The Basics: Shakespeare's Words

A primer to reading and comprehension

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Below is a resource for teachers and students alike which introduces some of the non-contemporary uses of language that you'll find in Shakespeare's plays. Knowing what you'll encounter along the way can improve your ability to navigate and interpret the text!

Verb Tenses: Contraction, Expansion & Elision

Since Shakespeare was writing in verse and rhythm, he took liberties with word length. Here are some word forms that were common in Shakespeare's day, and that you're guaranteed to come across:

Contraction is when a two-syllable word ("over"; "even") gets condensed to one syllable ("o'er"; "e'en").

Elision is like contraction on steroids: two full words that get smushed together into one word and syllable: "On it" becomes "on't"; "It is" becomes "'Tis".

(Today, contraction and elision remains in words like *don't [do not], can't [cannot],* etc.)

Expansion is just the opposite: a word gets stretched, and an extra syllable gets added at the end. You'll know expansion by its trademark: an accent mark over the final syllable.

Banishèd (normally pronounced BA-NISHD; now BA-NI-SHED)
Deliverèd (normally DEE-LI-VRD; now DEE-LI-VU-RED)

Other words you might come across

In addition to contracted, elided and expanded words, here's a brief list of words common in Shakespeare's day to become familiar with, along with typical pronunciations:*

Adieu = "goodbye"	*uh-DYOO*
Ay / Aye = "yes" / word of agreement	*rhymes with 'eye'*
Doth = "does", as in "she doth protest"	*same vowel sound as 'cup'*
E'en = "even"	*one syllable – "eeyun"*
Ere ("before in time / when in time")	*rhymes with 'hair'*
Err ("to mistake")	*same vowel sound as "bird"*
Liege ("lord, sovereign"	*rhymes with 'siege'*
Ne'er ("never")	*rhymes with 'hair'*
Sirrah ("sir)	*SEAR-uh*
Troth = ("truly")	*rhymes with 'oath'*
Trow = ("swear")	*rhymes with 'know'*

Other pronunciations –

Amen (ahhh-MEN)	*Our (like "hour")*
Either/neither (EYE-thur, not EE-thur)	*Poor (POO-er, one syllable; not like "pour")*
I'll (as in "aisle")	*Your (YORE, not 'yer'*
Leisure (LEH-zur, not LEE-zur)	

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Pronoun & Verb Forms

- *[You – your – yours]* often becomes *[thou – thee – thy – thine]*
- The endings [*-est, -'st or -st*] often gets added in second person familiar ("you go" becomes "thou goest")
- The ending [*-s*] often gets replaced with **[-th]** in third person singular ("she goes" becomes "she goeth")
- The articles **[a, an, and the]** also often get dropped.
- And there are the odd verb forms:

SOME IRREGULAR VERBS							
Present:	you	are	have	will	can	shall	do
Present:	thou	art	hast	wilt	canst	shalt	dost
Past:	thou	wast	hadst	wouldst	couldst	shouldst	didst

So….

You are wonderful	*becomes*	Thou art wonderful
You were the most wonderful		Thou wast most wonderful
Give me your hand		Give me thy hand
You all should return home		Thou shouldst return home
My love was yours, and yours alone		My love wast thine, and thine alone
I give them all to you		I give them all to thee

"Words, words, words"

When Shakespeare couldn't find the right word for what he wanted to express, he just made it up! As a result, his plays included many words that had never been recorded in writing before (though many may have been in the vernacular). We believe he coined many of the words and phrases we use today, including:

accessible	downstairs	indirection
accommodation	to educate	indistinguishable
admirable	embrace (as a noun – 'a hug')	invitation
amazement	employer & employment	lackluster
anchovy	engagement	lament
arch-villain	epileptic	to lapse
assassination	eventful	laughable
barber	exposure	love letter
baseless	eyeball	madcap
bubble	farmhouse	majestic
to cater (as "to bring food")	fashionable	manager
catlike	fortune-teller	marriage bed
to champion	full-grown	misquote
circumstantial	to grovel	money's worth
clutch	half-blooded	monumental
cold-blooded	hint (as a noun)	moonbeam
coldhearted	hostile	motionless
colourful	hot-blooded	muddy
to comply	to humor	to negotiate
courtship	to hurry	never-ending
critical	ill-tempered	noiseless
day's work	impartial	to operate
to dishearten	to impeded	outbreak
to dislocate	inaudible	

Scholar James Shapiro describes Shakespeare's process as chemistry: he would smash two existing words together to make a brand new one ("eyeball"; "bedroom"). His tendency to expand a word or smush two words together to fit the poetic meter, as discussed above, was also part of his invention. He was messing with the English language in a way that none of his contemporaries were doing.

Listen to James Shapiro on NPR's Radiolab (22 minutes into the program):

http://www.radiolab.org/story/91728-words-that-change-the-world/

Exercise:	*Invent a word that doesn't exist – but should – to describe something about your current day-to-day experience.*

References: Shakespeare often references some or all of the following, so be prepared to reference them:

Greek & Roman mythology / Ovid's *Metamorphoses*

The story of the Trojan War / Homer's *Iliad* & Virgil's *Aeneid*

The workings of the natural world – plants, trees, birds

Body humors (considered scientific fact at the time)

Music of the Spheres and the Great Chain of Being

Word Order

A mark of Shakespeare's artistry was his manipulation of word order. It's new for us, reading it; and, in ways, it was also new for his time. It was part of his innovation: that the English language of poetry didn't have to follow the rules everybody thought/said it did.

Manipulating word order served two main purposes:

- It allowed the structure of his plays to mirror the structure of Latin grammar, which was the popular thing to do at the time.

- It allowed him to fit the structure of metrical rhythm, while still saying what he wanted to say.

From Wikipedia's [entry on Word Order](#):

> In Latin, the endings of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and pronouns allow for extremely flexible order in most situations. Latin lacks articles (a/an/the).
>
> The Subject, Verb, and Object can come in any order in a Latin sentence, although most often the verb comes last.[28] Factors such as topic and focus play a large part in determining the order. Thus the following sentences each answer a different question:[29]
>
> - "Romulus Romam condidit." ["Romulus founded Rome"] (What did Romulus do?)
> - "Hanc urbem condidit Romulus." ["Romulus founded this city"] (Who founded this city?)
> - "Condidit Romam Romulus." ["Romulus founded Rome"] (What happened?)
>
> In Classical Latin poetry, lyricists followed word order very loosely to achieve a desired [scansion](#).

So:

"I saw your son walking early this morning"	*becomes*	"So early walking did I see your son."
"He's been seen there many mornings"	*becomes*	"Many a morning hath he there been seen."
"Do you mean the king?"	*becomes*	"Mean you his majesty?"
"Are you riding this afternoon?"	*becomes*	"Ride you this afternoon?"

Exercise:

Describe an event from your day yesterday, intentionally inverting word order for dramatic/linguistic effect.

Exercise: *Tell a friend how much you appreciate them, using thee/thy/thine.*

Exercise: *Find all the unfamiliar language in your text. Make notations in your text as necessary to make it 'familiar.'*