

The strategies used in the *Elementarie* to elevate the status of its author, denigrate those who adopted an alternative approach and launch another initiative are designed to avoid direct confrontation. As a reformer and a public figure, Mulcaster was conscious of putting his renown on the line, of placing himself under public scrutiny. He gambled not only his ego but also his future role in circles of power on the basis of the publication and reception of his work. Like his contemporaries, he entered the market place to peddle his wares as he himself expressly admits in *Positions*, his first work on educational reform. The sometimes unscrupulous sales strategies he adopted leave nothing to be envied by modern marketing practices. Praise and condemnation are ladled out with equanimity and cancel each other out, play on words not only condemns the phonemic reformers but his own use of language demonstrates the principle that underlies the literature of the period: spelling and writing must allow a certain freedom of movement. His strongest appeal, however, is to the religious, political and economic arenas within which the movement was situated, identifying, language and spelling as issues which cannot be cordoned off from the context in which they arise. Time, it must be conceded, has borne out the validity of his approach.

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