**Elizabethan English**

**The Obstacles**

* One of the biggest challenges when reading a Shakespeare play as a modern student is the language that he uses.
* During Shakespeare’s time English was changing. It was on the verge of becoming Modern English, and leaving behind Middle English.
* Old English, which started to become Middle English in 1066, would be unrecognizable to you.
* In Shakespeare’s work there are still some holdovers from Middle English. We get a good picture of what the language was like at the time from his work and also from the King James Bible, which was translated in 1605.
* This moment in the English language is called Elizabethan English after Elizabeth I.

**Remember!**

A lot of Shakespeare’s use of language was dictated by the way that he wrote. In his verse writing, he used Iambic Pentameter, which had a strict syllable count.

**The Same, Just Shorter…**

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 (said like een)
* E’er = ever (said like air)
* Ne’er = never (said like nair)

**Pronouns**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 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 |

**Just a Note**

* Sometimes Shakespeare wouldn’t just use the pronouns in the last two rows. Since the language was changing, he would sometimes use modern pronouns instead.

**Sayest Thou…What?**

* Verb conjugations follow a pattern. In Elizabethan English, it’s just slightly more complicated than it is in Modern English. 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 | (hablais) | You speak | You speak | Thou speakest | Ye speak |
| Habla | Hablan | He/she/it speaks | They speak | He/she/it speakest | They speak |

* Conjugating verbs in Modern English is pretty easy, because we changed two of the conjugations. To conjugate in Elizabethan English:
  + 2nd person singular verb adds –*est* (*you give* is t*hou givest*)
  + 3rd person singular verb adds –*eth* (*she gives* is *she giveth*)

**Some Examples**

Elizabethan English:

* Thou- art hast wilt canst dost hadst wouldst couldst shouldst didst
* He- art hath will can doth had would could should did

Modern English:

* You- are have will can do have would could should do
* Thou- epeakest liest lovest thinkest
* He- speaketh lieth loveth thinketh
* You- speak lie love think
* What do you think?
* What dost thou think?
* What thinkest thou?

**Royalty Makes Things Complicated**

* The Royal “We” – a king or other royal leader will frequently refer to themselves as “we” (“our sister, now our queen”, “our sovereignty), as if the king and 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