

Reading Shakespeare's Plays: Understanding Elizabethan English

Unusual Word Arrangements

Many students wonder if people really spoke the way they do in Shakespeare's plays. The answer is no. Shakespeare wrote the way he did for poetic and dramatic purposes. There are many reasons why he did this—to create a specific poetic rhythm, to emphasize a certain word, to give a character a specific speech pattern, and so forth. Take a look at a great example from Robinson's *Unlocking Shakespeare's Language*:

I ate the sandwich.
I the sandwich ate.
Ate the sandwich I.
Ate I the sandwich.
The sandwich I ate.
The sandwich ate I.

Robinson shows us that these four words can create six unique sentences, which carry the same meaning.

When you are reading Shakespeare's plays, look for this type of unusual word arrangement. Locate the subject, verb, and object of the sentence. Notice that the object of the sentence is often placed at the beginning (the sandwich) in front of the verb (ate) and subject (I). Rearrange the words in the order that makes the most sense to you (I ate the sandwich). This will be one of your first steps in making sense of Shakespeare's language.

Language Omissions

Again, for the sake of his poetry, Shakespeare often left out letters, syllables, and whole words. These omissions are not that much different from the way we speak today.

For instance, we say:

"Been to class yet?"
"No. Heard Coker's givin' a test."
"Wha'sup wi'that?"

We leave out words and parts of words to speed up our speech. If we were talking in complete sentences, we would say:

"Have you been to class yet?"
"No, I have not been to class. I heard that Mrs. Coker is giving a test today."
"What is up with that?"

A few examples of Shakespearean omissions, also called *contractions*, follow:

'tis ~ it is
ope' ~ open
o'er ~ over
gi' ~ give
ne'er ~ never
i' ~ in
e'er ~ ever
oft' ~ often
a' ~ he
e'en ~ even



Unusual Words

Most of us run into problems when we come across archaic words that are no longer used in Modern English. Or worse, when we run across words that are still used today but have much different meanings than when Shakespeare used (or invented) the words. This is particularly troublesome, because we think we know what the word means, but the line still does not make sense. For instance, when Juliet says, "Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?" she is not asking *where* he is; she is asking *why* is he Romeo. In other words, of all the people I could have fallen in love with, why do you have to be a Montague, the son of my father's enemy?

While running across unknown words can be frustrating, it is not surprising. After all, Shakespeare's vocabulary included 30,000 words! Today, our vocabularies run between only 6,000 and 15,000 words. Because Shakespeare loved to play with words, he also created new words that we still use today.

Some Basic Words

an - if

anon - now; at once; soon; shortly

beseech - implore; beg; ask; importune

durst - dared; had the courage to

fain - ready; willing; eager

marry - the meaning and force are similar to those of the word *well*

morrow - morning

prithee - please; I pray thee

fellow - mister (the word is used disrespectfully/mockingly)

truth - fact

thee, thou =

sirrah = fellow; mister. The word is used disrespectfully/mockingly.

sooth - truth; fact

thee, thou - you

thine - yours

thy - your

thyself - yourself

wherefore - why

withal - in addition; notwithstanding; besides

zounds - expression of surprise, anger, amazement, disappointment. The word is a corruption of "by His wounds" (meaning the wounds of Christ). The word came about after people began pronouncing "by His wounds" quickly so that it sounded like a single word--zounds.

Resources

Glossary of Archaisms

Old Words That Occur Frequently in Shakespeare

www.cummingsstudyguides.net/xArchaisms.html*

For help with specific words, look them up at:

Shakespeare's Grammar—Glossary Search

www.bardweb.net/grammar/04gloss.html*

And just for fun...

Ye Olde Official Shakespearean Insult Kit

www.petelevin.com/shakespeare.htm*



Shakespeare