

Oxford English Dictionary Exercise “Villain” in *As You Like It* Act 1, Scene 1

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Finding a word’s etymology and various meanings in *The Oxford English Dictionary* can open up interpretations of a line or scene. Below is an exercise for considering how the etymology and meanings of “villain” might affect the understanding or performance of a scene in *As You Like It*.

Reread the opening exchange between Oliver and Orlando in *As You Like It*, with particular focus on 1.1.51-61.

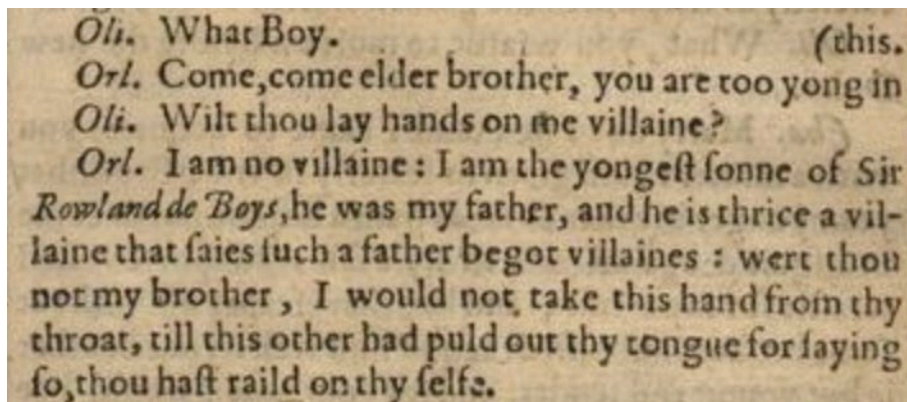
Then read the excerpts from the Oxford English Dictionary entry for “[villain](#)” and its variant “[villein](#).”

Here is the scene in the [Folger edition](#):

OLIVER *ƒ threatening Orlando ʔ* What, boy!
ORLANDO *ƒ holding off Oliver by the throat ʔ* Come,
 come, elder brother, you are too young in this.
OLIVER Wilt thou lay hands on me, villain?
ORLANDO I am no villain. I am the youngest son of Sir 55
 Rowland de Boys. He was my father, and he is
 thrice a villain that says such a father begot villains.
 Wert thou not my brother, I would not take this
 hand from thy throat till this other had pulled out
 thy tongue for saying so. Thou hast railed on thyself. 60

(*As You Like It* 1.1.51-61)

And here is the scene in the [First Folio](#):



Oli. What Boy. (this.
Orl. Come, come elder brother, you are too yong in
Oli. Wilt thou lay hands on me villaine?
Orl. I am no villaine: I am the yongest sonne of Sir
Rowland de Boys, he was my father, and he is thrice a vil-
laine that saies such a father begot villaines: wert thou
not my brother, I would not take this hand from thy
throat, till this other had puld out thy tongue for saying
so, thou hast raild on thy selfe.

Which of the Oxford English Dictionary’s meanings for “villain” would you include in the play’s glossary for lines 1.1.51-61? Imagine that you are editing the play, and write a note (or notes) for these lines.

VILLAIN, n. meanings, etymology and more (excerpt from online Oxford English Dictionary 7/10/24)

Etymology

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. & adj.*

Meaning & use

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:

1.a. Used as a term of opprobrious address. **1303–**

1.b. In descriptive use. (Common from c1590.) **c1400–**

1.c. Used playfully, or without serious imputation of bad qualities. Also applied **1609–** to a woman.

1.d. (Usually with *the*.) The character in a play, novel, etc., whose evil motives or **1822–** actions form an important element in the plot. Also *transferred*, esp. in villain of the piece.

1.e. A professional criminal. *slang.* **1960–**

2. † A bird (*esp.* a hawk) of a common or inferior species. *Obsolete.* **1481–1575**

3. A person or animal of a troublesome character in some respect. **1895–**

VILLEIN, n. & adj. meanings, etymology and more (excerpt from online Oxford English Dictionary 7/10/24)

Etymology

A borrowing from French. Etymon: French *villein*.

< Anglo-Norman *villein* (*vilein*, *-eyn*, *vyleyn*, etc.), variant *villain*, etc., *villain n.* Both types of spelling have been freely employed for this special sense of the word, and the tendency to use the form *villein* has increased in recent years.

Meaning & use

Now *Historical*.

NOUN

1. One of the class of serfs in the feudal system; *spec.* a peasant occupier or cultivator entirely subject to a lord (*villein in gross*) or attached to a manor (*villein regardant*); a tenant in *villeinage*; also applied to a person regarded as holding a similar position in other communities, a bondsman. †Hence formerly in general use, a peasant, country labourer, or low-born rustic. **1325-**

2. † A servant, a retainer. *Obsolete. rare.* **1534-**

ADJECTIVE

† Of base or servile birth; belonging to the class of feudal villeins or serfs. *Obsolete.* **1551-**

