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The Problems of Shakespeare's Language For Students

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Students often find themselves puzzled by Shakespeare's language and his inventive use of words. In fact, his contemporaries may well have had similar problems.

One of the most frequent problems students encounter when they first tackle a Shakespeare play is the words. Much of this is simply the passage of centuries: English is a continually developing language, and Shakespeare's time was one of particular linguistic upheaval. The English spoken in Renaissance London differed widely from our version of it, and indeed from the versions spoken in other parts of England at the time. There have been grammatical shifts as well as a vast change in vocabulary since the end of the sixteenth century: we no longer add "eth" to the end of verbs like "go", and there is no longer a distinction between the different forms of "you" represented by "thou" and "ye".

It is not simply Shakespeare's time period which makes his words seem odd, however. Shakespeare himself had an extremely unusual vocabulary. In his section on Shakespeare in *12 Books That Changed The World*, Melvyn Bragg records that Shakespeare's vocabulary apparently amounted to "at least twenty-one thousand words – possibly, when the combinations and different uses of these words are added, thirty thousand words." He estimates that an educated person today, even with the vast additions to the language which have occurred in the four centuries since Shakespeare wrote, will have a working vocabulary of less than ten thousand words. The equivalent of an average audience member at The Globe, bearing in mind much lower literacy rates, and the social variation of theatregoers, must have been much lower.

Obviously Shakespeare was writing extremely literary and carefully-wrought plays. Part of these figures would have been taken up by so-called "poetic diction", words that only appeared in literary contexts; "cerulean" and "Olympian", for example. Even with these factored in, however, 20,000 to 30,000 is an enormous number, both in itself and in proportion with the vocabulary of other people. In fact, Shakespeare seems to have simply made up a lot of words for his own use. Who can blame school students if they don't immediately understand everything he says?

This incredible use of words has other implications. Historical novels set in the Renaissance often put readers' teeth on edge when they attempt "ye olde dialogue" in Early Modern English. The effect frequently seems forced, awkward and embarrassing, grasping after some kind of "Shakespearean English", when people in Shakespeare's time wouldn't have spoken anything like Shakespeare. They certainly don't sound Shakespearean in contemporary prose stories like *Jack of Reading* by Thomas Nashe. Attempts to "translate" Shakespeare into modern everyday English also frequently founder on the same problem: Shakespeare wasn't writing in his everyday English, so it's extremely hard to say what he wants to say in our everyday English. It is too often forgotten that Shakespeare wasn't speaking Early Modern English. He was speaking Shakespeare.

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