

The language of Shakespeare

The English of Shakespeare's time was in many ways different from the English we speak today. A number of words or forms have either changed in meaning since Shakespeare's day, or have fallen out in use altogether in everyday Modern English, or are shortened forms which Shakespeare used for special effects, e.g. so as to fit in with the metrical pattern of the lines.

Shakespeare was a poet, and like all poets, he employed language in a way which is not usual for the making of direct statements in prose. In his plays poetry is the means by which all except the humblest characters use prose, their feelings are less strong than when they speak in verse.

Here are some examples:

How now! = hallo!, what news?

Faith = indeed

Nay = no

Ay = yes

Adieu = good-bye

Enow = enough

Oft = often

Tarry = stop, stay

Thou, thee, thy, thine = you, your, yours

Thou art = you are

e.g. I'll be sworn, if thou be Launcelot, thou art mine own flesh and blood

the verb associated with thou as subject ends in –st or –est

e.g. How dost thou and thy master agree?

e.g. Lord, how art thou changed?

Methinks = it seems to me

Hence = from this place

Hither = to this place

Fie = an exclamation expressing disgust