

Interpreting the Symbols and Abbreviations in Seventeenth Century English and American Documents

A BOARD FOR CERTIFICATION OF GENEALOGISTS SKILLBUILDING-TRACK LECTURE

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The genealogist's first encounter with documents written in the secretary hand, also known as Elizabethan Script, is often one of frustration. Medieval symbols used for combinations of certain letters, and the liberal use of unfamiliar abbreviations and contractions, are major impediments. My goal is to provide examples of 16th and 17th century handwriting and, in particular, examples of the many abbreviations and special symbols that so often cause readers trouble. Examples of the capitals and minuscules encountered in Elizabethan handwriting are shown in Figures 1 and 2, respectively.

SPELLING

Correct orthography in the 16th, 17th, and early 18th centuries was unknown. Until the late 18th century, there were no hard rules concerning the spelling of words, place-names, or surnames. Words were written phonetically, as a series of sounds, often influenced by dialect. It is not unusual to find words, including surnames, spelled in several different ways on the same page. Common words may appear anywhere in the text with a capitalized first letter, and punctuation is nonexistent or, at the least, unsystematic.

Examples of some 17th century spelling that differ from that accepted today are listed below. This list is not all-inclusive; it is, however, quite representative of words that one will encounter.

Addition of a terminal *e*: *soe* *soe* *doe* *doe* *owne* *owne* *newe* *newe*

Omission of a terminal *e*: *ar* *ar* *wer* *wer* *ther* *ther* *wher* *wher*

Doubling of consonants: *att* *att* *Itt* *Itt* *hadd* *hadd* *sett* *sett*

to my sonne *to my sonne* *Lordshipes* *Lordshipes*

Common vowel sounds: *yeares* *yeares* *yeeres* *yeeres* *yeres* *yeres*

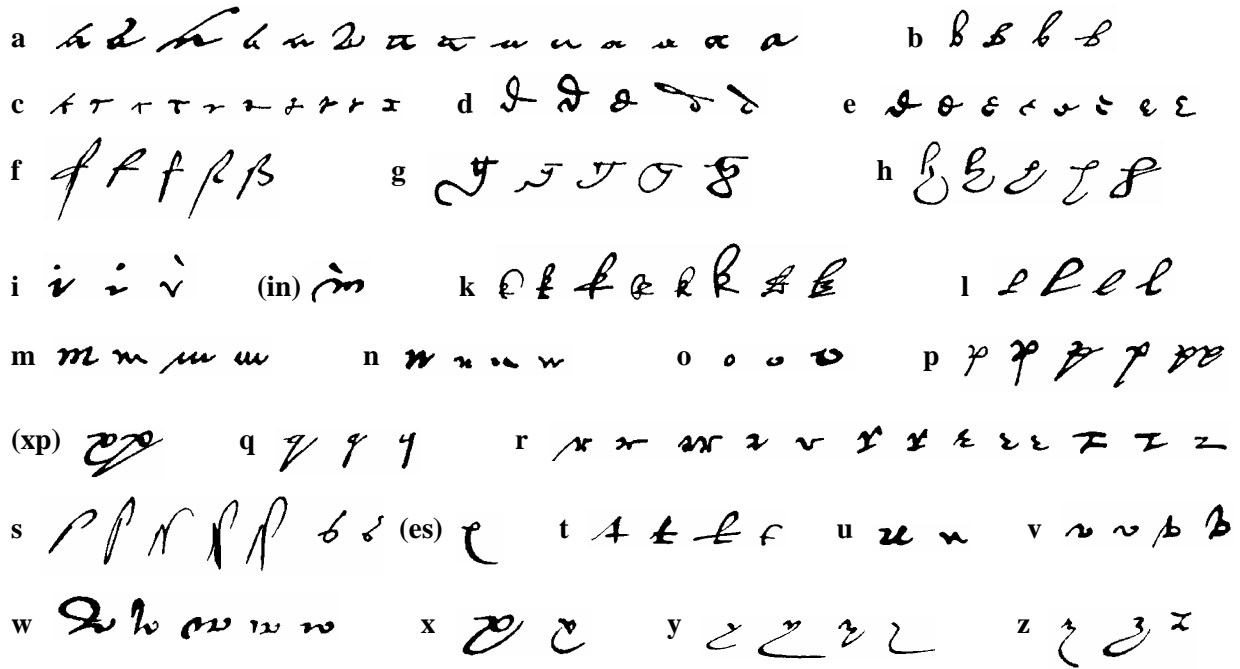
Interchange of *y* for *i*: *yt* *yt* *ys* *ys* *Dyd* *Dyd* *payd* *payd*

Interchange of *w* for *u*: *stoode* *Bownde* *stoods* *Bownde* *pownd* *pownd*

Figure 1: The Capitals*



Figure 2: The Minuscules



*Adapted from *An Introduction to Bibliography for Literary Students*, by R. B. McKerrow (Oxford, the Clarendon Press, 1928).

