

Early Modern English: Reading Shakespeare

When reading Shakespeare for the first time, it may seem like he’s writing in a completely different language, despite being one of the most well-known writers in English. This is because English, as a living language, has organically evolved throughout the centuries as words and phrases change or go out of style. A common misconception is that Shakespeare wrote in “Old English,” but while his version of English is certainly old, it’s not THE Old English, spoken roughly between the 5th and 11th centuries. An example is shown below.

Old English Example (from Beowulf)

Hwæt. We Gardena in geardagum,
þeodcýninga, þrym gefrunon,
hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon.
Oft Scyld Scefing sceaþena þreatum,
monegum mægþum, meodosetla ofteah,
egsode eorlas.

It’s pretty different! We don’t even know for sure what the first word, “Hwæt,” means. While Shakespeare can be tough to sift through, it’s definitely more readable than Old English. Shakespeare wrote in what is called “Early Modern English” (EME), which was spoken from roughly the 16th to the 18th century. This guide will cover some of the quirks of EME and provide a few tips to help you better understand Shakespearean and other EME texts.

Quirks of Early Modern English

To help you better understand EME, let’s dive into some of the ways it is different from modern everyday speech.

Vocabulary Changes

EME is filled with archaic words and inconsistent spelling. English, a language with many influences—including Latin, German, and French—has undergone significant changes over time. Some words have been forgotten in everyday speech (see below) but still exist in older texts.

Examples of Dead Words in Shakespearean Texts

beseech, meaning to beg or request
hie, meaning to hurry
anon, meaning soon or in a moment
knave, meaning an untrustworthy person
verily, meaning truly

There is no way to memorize every word that has ever been, so you are encouraged to look up any word that you may not know in an online dictionary. Try replacing that word with a modern equivalent in your head and see if you can find the meaning in the rest of the line.

Pronouns and Verb Conjugations

When reading Shakespeare or other EME texts, you may find “thou” or “thy” and wonder what these words are that appear over and over. This is the “familiar you” pronoun; it has the same meaning as the word “you,” but you would use it for your close family, dear friends, or romantic partner, which is why it appears in Shakespeare so much. Modern English has since eliminated the “familiar you” pronoun; however, speakers of Spanish and French may still be familiar with this concept.

Thou: (subject case) - similar to the word “you,” but if it’s the subject or start of the sentence.

Ex: **Thou** liketh video games.

Thee: (object case) - similar to the word “you,” but if it’s the object or end of the sentence.

Ex: He walks with **thee**.

Thy: (possessive) - similar to “your,” showing ownership of something.

Ex: **Thy** Starbucks latte.

Thine: (possessive) - also “your”; however, only used if it appears before a word that starts with a vowel. Similar to the way we use “a” and “an” for “a book” vs. “an apple.”

Ex: Honey, where is **thine** iPhone?

Some verb conjugations have changed over the years as well; some are attached to the now-nonexistent informal you, but others fell out of fashion as English modernized. Examples include “thou dost” (you do), “thou art” (you are), “he doth” (he does), and “she hath” (she has).

Syntax and Word Order

EME has a more flexible word order than Modern English, so readers familiar with modern conventions may find it challenging to piece together what goes with what.

Shakespeare especially uses inversions and poetic constructions. (e.g., “Does he go to school?” could be written, “Goes he to school?”)

One thing to keep in mind is the omission of the word “do.” The word “do” is very common in Modern English, especially in questions or negatives, but it does not appear in EME.

“Did you see him?” or “I do not have...”

VS.

“Saw you him?” or “I have not...”

Tips for Reading Early Modern English Texts

The best way to become more comfortable reading EME is to try saying the phrase or sentence the way you would say it today. When you find a line that confuses you, stop and ask yourself: What is this phrase saying in current English? Often, EME texts that we read in school are poetry, so even with old words and word order, they are written in a way that sounds poetic (with the author prioritizing poetry over clarity). You don't need to translate every word literally—just try to get the idea. This step helps you follow the story and makes the language feel more natural.

Example from Romeo and Juliet

Original Line: “What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.”

In your own words: “What’s that light in the window? It’s Juliet. She’s as bright as the sun.”

Try your best to look for the words you recognize as context clues, and paraphrase the words in between. Take a look at the footnotes and glossaries that are included in the book you are reading.

Use annotations and dictionaries as well. Highlight or underline words or phrases that confuse you and try to find their definitions later. The best thing about many of these older texts is that so many people have written about them over the years, so there are hundreds of online resources to help your understanding. [No Fear Shakespeare](#) provides a modern English translation side-by-side with the original Shakespeare. [The Folger Shakespeare Library](#) features free digital versions of Shakespeare’s plays. Databases like [Lexicons of Early Modern English](#) (LEME) and the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) (OED) provide definitions for archaic words and phrases. Remember, these resources are meant to help you, not replace reading the text.

Especially for Shakespeare, part of the fun is reading the plays aloud since they were meant to be performed. If you are in a Shakespeare course, consider doing your reading assignments with fellow peers, playing different characters, and using the opportunity to help one another interpret the text as a group.

Activity

Using your knowledge of EME conventions and tips, try to translate a few phrases written in EME. Feel free to look up words you may not know. Be creative with your translations, as this is for your understanding.

1. “Verily, 'tis the mid of the week, mine fellows.”
2. “Behold yon multitude of fowls!”
3. “Labour upon the road? Marry, I most heartily hope it continueth.”

4. “Away with thee!” or “Hence!”
5. “Thou hast nigh caused me to let fall mine pastry!”
6. “Wherefore dost thou ever speak falsehoods?”
7. “I do entreat thee yet again for thine aid in coin.”
8. “Prithee, what manner of footwear be these?!”
9. “’Tis land most freely given.”

Answer Key for Activity

1. “It is Wednesday, my dudes.”
2. “Look at all those chickens!”
3. “Road work ahead? Uh, yeah, I sure hope it continues.”
4. “Yeet!”
5. “You almost made me drop my croissant!”
6. “Why are you always lying?”
7. “I am once again asking for your financial support.”
8. “What are those [shoes]?!”
9. “It’s free real estate.”

References

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