

UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

Students often complain about the difficulty in understanding Shakespeare's language. Listed below are some of the common problems of his 16th-century language - that is his grammar and usage.

Archaic words or words not quite our own:

1. Second person pronouns: thou, thy, thine, ye

2. Verb inflection:

second person thou + a-t, -st, or -est = thou art, thou seemest; may be contracted: thou seem'st

third person he, she, it + add -eth = he knoweth

3. Words common to Shakespeare, but not to us: some examples such as

anon = soon

bespew= curse

bootless = without result

cousin= any relative or close friend; monarchs often refer to each other as

cousin, whether related or not and whether friends or not

cuckold= a man whose wife is unfaithful; the butt of many Elizabethan jokes,

often referred to as wearing horns, the traditional sign of the

cuckold. References to the cuckoo, a bird that lays its eggs in the nests of

other birds, also point to the cuckold.

fain= gladly

forsooth= truly, used for emphasis

forswear=renounce or perjure

hap=perhaps, sometimes written as haply

hence=away from here; also later

marry=a mild oath using a corrupted spelling of "Mary"; indeed

mistress=any woman, often the female head of the household, or the object of a man's affection; seldom used in the modern sense of a woman engaged in an affair

tarry=wait

thence=away from there

wherefore=why

Unusual word order or syntax -Normal sentence order is often inverted to make rhythms work out correctly or to emphasize the verb or object.

Unscramble the syntax by rephrasing the clause or sentence in the normal S-V-O order.

Two examples:

"Let's do't, I pray; and I this morning know

"Where we shall find him most conveniently." Hamlet, Act 1, scene 1

"For this relief much thanks: 'tis bitter cold,

And I am sick at heart." Hamlet, Act 1, scene 1

Omissions or what we might call contractions: For the sake of his verse, Shakespeare often left out letters, syllables, and whole words. These types of omissions are very common in today's speech.

A few examples of Shakespearean omissions/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

Word play or puns:

1. Puns - play on words that sound alike or that have multiple meanings.
2. Double entendres- double meanings, one of which is usually sexual.
3. Malapropisms - using the wrong word; generally reveals ignorance or lack of education, as in the lower classes; Bottom frequently employs the wrong word to humorous effect.
4. Scatological, anatomical, or "dirty" jokes - about bodily functions (farts), about body parts, especially reproductive anatomy, or about sex; mild by today's standards!