Shakespeare's Language

Pronouns

Thou, *thee*, *thine* and *thy* are pronouns that have dropped out of the main dialects of Modern English. During the period of Early Modern English (~1470-1700), they formed the Second Person Singular of the English language and were standardized as shown in the grid below.

	Subjective	Objective	Possessive
1st Pers. Sing.	I	me	my/mine*
2nd Pers. Sing.	thou	thee	thy/thine*
3rd Pers. Sing.	he/she/it	him/her/it	his/her/its
1st Pers. Plural	we	us	our
2nd Pers. Plural	ye/you	you	your
3rd Pers. Plural	they	them	their

Mine and *thine* were used before vowels, much as *an*.

You may hear that *thou* was for familiar use, and *you* and *ye* were formal. This was not true originally, but it was true for about two centuries, roughly 1450-1650, including Shakespeare's time. The previously plural *you* was used in the singular to signify politeness and respect, which left *thou* for all the other singular uses, ranging from endearing intimacy to bitter rudeness. Eventually, the polite *you* drove out nearly all uses of *thou* which survived mostly in poetry and religion.
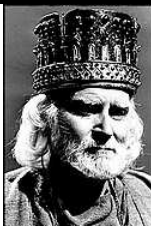
Verb Conjugation

In modern English the form of verbs when conjugated in present tense only changes in 3rd person singular … and some people do not even get that right! In Shakespearean English you will come across some other conjugations.

To conjugate a verb in 2nd peson singular, add -t, -st, or -est, depending on the verb. (*thou shalt*, *thou canst*, *thou dost*, *thou knowest*)

Shakespeare mixed the old and new styles for 3rd person singular. Sometimes, he wrote *he ist* or *he hath*, and other times, he wrote *he is* or *he has*. For other verbs, the conjugation usually requires that -eth be added to the end of the verb, as in *she knoweth* or *he wanteth*. Shakespeare was at ease with both forms and freely used one or the other.

	Present Tense Suffixes
1st Pers. Sing.	---
2nd Pers. Sing.	-est, -st, -t
3rd Pers. Sing.	-th, -t, -eth / -s
1st Pers. Plural	---
2nd Pers. Plural	---
3rd Pers. Plural	---

Here are the present tense conjugations from that era of two common irregular verbs.

	to be	to have
1st Pers. Sing.	I am	I have
2nd Pers. Sing.	thou art	thou hast
3rd Pers. Sing.	he/she/it is	he/she/it hath
1st Pers. Plural	we are	we have
2nd Pers. Plural	ye/you are	ye/you have
3rd Pers. Plural	they are	they have

Unusual Word Arrangements

Some students wonder if people really spoke the way they do in Shakespeare's plays and the answer is obviously *No*! Shakespeare wrote the way he did for poetic and dramatic purposes. There are many reasons why he did this: to create a specific poetic rhythm, to emphasize a certain word, to give a character a specific speech pattern, etc.

Example:

I ate the sandwich.	Ate I the sandwich.	Ate the sandwich I.
I the sandwich ate.	The sandwich I ate.	The sandwich ate I.

These four words can create six unique sentences which essentially carry the same meaning. When you are reading Shakespeare's plays, look for this type of unusual word arrangement. Locate the subject, verb, and the object of the sentence. Notice that the object of the sentence is often placed at the beginning in front of the verb and subject. Germans rarely have problems with this characteristic of Shakespeare's language but it might help to rearrange the words in the order that makes most sense to you.

Poetry

We usually speak in prose that means without metrical structure but Shakespeare wrote in both prose and verse. It is important that you understand (at least!) the following terms.

- **iambic pentameter**: five beats of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables; ten syllables per line.
  "So fair and foul a day I have not seen" (*Macbeth*, I,iii)
- **blank verse**: unrhymed iambic pentameter

Omissions

For the sake of his poetry, Shakespeare often leaves out letters, syllables, and whole words. These omissions are not so very different from our own everyday speech:

"Been to class yet?" "No. Heard Wolff's givin' a test." "Wha's up wi'that?"

If we were talking in complete sentences, we would say:

"Have you been to class yet?" "No, I have not been to class. I heard that Mr. Wolff is giving a test today." "What is up with that?"

Here are a few examples of Shakespearean omissions and contractions:

'tis = it is	o'er = over	gi' = give	ne'er = never	e'er = ever
ope = open	i' = in	a' = he	e'en = even	oft = often

Unusual Words and Meanings

One problem that always occurs when working with old texts is that the author tends to use words that are no longer in use in modern language. It might be even more difficult when the author uses a word that is still in use but has changed its meaning.

An example in Macbeth is the word *illness* that today means *malady*, *sickness* or *ailment*. Orignally, the only sense for the adjective *ill* had been *bad* or *wicked*, with the noun *illness* expressing the related notion of *wickedness* or *evil conduct*. By Shakespeare's time, *illness* was developing a wider range of meanings, such as *unpleasantness* and *disagreeableness*, and this is how it is used when Lady Macbeth accuses Macbeth in I,v: "*Thou wouldst be great ... but without / The illness should attend it.*"

So watch out for Shakespeare's false friends.