

Elizabethan English

One of the primary obstacles between Shakespeare's plays and modern audiences is his language. When he was writing, English was on the cusp of becoming Modern English and leaving Middle English behind. (You wouldn't recognize Old English, which started to morph into Middle English around 1066.) However, there are a few holdovers from Middle English still remaining. Because of two bodies of literature – Shakespeare's works and the King James Bible, newly translated in 1605 – this moment in English's development was captured in time, and is thus referred to as Elizabethan English, after Queen Elizabeth I. Why not Jacobean English, after King James I? I have no idea.

However, with practice, insight, and Mr. Shanley's awesome handouts, this obstacle can be minimized. Here are a few lessons.

The same, just shortened

Shakespeare uses a lot of contractions, especially to maintain iambic pentameter:

wi' = with I' = In o' = of
t' = to 't = it 'tis = it is 'twas = it was
e'en = even (sounds like *een*) e'er = ever (sounds like *air*) ne'er = never (sounds like *nair*)

Hey, you!

Fear not *thees* and *thous*! They both mean *you*, and they follow a pattern.

thou = you (subject) thee = you (object) ye = you (plural)
thy = your thine = yours

To compare this all to Modern English, use the handy chart below.

Subjective	Objective	Possessive (adj)	Possessive (pronoun)
I	me	my	mine
you	you	your	yours
she	her	her	hers
he	him	his	his
it	it	its	---
we	us	our	ours
you (all)*	you	your	yours
they	them	their	theirs
who	whom	whose	whose
thou	thee	thy	thine
ye	you	yours	yours

Shakespeare doesn't always use the pronouns in the last two lines; since Elizabethan English was changing, he sometimes used the modern ones instead.

* this is why *y'all* is so useful

Savest thou what?!

Verb conjugation also follows a pattern. It's just a little more complicated than English verb conjugation is now. Let's compare verb conjugations in Spanish, Modern English, and Elizabethan English.

Hablar			To Speak			To Speak	
Hablo	Hablamos		I speak	We speak		I speak	We speak
Hablas	(hablaís)		You speak	You speak		Thou speakest	Ye speak
Habla	Hablan		He/she/it speaks	They speak		He/she/it speaketh	They speak

Conjugating verbs in Modern English is relatively easy, mainly because we changed two of the conjugations. To conjugate in Elizabethan English,

2nd Person singular verb adds *-est*, (*you give* is *thou givest*)

3rd Person singular verb adds *-eth* (*she gives* is *she giveth*)

Here are some examples:

Elizabethan English

thou – art hast wilt canst dost hadst wouldst couldst shouldst didst
he— is hath will can doth had would could should did

Modern English

you – are have will can do
thou – speakest liest lovest thinkest
he— speaketh lieth loveth thinketh
you – speak lie love think

What do you think? What dost thou think? What thinkest thou?

The Royal “We” – a king or other royal leader will frequently refer to him/herself as “we” (“our sister, now our queen” “our sovereignty”), as if the king and the country are one and the same

Kings and other nobility are also sometimes referred to with the name of their country; in *Hamlet*, the uncle of Fortinbras, Norway’s king, is often called Old Norway.

Some characters, especially in the histories, are referred to with several names. Henry Bolingbroke is called Bolingbroke at first in *Richard II*; when his father, the Duke of Lancaster, dies, Henry inherits his father’s title and is sometimes called Lancaster. When he becomes king, he becomes Henry IV.

In families,

- the prefix *step-* and the suffix *-in-law* are often dropped
- cousin, aunt, uncle, nephew and niece can be used very broadly
- cousin can also be used with a friend or comrade

Shakespearean Vocabulary

'a = contraction of <i>have</i> or <i>he</i>	dote on = love dearly, often overdoing it (spoiling a child)
a' = at, in, to (sometimes by, on)	enmity = hate (like "enemy")
ado = commotion, trouble	ere = before
against = for, in preparation for	err = to make an error; to sin
alack = alas (exclamation of sorrow)	fain = gladly, willingly (or, forced or obliged)
an, and = if (sometimes)	fair = pale or light-colored; attractive
anon = soon, at once	feign = pretend, put on an emotion
apace = quickly	fie, fie on it = darn it, to heck with it
aught = anything	fool = can be a term of endearment or pity
ay, aye = yes (sounds like "eye")	forbear = stop, leave alone
bade = asked, commanded	forsooth = truthfully
base, baseness = low, animal-like, petty	forswear = swear falsely; renounce, deny
bastard = someone born out of wedlock	fortnight = two weeks (14 nights)
bawd = low person, pimp/prostitute	gage = challenge (throwing down the gauntlet)
bawdy = obscene, sexual, low class	gentle = (noun) honorable person, noble-born
befall = happen, turn out in the end	glass = mirror
beguile = to charm or deceive with charm	god-den = good evening (fr. "God give good evening")
bereft = deprived, robbed	go to! = "C'mon, get outta here..." or, "Screw you!"
beshrew me = shame on me, curse me	guile = charm in order to deceive; trickiness
betray = give away (his face doth betray his thoughts)	had as lief = I would rather
betrothed = engaged to marry, or the person one is engaged to	haply = perhaps, by chance
blood = passion (sometimes)	harbinger = precursor, foreshadowing
bodes = foreshadows, is an indicator of...	haste = hurry
bosom = heart	hence = away from here (place), after this (time)
brace = pair	hie = go (quickly; usually used as an order)
breast = chest, heart	his due = what's coming to him
but = only, except	hither = here
by and by = immediately, directly	hitherto = so far, to this extent
commend me to = give my regards to	ho! = a call to attention, usu. by someone with authority
corse = corpse	honest = truthful, loyal, trustworthy, faithful in marriage
crown = head	humour = mood, frame of mind
cuckold = (noun) a man whose wife cheated on him; often compared to an animal with horns (verb) when a woman cheats on her husband, she cuckolds him	issue = offspring, children
	it is (not) meet = it is (not) proper or expected
	it will serve = it will do, good enough
	iwis = truly, certainly
	kin, kinsman = relative, family member