The letters *i* and *j*: In the Roman alphabet, *i* and *j* were two forms of the same letter, but in the 16th and 17th centuries, *i* was used instead of *j*, both initially and medially, either vowel or consonant. As a consonant, the letter was pronounced as we pronounce *j*, as in *jury*, but written *iury*. Examples are:

enjoy [enjoy] *iustly* [justly] *ioynt* [joynt]

The letter *j* does appear, however, in lower-case Roman numerals ending with one or more *i*'s:


xxxiiij[33] *viiij*[8] *lxxvij*[77]

The letters *u* and *v*: In the Roman alphabet, *u* and *v* were two forms of the same letter, but interchangeable either as consonant or vowel. Thus, we find *vnto* and *unto*, or *have* and *haue*. A convention arising in the 16th century preferred that *v* be used initially and *u* medially. Thus, we often find the spellings *vp*, *vniuste*, *vse*, *vnto*, *vnrael*, and *euery*, *gaue*, *haue*, *recouer*. Some examples are:

vse *vnto* *vnder* *haue* *foreuer* *Allso I giue vnto Anne*

CONTRACTIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

Probably the single most difficult aspect of reading old manuscripts is interpreting the many and various contractions and abbreviations that were used by scribes to save space and time. Generally, an abbreviated word is marked by an upward and backward stroke attached to the last letter written. Contraction was usually accomplished by using various symbols from Medieval Latin and by using superior letters, usually the terminal letter or letters of a word or syllable.

The *thorn*  is the Old English runic letter *þ*. It represents the *th* sound as in *the* *this* *that* and *their* and medially as in *ffather* and in *declare whyther*

The letter *y* often represents the *thorn* in *y^e* = the, *y^t* = that, and *y^s* = this; as above, however, note that *ye* = you, *yt* = it, and *ys* = is. *Y^e olde shoppe* is pronounced *The old shop*. Examples are:

that *the* *that the sayde Defend^t* *Leas of the mylles* *with the seale*

The *tittle*, a short, straight, wavy or looped line appearing over a letter or letters, generally indicates the omission of an *m* or *n*, or the contraction of *tion* to *con*. Examples are:

manner *Auncyacon* [annunciation] *committ* *Commonly* *Commyssyoners* *the somme*

In the last example, *some*, usually spelled *somme*, refers to a sum of money. Numerous examples can be found where a *tittle* has been placed over a single *n* or *m* where today's usage would require only a single *n* or *m*.

The medieval symbols *p*, *p* representing *per* or *par* and *pr*, *pr* representing *pro* appear initially as in *parishe* *p^rishe*, *p^rishe*, *p^rishe*, *p^rishe* *perfect* *p^rfect*
parcell *p^rocell* *parte* *p^rte*, *p^rte* *promised* *p^romised* *profit* *p^rofit*

and medially as in:

appertayne *appertayne* *Draper* *Draper* *departed* *departed* and both forms are present in *proper* *pp^r* *rightfully & properly* *rightfully* *pp^rly*

There exist numerous contractions for the letters *er*, *ir*, *or*, *ur*, and *re*. Examples are:

pre *p^r*, *p^r*, *p^r* *premisses* *p^rmisses*, *p^rmisses* *purchased* *p^rchased*
merchant *merchant* *merchant tailour* *merchant tailour* *mr parker* *m^r parker*
deli^{er}y [delivery] *deli^{er}y* *seu^{er}all* *seu^{er}all*, *seu^{er}all* *foreu^{er}* *foreu^{er}*
bequeath vnto eu^{er}y *bequeath vnto eu^{er}y* *of our* *of our* *Indenture* *Indenture*
ser or sir *ser* *I res^{er}ve vnto* *I res^{er}ve vnto* *Res^{er}uacon* *Res^{er}uacon*
[Reservation]

Other contractions often found include:

w^{ch} [which] *w^{ch}*, *w^{ch}* *wth [with]* *wth*, *wth* *wthin* *wthin*, *wthin*
Matie [Majesty] *Matie* and *e*, *e* etcetera *e*, *e* *weight* *wth*

In the following examples, the letter *e* in the preceding *the* has been dropped, and the *th* has been joined directly to the following word:

by thexecutors *by thexecutors* *thelder* *thelder*

Additional examples of Elizabethan handwriting may be found in the references below:

Giles E. Dawson and Laetitia Kennedy-Skipton, *Elizabethan Handwriting, 1500–1650* (W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., New York, 1966). An English edition was published by Faber and Faber, London, 1968.

Ronald A. Hill, "Interpreting the Symbols and Abbreviations in 16th and 17th Century English Documents," *Genealogical Journal*, Vol. 21, p. 1, published by the Utah Genealogical Association, Salt Lake City, 1993.