

## Shakespeare's English: an overview

Reading Shakespeare (or any other writer of his time) in the text is famously difficult, many would even say off-putting, to the point that Spark Notes has a “No Fear Shakespeare” collection providing native Anglophone pupils with a modern translation of the major plays. But it does not have to be a student's worst nightmare: understanding Elizabethan English is actually not that difficult, and is really something one can get used to, if only one is ready to practice a bit. What is more, it is arguably easier for us French natives than it is for someone whose mother tongue is English. With a few tools and bearings, and an open mind, one can, not so uneasily, make sense of the Bard's words.

Possibly the first thing one has to bear in mind when tackling Shakespeare is that one is dealing with **poetic language**. A large proportion of the plays, and obviously the Sonnets and narrative poems, are written in verse (iambic pentameter for the most part); even in the prose passages, Shakespeare made use of the poetic function of language, if only because he was writing literature. Furthermore, he was writing during the **late Renaissance / early Baroque** period, when exuberance, grandiose conceits and elaborate devices were artistic requirements. Parts of the difficulties in reading Shakespeare are thus due to his writing style rather than to his language *per se*, which can be worth remembering, as being able to tell where a difficulty originates is sometimes the first step towards solving it.



Some reactions to trying to read Shakespeare in the original for the first time

(Lady Macbeth by Fuseli (1784); Laurence Olivier in his 1948 *Hamlet*; Lily Brayton as Ophelia in 1905; Macbeth in Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, 1901)

### Philological obstacles

In some cases, the text which features in an early edition (a Quarto or a Folio) of a given play is faulty: a typesetter made a mistake, and the published text makes little or no sense. Although this can not be attributed to Shakespeare's language directly, it can, especially with those plays for which we have only one edition, make it difficult to understand a specific passage. Such *crucis* are usually amended in modern editions; but the editor normally tries to change as little of the original text as possible, and it can account for some particularly tricky passages.

### Morphological features

The language that was spoken and written in England in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, called Early Modern English, had many forms that are now archaic.

Shakespeare made frequent use of the **second person singular** forms to express both familiarity and intimacy, or a character addressing a social inferior, with a possible hint of aggressiveness (just like French *tutoiement*). In some instances, the characters' switching from it to the modern *you* is meaningful; in other cases, perhaps less so: these forms were gradually disappearing then, and Shakespeare's usage is not entirely consistent. The forms were *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, *thine*, *thyself*. Note that the **possessive adjectives** *my* and *thy* frequently appear as *mine* and *thine* before a vowel: *mine eyes*, *thine enemy*.

The distinction between the simple and **reflexive forms** of personal pronouns was not as rigid as it is in modern English (especially in verse, for metrical reasons); pronouns also appear where they would be absent in modern usage, sometimes in cases where they can be compared to the **ethic dative** found in Latin. See “[He] laid him down and basked him in the sun” (*AYL* 2.7), “Her wits I fear me are not firm” (*Measure* 5.1), or “dismantle you” (= “take off your clothes”, *WT* 4.4). In terms of **grammatical genders**, the difference between masculine and neutral pronouns was not firmly established, as this example from *Jul.Caes.* 5.3 shows: “my life is run his compass”.

**Verbal morphology** was also evolving, and archaic second- and third-person endings can be found: *thou dost, thou canst, thou didst, thou wilt...*; *he doth, she hath*. Again, this is not systematic, all the more so as editors sometimes modernize those forms. Some specific verbs also have archaic preterite forms, e.g. *spake* (modern *spoke*) or *durst* (*dared*).

Such a line as “Which are as easy broke as they make forms” (*Measure* 2.4, about mirrors) shows two cases of “confusion”: between preterite and past participle on the one hand (*broke* for *broken*), and between adjective and adverb on the other hand (*easy* for *easily*)<sup>1</sup>. Generally speaking, Shakespeare’s English was characterised by a greater **fluidity of grammatical categories** than is possible today (this is part of his famed linguistic inventiveness, and can be said to be stylistic and idiosyncratic as much as a feature of the language of his time). Such phrases as “he outherods Herod” (*Hamlet*), “The lady fathers herself” (*MAAN*), “cast thy nighted colour off” (*Hamlet*), “You must take some pains to work her to your manage” (*Pericles*), “It beggared all description” (*A&C*) or “What cracker is this same that deafs our ears” (*King John*) are examples of it.

