

**E. H. Gombrich, (& response by Humphrey Tonkin) Wooden 'O'
[Shakespeare, Henry V, Prologue, line 13], Times Literary Supplement -
Letters, 10 March, 2000. [Trapp no.2000E.1]**

Wooden O

Sir, I wonder if any of your readers can enlighten me as to whether I am right to suspect that Shakespeare wanted the Prologue of *Henry V* to describe the Globe as a “wooden *naught*”, rather than a “wooden *O*”? The upright oval on the page of the First Folio could, of course, be pronounced either way, but to my mind the suggested alternative would greatly enhance the appearance of that marvellous piece of rhetoric: the escalation from *unworthy scaffold* to *cockpit* to *wooden O*, leading cunningly to the metaphors of *figures* and *ciphers*:

*- But pardon, Gentles all:
The flat unrayed Spirits that hath dar'd,
On this unworthy Scaffold, to bring forth,
So great an Object. Can this Cock-Pit hold
Within this Woodden O, the very Caskes
That did affright the Ayre at Agincourt?
O pardon: Since a crooked Figure may
Attest in little place a Million,
And let us, Cyphers to this great Accompt,
On your imaginarie Forces worke.*

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Wooden O

Sir, - Ernst Gombrich's suggestion (Letters, March 10) that the “wooden O” of the Prologue to *Henry V* might in fact be a “wooden naught” requires no change in pronunciation. “Now thou art an O without a figure,” says the Fool in *King Lear*, Act I, scene iv, “I am better than thou art now: I am a fool, thou art nothing.” An O (not, of course, a O, which you would expect if it were a naught) with a figure, at least if the figure is in the right place, is ten (and more, if there are more Os). The letter O, pronounced as such, normally stood for zero in Shakespeare's day; the term “naught” began to take its place in this meaning in the course of the seventeenth century. That Shakespeare intended that the O be pronounced like the letter is reinforced by the quibble two lines later. “O pardon: Since a crooked Figure may / Attest in little place a million” In other words, grant pardon to the O, since a crooked (that is not straight, or bent) figure, when placed in a subordinate position to a straight (or upright) figure (the numeral 1) may signify a million. (“In little place” does double duty here, meaning both “in small compass” and “in subordinate position”.) Without the first O, the playful ambiguity of “O pardon” disappears. A “million”, by the way, is in Elizabethan parlance also a crowd, a host of people: says Hamlet to the Players (II, ii), “The play, I remember, pleased not the million.” We might also note the image at the beginning of the Prologue, where “the warlike Harry” assumes “the port of Mars”, shoulders back and spine straight, while “at his heels / Leash'd in like hounds) ... famine, sword and fire, / Crouch for employment”, like so many crooked figures following along behind their upright and martial leader.

Humphrey Tonkin

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