THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY—the "OED"

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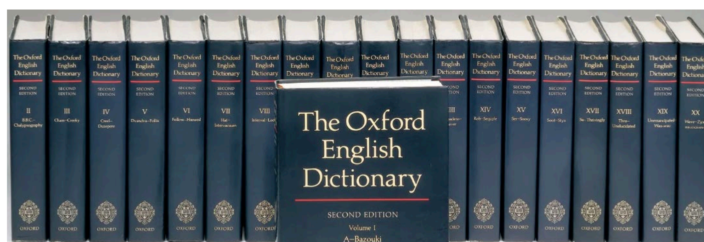
The Oxford English Dictionary is an invaluable resource when reading Shakespeare. What follows is a brief introduction, in five parts, to how the OED can enrich your understanding of works written more than 400 years ago by a poet-playwright with a famously large vocabulary.

1. Access to the OED in Print and Online
2. Information in the OED: What information is in the OED that is not in other dictionaries?
3. On Etymology: What is a word's etymology and how might it be of interest?
4. On Older Meanings of Words: Where are meanings of words current in Shakespeare's time available?
5. On Multiple Meanings of Words: How might the various meanings of a word broaden choices for interpreting a speech or scene?

ACCESS TO THE OED IN PRINT & ONLINE

In *The Oxford English Dictionary* you can find the history of how a word came into the English language—its etymology—and all of a word's various meanings, past and present. Because the OED includes so much information about each word, it is printed in twenty large volumes! Your library might have this set of books in its reference section.



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INFORMATION in THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

The OED provides information you can find in other English dictionaries, such as a word's part of speech, pronunciation, and current definitions. It fills up twenty volumes, however, because the OED also provides the history of definitions of each word, starting from when it first appeared in writing, along with the raw data from which those definitions are derived. Here's the heading you'll see for the noun "weird" at oed.com.

If you click on "**Forms**," you will see how the word itself evolved as the English language evolved.

Variant forms

Old English **wyrd**, Middle English **wird**, (Middle English **wired**, Middle English **wirid**), **wirde**, Middle English **wyrde**, (transmission error) **word**; Middle English **wyerde**, **wierde**, Middle English–1500s **werd** (Middle English **werid**), **werde**, Middle English– **weird** (Middle English *Scottish* **veird**), 1600s–1700s (1800s *Scottish*) **wierd**; *Scottish*1500s **waird**, 1500s–1600s **weard**, 1700s **weerd**.

- *Notice that the noun "weird" has been spelled wyrd, wird, wired, wirid, wirde, wyrde, word, wyerde, wierde, wed, werid, werde, weird, veird, wierd, waird, weard, and weerd!*

If you click on "**Etymology**," you will see the origins of the word in earlier languages.

Old English *wyrd* (feminine), = **Old Saxon** *wurd* (plural *wurdi*), **Old High German** *wurt*, **Old Norse** *urð-r*, from the weak grade of the stem *werþ-*, *warþ-*, *wurþ-* to become: see **worth** *v.*[1]

- *Notice that the noun "weird" is derived from an Old English word meaning "to become."*

If you click on "**Meaning & use**," you will see a history of the word's definitions and the range of years when each definition is relevant. Also provided are quotations of sentences where the word occurs and from which its definitions are derived, followed by the texts' titles and publications dates.

1.a. The principle, power, or agency by which events are predetermined; fate, destiny. **Old English–**

OE Ac þæt þæt we wyrd hatað, þæt bið Godes weorc þæt he ælce dæg wyrcð.
Ælfred, translation of Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae* xxxix. §5 ···
...
1603 Quhat wickit weird hes wrocht our wo?
Philotus c. sig. D3v ···
...
Show more quotations