## Syntactic features

Early Modern English in general enjoyed **great syntactic freedom**; even more so when it was in verse. One simply has to put the words “back” in the “normal” order to uncover familiar English in these lines: “Uncleanly scruples fear not you” (*King John*); “And from her womb children of divers kind / We sucking on her natural bosom find” (*R&J* 2.3). This includes **dangling participles**, as in *MAAN* 4.1: “What we have we prize not to the worth / Whiles we enjoy it, but being lacked and lost, / Why then we *etc.*” One frequent case of such freedom is subject and verb **agreeing according to meaning** rather than to grammar (*accord par syllepse*), as in “All my pains is sorted to no proof” (*Taming*) or “Where both fire and food is ready” (*Lear* 3.4). Another instance is that the **relative pronoun** *that* could sometimes be omitted: “I have words to speak in thine ear will make thee dumb” (*Hamlet*).

Contrary to what modern rules dictate, **the auxiliary do** was not necessary in interrogative and negative clauses, while it could be used in assertions without implying particular emphasis (perhaps mainly for metrical reasons): “you demi-puppets that / By moonshine do the green sour ringlets make, / Whereof the ewe not bites” (*Tempest* 5.1); “Why seeks thou me?” (*MND* 3.2). This can be particularly confusing when *do* is used as a verb, as in “What dost thou with thy best apparel on?” (*Jul. Caes.* 1.1). Furthermore, questions without a subject can be found: “Wilt break my heart?” (= “Do you wish to break...”, *Lear* 3.4). For **perfect forms**, *have* was not the exclusive auxiliary as it is now: see for example *Jul. Caes.* 4.3 “The deep of night is crept upon our talk”, or 5.3 (quoted above) “is run”.

For expressive purposes, Early Modern English allowed the use of **double or triple negatives**: “love no man in good earnest, nor no further in sport neither” (*AYL* 1.2); and **double comparatives**: “My love’s / More richer than my tongue” (*Lear* 1.1).

Finally, one major feature of that language was the widespread use of the **subjunctive**: it is liable to appear in any subordinate clause expressing even the merest shadow of uncertainty, of something non-real<sup>2</sup>. See for example *Hamlet* 1.3 “If she unmask her beauty to the moon”; or *MND* 5.1 “Give me your hands, if we be friends”.

## Lexical features

Unsurprisingly, English vocabulary has changed considerably since the late 16th century. One consequence is that when reading Shakespeare, **dictionaries cannot be trusted**—unless they are specialized ones, or the complete *OED*. The bright side is that most of those **archaic terms** are of Latin or French origin; see for instance “a most festinate preparation” (*Lear* 3.7) or Jacques’s famous “Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything” in *AYL* 2.7. That is why we French speakers actually have a head start!

A few frequent cases are nonetheless worth mentioning. Many **conjunctions** were supplemented with *that* (*when that, if that, since that* = *when, if, since*, etc.); *an* or *an if* means *if*; *ere* means *before*. The **prepositions** *on* and *of* were not clearly distinguished: “We are such stuff / As dreams are made on” (*Tempest* 4.1); “This fellow has banished two on’s [= of his] daughters” (*Lear*). (*I*) *prithiee* is *please*; *methinks* and *methought* are *I think that* and *I thought that* respectively.

## Resources

You will find links to many pages dedicated to Early Modern English, including online versions of specialized dictionaries and glossaries, here: <http://www.bardweb.net/language.html>.

If you want to practise understanding Shakespeare and have fun as well, you can try playing “Shakespeare in plain English” quizzes here: <http://www.sporcle.com/games/tags/inplain>.

<sup>1</sup> Although considered non-standard, both can still be found today in certain dialects of English.

<sup>2</sup> Arguably, in any subordinate clause, whatever it expresses.