knave = scoundrel, jerk (young male)
knavery = fooling around, trickery (what knaves would do), or foolish ornamentation
lest = unless, otherwise; in case of
liege, My liege = king, master, lord
like to (die) = likely (to die)
likeness = resemblance
look to = watch, keep an eye on, take care of it
love = can be romantic, family, friendship, or loyalty
maiden = a young girl, specifically a virgin
maidenhead = virginity (protect her maidenhead)
marry = indeed (literally, "by Mary")
mere, merely = absolute, completely
merry = happy, festive
nary = not a single one
naught = nothing
nay = no
office = job, responsibility
oft = often
ope = open
out, out upon = exclamation of frustration
owe = own
pate = head, especially the top
perdition = hell, by the fire of hell
pernicious = harmful, deceitful
presently = soon
prithce = I ask you, please (I pray thee)
prate = chatter, babble
prove = test, show to be true
purse = man's small bag for coins; a person's finances
quaffing = drinking alcohol in a "chugging" fashion
rude = not eloquent
sack = white wine, probably cheap
score = twenty (four score and seven equals 87)
several = separate, distinct
shrew = mean, scolding woman
shrive, shrift = confession (religious)
sirrah = man, sir; used when addressing someone under your authority (also, "oh, man!")
sith = since
soft! = exclamation of surprise
solemnity = peacefulness, respectability

solemnities = ritual celebrations (more formal than fun)
sooth = truth
sovereign = the leader who answers to nobody
sovereignty = independence, the leader's control, or a person's control over him/herself
steal (away) = sneak out, usually quickly; or, to hide
steward = one who fulfills an office which is rightfully the office of someone else who cannot do that job him/herself; often an uncle overseeing the realm for an underage king
sue = to make an appeal (that appeal is a suit)
suitor = a man who is hoping to marry a certain woman
thence = from there, from then on
thither = there
to the purpose = on topic, constructively, toward a goal
treble = triple
troth = truth, truly
by troth, by my troth = truthfully (or a vow)
tut = hmpfh
twain = two
undone = ruined
verily = truthfully, indeed
visage = face, appearance
virtue = can refer to a woman's virginity
want = need, lack, be without
wanton = childish, playful, undisciplined, sexually unrestrained (especially women)
wench = girl, young serving woman
whence = where, from where
wherefore = why (**not** "where")
whither = where, to where
withal = in addition, all together, with
woe = sadness
wont = used to, likely to
woo = date, flirt with, seduce, win over
wot = know, learn, be told
would that, I would = if only, I wish
wretch = miserable, despicable person
yon, yonder = over there
your part = your opinion, point of view, your sake
zounds, 'swounds = I swear (literally "by His wounds")

Shakespeare's Poetry and How to Read It

Shakespeare's language is weird because English has been constantly changing, especially at the time when he was writing; we were moving from middle English to modern English; he was also writing in poetic meter.

Iambic Pentameter

10 syllables a line in 5 feet, or iambs (one foot is two syllables or beats)

In each foot, the first syllable is not stressed, the second syllable is stressed

U ^	U ^	U ^	U ^	U ^
<u>But soft!</u>	<u>What light</u>	<u>through yon-</u>	<u>der win-</u>	<u>dow breaks?</u>
<i>foot</i>	<i>foot</i>	<i>foot</i>	<i>foot</i>	<i>foot</i>

The witches in *Macbeth* speak in the opposite rhythm, and their lines are shorter, with four feet instead of five. This is called trochaic tetrameter.

^ U	^ U	^ U	^ U
<u>Bubble,</u>	<u>bubble,</u>	<u>toil and</u>	<u>trouble!</u>
<i>foot</i>	<i>foot</i>	<i>foot</i>	<i>foot</i>

Then the witches will switch to iambic tetrameter (8 syllables in 4 feet), just for kicks.

Because this is poetry with a constant meter, this is called verse.

--used by higher class characters and in important moments

Prose is just regular writing, like in a paragraph

--used by lower-class characters, for humor, in idle conversation, and by cynical characters (like Mercutio and Iago)

Verse usually doesn't rhyme (blank verse).

One line is often split between two speakers, so the 2nd half starts in the middle of the page, away from the left margin.

This syllable pattern is why Shakespeare often put words in a weird order (i.e., talking backwards) and used words in new ways.

Sometimes words are skipped ("I'll to England").

If there's no punctuation at the end of the line, don't pause!

If there's an accent on the *-ed* at the end of the word, pronounce it as a syllable;

"Romeo is banishéd" is 7 syllables.

Pronunciation

Glocester = GLAHS-ter

Glocestershire = GLAHS-ter-sher

Worcester = WOOS-ter

Worcestershire = WOOS-ter-sher

Greenwich = GREN-ish (or GREN-ij)

Warwick = WAR-ik

Warwickshire = WAR-ik-sher

***the British rarely pronounce the suffix *-shire* as *SHIRE*