1.b. Magical power, enchantment. **1813–**

1813 He heard the word of awsome weird, And he saw their deedis of synn.
J. Hogg, *Queen's Wake* i. viii. 82 ···

- *Notice that the noun "weird" first occurs in an Old English ("OE") text. (The quoted sentence is in this earlier form of English.) Specific publication dates are not available for many early texts, but if you click on the "..." for this text, you will learn that it was translated into English by King Alfred who lived from c848-899. Thus, the earliest existing English text that includes the noun "weird" is from the ninth century.*

Nowadays the adjective "weird" is far more common than the noun. Below, in the "Meanings & use" entry for the adjective, you will see that the earliest instance of the adjective "weird" occurs circa 1400—more than 500 years after the noun—and that three of the quoted passages from which the OED definitions are derived are from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*!

weird

ADJECTIVE

1. Having the power to control the fate or destiny of human beings, etc.; later, claiming the supernatural power of dealing with fate or destiny. **c1400–**

Originally in **the Weird Sisters** = †*(a)* the Fates; *(b)* the witches in *Macbeth*.

c1400 Vþeris said sche was, I trow, A werde-sister, I wait neuir how.
Sc. Trojan War ii. 2818

c1420 Þa women þan thoucht he Thre werd systeris mast lyk to be.
Wyntoun, *Cronykil* vi. xviii. 1862

c1475 Wyrde systres, *parce*.
Catholicon Anglicum (Add. MS.) 420/2

1513 Admit myne asking, gif so the fatis gidis,..Or ȝit werd sisteris list gif thaim that cuntre.
G. Douglas, translation of Virgil, *Æneid* v. xiii. 74

c1550 The tail of the thre veird systirs.
Complaynt of Scotland (1979) vi. 50

1577 The prophesie of three women supposing to be the weird sisters or feiries.
R. Holinshed, *Hist. Scotl.* 243/2 (margin) in *Chronicles* vol. I

a1616 The weyward Sisters, hand in hand,..Thus doe goe, about, about.
W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1623) i. iii. 30

a1616 Thou hast it now, King, Cawdor, Glamis, all, As the weyard Women promis'd.
W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1623) iii. i. 2

a1616 I will to morrow..to the weyard Sisters.
W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (1623) iii. iv. 132

1693 The weer'd Sister Parques.
T. Urquhart & P. A. Motteux, translation of F. Rabelais, *3rd Book of Works* xxviii. 237

1733 In every passage..my Emendation must be embraced and we must read *weïrd* [1740 *Wierd*, or *Weïrd*].
L. Theobald, *Works of Shakespeare* vol. V. 393 (note)

1755 Where three swart sisters of the weïrd band Were mutt'ring curses to the troublous wind.
J. G. Cooper, *Tomb Shakspeare* 99

1765 To the weïrd lady of the woods He purpos'd to repaire.
Birth of St. George 47 in Percy, *Reliques* vol. III. 218

1807 He had rather see one of the weird sisters flourish through his key-hole on a broom-stick.
Salmagundi 18 April 151

a1822 And here, like some weïrd Archimage sit I, Plotting dark spells.
P. B. Shelley, *Letter to—* in *Posthumous Poems* (1824) 62

a1854 The weird woman with beards meet to seal the deep damnation of their victim.
H. Reed, *Lectures on British Poets* (1857) v. 189

Show fewer quotations

Here are the second, third, and fourth definitions of "weird" (without quotations). Notice that "weird," originally associated with fate, destiny, and supernatural powers, eventually comes to mean "strange" or "odd" more generally.

2.a.	Partaking of or suggestive of the supernatural; of a mysterious or unearthly character; unaccountably or uncomfortably strange; uncanny.	**1817–**
3.	Of strange or unusual appearance, odd-looking.	**1816–**
4.a.	Out of the ordinary course, strange, unusual; hence, odd, fantastic.	**1820–**

And here is the "Etymology"entry. Notice that the etymology of the adjective "weird," directs you to the noun "weird." *(See the highlighted phrase below.)* Since a word's origin in an earlier language is listed in the OED entry associated with the oldest form of the word—in this case the noun "weird"—you sometimes have to switch to the entry for another part of speech to discover a word's full etymology.

