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 thee and thou! 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.

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

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
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.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hablar</th>
<th>To Speak</th>
<th>To Speak</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hablo</td>
<td>I speak</td>
<td>We speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hablas</td>
<td>You speak</td>
<td>Thou speakest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habla</td>
<td>He/she/it speaks</td>
<td>He/she/it speaketh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hablamos</td>
<td>We speak</td>
<td>Ye speak</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>thou –</th>
<th>art</th>
<th>hast</th>
<th>wilt</th>
<th>canst</th>
<th>dost</th>
<th>hastest</th>
<th>wouldst</th>
<th>couldst</th>
<th>shouldst</th>
<th>didst</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>he—</td>
<td>is</td>
<td>hath</td>
<td>will</td>
<td>can</td>
<td>doth</td>
<td>had</td>
<td>would</td>
<td>could</td>
<td>should</td>
<td>did</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Modern English**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>you –</th>
<th>are</th>
<th>have</th>
<th>will</th>
<th>can</th>
<th>do</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>thou –</td>
<td>speakest</td>
<td>liest</td>
<td>lovest</td>
<td>thinkest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he—</td>
<td>speaketh</td>
<td>lieth</td>
<td>loveth</td>
<td>thinketh</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you –</td>
<td>speak</td>
<td>lie</td>
<td>love</td>
<td>think</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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 have or he

a’ = at, in, to (sometimes by, on)

ado = commotion, trouble

against = for, in preparation for

alack = alas (exclamation of sorrow)

an, and = if (sometimes)

anon = soon, at once

apace = quickly

aught = anything

ay, aye = yes (sounds like “eye”)

bade = asked, commanded

base, baseness = low, animal-like, petty

bastard = someone born out of wedlock

bawd = low person, pimp/prostitute

bawdy = obscene, sexual, low class

befall = happen, turn out in the end

beguile = to charm or deceive with charm

bereft = deprived, robbed

beshrew me = shame on me, curse me

betray = give away (his face doth betray his thoughts)

betrothed = engaged to marry, or the person one is engaged to

blood = passion (sometimes)

bodes = foreshadows, is an indicator of…

bosom = heart

brace = pair

breast = chest, heart

but = only, except

by and by = immediately, directly

commend me to = give my regards to

corse = corpse

crown = head

cuckold = (noun) a man whose wife cheated on him;

(verb) when a woman cheats on her husband, she cuckold his

dote on = love dearly, often overdoing it (spoiling a child)

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enmity = hate (like “enemy”)

ere = before

err = to make an error; to sin

fain = gladly, willingly (or, forced or obliged)

fair = pale or light-colored; attractive

feign = pretend, put on an emotion

fie, fie on it = darn it, to heck with it

fool = can be a term of endearment or pity

forbear = stop, leave alone

forsooth = truthfully

forswear = swear falsely; renounce, deny

fortnight = two weeks (14 nights)

gage = challenge (throwing down the gauntlet)

gentle = (noun) honorable person, noble-born

glass = mirror

god-den = good evening (fr. “God give good evening”)
go to! = “C’mon, get outta here…” or, “Screw you!”

guile = charm in order to deceive; trickiness

had as lief = I would rather

haply = perhaps, by chance

harbinger = precursor, foreshadowing

haste = hurry

hence = away from here (place), after this (time)

hie = go (quickly; usually used as an order)

his due = what’s coming to him

hither = here

hitherto = so far, to this extent

ho! = a call to attention, usu. by someone with authority

honest = truthful, loyal, trustworthy, faithful in marriage

humour = mood, frame of mind

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
prithee = 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 = hmph
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

```
But soft!         What light through yon-der win-dow brea-
foot          foot          foot
```

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.

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Bubble,         bubble, toil and trouble!
foot          foot          foot          foot
```

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.

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**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***