Early Modern English vs Modern English

Early Modern English, the kind of English Shakespeare wrote in, is a bit different from Modern English, which we use today. Although it might be 'old', Early Modern English is, however, not 'medieval' English – this was spoken from around 1100 till about 1500 and it is much more difficult to understand for modern English speakers. Here is an example from the Bible, a translation of Psalm 23, first into Middle English, and then into Early Modern English:

Middle English (1100-1500)
The Lord governeth me, and no thing schal faile to me.
In the place of pasture there he hath set me.
He nurschide me on the water of refreischyng.

Early Modern English (King James Bible, 1611)
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures.
He leadeth me beside the still waters.

Early Modern English has some grammatical differences to Modern English, and some words have changed their meaning over time, or have gone out of use completely. Take a look at what Juliet says in the famous window scene in *Romeo and Juliet* (Act 2, scene 2):

"Oh Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
Deny thy father and refuse thy name."

Thou vs You

You will notice that there are a couple of words and grammatical structures that are not easily understandable for Modern English speakers. The most obvious grammatical difference are the pronouns *thou* and *thy* plus the verb form *art*. Early Modern English still had a proper second person singular, *thou* (with its possessive pronoun *thy/thine*) that also had its own verb form: *thou art, thou dost, thou shalt, thou walkst, thou speakst* are some examples. In Modern English, this second person singular has been replaced by the second person plural, *you* (and *yours*, respectively).

Like in some other European languages (for example, French and German), the second person singular is used when the person addressed is very familiar and close to the other person, whereas strangers or people on a higher social level would be addressed with the more polite second person plural. The same is true for Early Modern English, so when Juliet talks about Romeo, whom she has just met for the first time in her life at a party, as *thou*, this tells us a lot about how close she already feels to him.

Early Modern English vs Modern English

"The lady doth protest too much." (*Hamlet*, Act 3, scene 2)

Another grammatical difference is the verb ending for the third person singular. Whereas in Modern English, we only add an *–s* to the verb, Shakespeare and his fellow English speakers had the choice of either adding *–eth* or *–es/–s*, so both the form *does* and *doth* exist and sometimes they even appear in the same sentence!

"Why does the world report that Kate doth limp?"
(*The Taming of the Shrew*, Act 2, scene1)

Other examples of this *–th* variant of the third person singular are *maketh, sayeth, giveth* and many others.

Shifts in Meaning: Lost Words and False Friends

Remember the *wherefore* in the example from *Romeo and Juliet* above? This is a form of why that is no longer in use, although it was common in Shakespeare's time – even native speakers need to look this up. But there aren't too many words in Shakespeare that have fallen completely out of fashion, only about 5% of all the words we can find in his plays have disappeared from Modern English vocabulary altogether. So, if you find a word in Shakespeare that isn't in your normal learners' dictionary, it might be that this is a word no longer in use. Online resources like this free glossary for outdated words in Shakespeare are useful in this case: **http://www.shakespeareswords.com/Glossary**

Some words that were already around in Shakespeare's time have changed their meaning during the last 400 years. In some cases, this is only a small change, but in others, it is quite a big one. For example, *dear* had more meanings at the time Shakespeare was writing than it does nowadays, including some negative ones: it could also mean 'harsh' or 'severe', 'serious' – quite the opposite to the usual meaning of 'beloved'. So when Romeo learns that the beautiful and witty girl he just met at the party is the daughter of his father's arch enemy and says "Is she a Capulet? Oh dear account!", he means that this is bad news for him.

Other examples of words that have changed meanings are *naughty*, which had a much more negative meaning that is does today, and *crazy*, which did not necessarily mean 'mad' but 'unwell'. A very good list of some of the most common Early Modern English false friends can be found here: **http://educationblog.oup.com/?s=false+friends**.

Early Modern English vs Modern English

Practice your Skills

In Short

- Early Modern English has many similarities with Modern English; it is not 'medieval' English.
- There are a few grammatical differences to remember, like the second person singular pronoun *thou* and its verb forms, and the *–th* variations in the third person singular.
- Some words have fallen out of use entirely; some have changed their meanings. You can use online glossaries to look these words up.

Let's see how much Early Modern English you already recognise. Take a look at this famous speech from *Macbeth*.

Macbeth
Is this a dagger, which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling, as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
(*Macbeth*, Act 2, scene 1)

1. In a first step, circle or highlight all the words you can now explain with a coloured pen, let's say, green.
2. Now do the same for those words you already know from your English classes, but use a different colour, like purple, or yellow.
3. In a final step, circle or highlight those words you still need to look up. How about blue?

Which colour did you use most?

Now let's have a closer look at the words you highlighted in blue:

1. Which ones can you easily look up in your dictionary?
2. Which ones are not in there, or their explanation does not seem to fit in this instance? Look those up in a Shakespeare glossary.

Early Modern English vs Modern English

Practice your Skills

Answer Sheet

Macbeth
Is this a dagger, which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling, as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
(*Macbeth*, Act 2, scene 1)

Vocabulary list

The entries with an asterisk are those that do not normally feature in learners' dictionaries.

dagger – n., a long knife

handle – n., the part of something that you use to hold it or open it; for example, a door handle

to clutch – v., to hold something tightly

***fatal** – adj., ominous, full of foreboding, doom-laden

***sensible** – adj. evident, perceptible by the senses, affecting the senses

sight – n., the area that it is possible for you to see

false – adj., not real

***to proceed from** – v., to result, arise, come from

***heat-oppressed** - feverish

palpable – adj., obvious and noticeable