Summary

Formed within English, by conversion.

Etymon: **weird** *n.*

Originally an attributive use of **weird** *n.* in *weird sisters* (see sense 1), the later currency and adjectival use being derived from the occurrence of this in the story of Macbeth.

Notes

The evolution of the forms found in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was apparently from**weyrd* to *weyard* (retained in Acts iii and iv in the First Folio) and *weyward* (used in Acts i and ii); the latter was no doubt due to association with *wayward*, a word used many times by Shakespeare. (The later folios retain the *weyward* spelling, and alter the other to this or to *wizard*.) In several passages the prosody clearly requires the word to be pronounced as two syllables; hence Theobald's use of the diæresis in his emendation *weïrd* (see quot. 1733 at sense 1), giving rise to the scansion of quot. 1755 at sense 1, and quot. 1820 at sense 4a.

ON ETYMOLOGY

Just like every person, every word has an ancestry or heritage. Most English words have their origins in older forms of English or in other languages entirely.

A word's ETYMOLOGY refers to its origins and history.

EXAMPLE 1: the etymology of "deject"

Below is what you will find at oed.com for *deject*, a word that in the ordinary current sense means, "downcast" or "dispirited."

deject

ADJECTIVE

Factsheet | Meaning & use | Etymology | Forms | Frequency | Compounds & derived words

Summary

A borrowing from Latin.

Etymon: Latin *dējectus*.

< **Latin** *dējectus*, past participle of *dējicĕre* (*dēicĕre*) to throw down, < **de-** *prefix* 1a + *jacĕre* to throw. (In **Old French** *des-*, *degiet*, *-get*, *-git*.)

Our English word *deject* has its origins in the Latin verb *deicere,* meaning "to throw down."

EXAMPLE 2: the etymology of "villain"

Below is the etymology and first definition you will find at oed.com for *villain*. Note that the etymology reveals that the word "villain," derived from the Latin *villanus*, originally referred to a villager, rural resident, or feudal servant. A word's origins and history can reveal a great deal about cultural views, in this case attitudes toward lower class, rural people.

villain

NOUN

Factsheet | Meaning & use | Etymology | Pronunciation | Forms | Frequency | Compounds & derived words

Summary

A borrowing from French.

Etymon: French *vilein*.

< **Anglo-Norman** and **Old French** *vilein*, *vilain*, *villain* (= **Provençal** *vilan*, **Italian** *villano*, **Spanish** *villano*, **Portuguese** *villão*) < popular **Latin** **villānum*, accusative singular of **villānus* (see **villains** *adj.*), < **Latin** *villa* **villa** *n.* See also **villein** *n.*

1. Originally, a low-born base-minded rustic; a man of ignoble ideas or instincts; in later use, an unprincipled or depraved scoundrel; a man naturally disposed to base or criminal actions, or deeply involved in the commission of disgraceful crimes:

ON OLDER MEANINGS OF WORDS

The meanings of words change over time. As you make sense of a line in a Shakespeare play, the OED can alert you to meanings of a word that were familiar at the time the play was first performed and published. Take, for instance, the word "nice." As you can see below in entries 1b, 9a, 9b, and 14a, the older—"*Obsolete*"—meanings of "nice" include "foolish," "insubstantial," "absurd," "unimportant" and "trivial," but eventually the meanings of "nice" come to include "pleasant" and "agreeable," connotations more common nowadays. (The oed.com exceprt below is without quotations.)

– nice –
ADJECTIVE & ADVERB

1.b.	Of an action, utterance, etc.: displaying foolishness or silliness; absurd, senseless. *Obsolete.*	**a1393–1657**
9.a.	Slender, thin, fine; insubstantial. *Obsolete.*	**1567–1749**
9.b.	Unimportant, trivial. *Obsolete.*	**a1594–1684**
14.a.	That one derives pleasure or satisfaction from; agreeable, pleasant, satisfactory; attractive.	**1747–**

Consider the word "nice" in *Romeo and Juliet*. When Friar John reports that he was not able to deliver the letter to Romeo that explains that Juliet eventually would awake from her death-like sleep, Friar Lawrence responds:

> Unhappy fortune! By my brotherhood,
> The letter was not nice but full of charge,
> Of dear import, and the neglecting it
> May do much danger. (5.2.17-20)

Here "nice" could mean *unimportant* or *trivial*. (As you can see in the OED entry, *agreeable* or *pleasant* were meanings not current until 1747, long after *Romeo and Juliet* was written.) Realizing the danger of Romeo's hearing news that Juliet is dead, Friar Lawrence emphasizes the importance of Romeo's receiving his letter.

Earlier in the play, when Benvolio reports to the Prince that Romeo attempted to persuade Tybalt not to fight, Benvolio says that Romeo pointed out to Tybalt that "the quarrel" was not worth fighting over. Here, "nice" could mean *foolish*, *absurd*, *senseless*, *unimportant* or *trivial*.:

> Romeo, that spoke him fair, bid him bethink
> How nice the quarrel was, and urged withal
> Your high displeasure. (3.1.161-63).

Usually a modern edition of a Shakespeare play provides a note about a word with an obsolete meaning. (The 2011 Folger Shakespeare Library edition glosses "nice" as "trivial" at 5.2. and "trivial, trifling" at 3.1.). Looking at the OED, however, gives you the fullest range of meanings to consider. What meaning does your edition of *Romeo and Juliet* provide for the word "nice"? What definition do you think best fits each sentence?

ON MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF WORDS

Words have more meanings than you might imagine. As you interpret a line, the OED will allow you to consider all of the possible meanings of a word. Take, for instance, the word "honest." Below are the second, third, and fourth entries in the OED. The quotations for each definition are not shown, but you can see the range of years (for instance, "1393-1702") when each meaning is considered current.

Notice that the fourth definition articulates how many people think about the word "honest" nowadays, namely an action done with "truthfulness" or a person who is "truthful" or "acts fairly and with integrity." However, the second and third definitions indicate that in Shakespeare's day "honest" also might be used to praise an inferior in "a patronizing way" and could refer specifically to a woman's "sexual morality."

honest
ADJECTIVE & ADVERB

2.a. Of a person: (originally) †holding a position of honour; distinguished, noble (*obsolete*); (hence) held in good esteem; respectable, reputable. Now *rare*. **a1382–**

2.b. As a general epithet of appreciation or praise for a person, esp. as used in a patronizing way to or of an inferior. Frequently as a form of address, often with *my*. **1551–**

3.a. † Of a person or society: of good moral character; virtuous, upright. *Obsolete*. **a1393–1702**

3.b. Esp. of a woman: virtuous as regards sexual morality, chaste; virginal. *archaic* and *rare* after early 18th cent. **a1400–**

4.a. Of an action, feeling, etc.: done with or expressive of truthfulness, fairness, or integrity of character or intention; free from deceit; genuine, sincere. Also: done with good intentions even if unsuccessful or misguided. **a1400–**

4.b. Of a person: that acts fairly and with integrity; that is not disposed to lie, cheat, or steal; truthful; trustworthy; sincere. **c1540–**

Consider the various definitions of "honest" as you think about the forty-five times the word is spoken in *Othello*.

- Might Iago feel patronized when Othello or Cassio calls him "Honest Iago" (1.3.295, 2.3.161, 2.3.312)?
- What might Othello mean when he tells Iago, "I do not think but Desdemona's honest" (3.3.265)?
- What is the effect of Othello's doubting his marriage and then referring to Iago as an "honest creature": "Why did I marry? This honest creature doubtless /Sees and knows more, much more, than he unfolds" (3.3.243-44).

Which definition of "honest" do you think best fits each line? How do the multiple meanings of "honest" expand the possibilities for how to interpret and perform each scene?