

## A Brief Guide to Elizabethan English

English spoken in Queen Elizabeth's day (1558-1603) was a different language, nothing like the English spoken in England today. Elizabethans were a literate, inventive people, which was all reflected in their language. Language was important to the Elizabethans; they spoke slower than we do and they used more words. They enjoyed a person with a "ready wit" who could tell a good story or pass on the local news in an interesting manner. Remember, they had no television or radio, so the majority of their free time was spent talking or reading. This is why Elizabethans would go to "hear" a play rather than go to "see" a play. The words were pronounced differently then, which explains why some rhymes do not make sense to us today. For example, head would sound like "haid;" thus bread becomes " braid" and dead becomes "daid." The "er" in mercy would be pronounced like "maircy." Of course, this is a great deal easier to understand than the language of Chaucer, a medieval poet. Chaucer's poetry looked and [sounded](#) like this:

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote

The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,

And bathed every veyne in swich licour

Of which vertu engendred is the flour;

(When April with its showers sweet

The drought of March had pierced to the root

And bathed every root (vein) in such moisture

Of which virtue engenders (creates) a flower;)

As you can see, Elizabethan English had made great strides in less than 200 years in becoming more like our modern language. Here are some tips on Elizabethan language:

Thou = You (used as an informal address to one's friends or social inferiors)

"You" is used to strangers and social superiors as a formal mode of speech.

Hello = Good Day!, Good Morrow!, Well Met, How Now, God give you a good day

Goodbye = I shall see thee anon, God save thee, God keep thee

No kidding—really = Forsooth (sooth means truth). In good sooth. Go to!

Wow = Marry! (A contraction of By Saint Mary), I'faith. Now by my faith

Excuse me = I cry you mercy

Please = Prithee, I pray you, pray. An (If) it please you

Thank you = I thank thee. Many thanks, good sir.

Darn it = Alack, Alackaday, Alas, Fie, Out upon it!

Better yet, Elizabethan oaths were much more creative than today's monotonous forms of verbal

abuse. Some examples are:

To a constable—You blue-bottle rogue, you filthy famished correctioner, you starved bloodhound.

To a fat man— Thou globe of sinfill continents.

Standest thou there the lyingst knave in Christendom.

Thou art a boil, a plague sore, an embossed carbuncle.

Whoreson cullionly barbermonger!

Swearing (not insults or abuse, but actual oaths) was widely practiced. Men swore by:

God's death (S'death)

God's wounds (S'wounds)

God's teeth (S'teeth)

Other parts of God's anatomy

Men also swore by the Roman gods, by their beards, their swords, their honor, or by the tools of

their trade. For example, a smith might swear, "By my hammer and tongs!" A woman might swear by her modesty, chastity, or maidenhead. (If her character is obviously lacking these, it was

always sure to produce a humorous effect.)

Some other words to consider:

**Prating = Babbling, talking too much** Bawcock = fine lusty fellow

Cutpurse = thief Recreant = Coward, traitor

Carouse = Party **Hap = Fortune or luck**

**Divers = Various Cholera = Wrath**

**Perchance = Maybe (also belike)** Nonpariel = a beauty

Cupshot = Drunk Slug-a-bed = lazy, sleepy

Antic = Bizarre, crazy Anon = soon

Whoreson = literally means "son of a whore," but used also as a mild emphasis, the way we'd use

"darned." (This whoreson cup!)

Toss-pot = Drunkard

**Cozener = Con Artist**

Scurvy = Wretched

**Perdy = Indeed; for sure**

**Forswear = To lie or cheat**

Physic == Medicine or cure

Malapert = Rude or impudent

Ere = **Before**

**Betimes = Very early in the morning**

## Tragedy

1. Tragedy is meant to reaffirm the fact that life is worth living, regardless of the suffering or pain that is part of human existence.

2. Tragedies are about people in conflict with the universe
  - a. Tragedies are always about spiritual conflicts, never about everyday events
3. Tragic actions arise from a character's inner conflict
  - a. The tragic protagonist must have **magnitude**; his struggles are great because he is important (has elevated status) to society.
4. The tragic protagonist must fall from high to low; he will have a noble soul
  - a. The audience must care about the tragic protagonist
5. The tragic protagonist is a good man, but not perfect.
  - a. He usually suffers from **hubris (pride)** as shown through **harmartia** (error or transgression)
  - b. Once the transgression is realized, the character enters the stage of **recognition** and will undergo a **reversal of fortune** (fall from high to low)
6. The protagonist's actions should arouse feelings of pity and **fear** in the audience
  - a. Pity because he is better than us, and we put ourselves into his position  
(empathy)
  - b. Fear because we too do not know our fate
7. By the end of the play, the audience should be purged of these two emotions
  - a. **Catharsis**—the purging of pity and fear
8. The tragic protagonist must ask the first and last of all questions: What does it mean to be?
  - a. He must face the world alone, unaccommodated, and kick against his fate
  - b. He can never escape his fate, but he will insist upon accepting fate on his own terms

**Shakespeare's impact on the patterns and stuff of everyday English speech has been memorably expressed by the English journalist**

**Bernard Levin:**

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare "it's Greek to me" you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger, if your wish is father to the thought, if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise — why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe that the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then — to give the devil his due — if the truth were known (for surely you

have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish I was dead as a door-nail, if you think I am an eyesore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stony-hearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then — by Jove O' Lord! Tut, tut! for goodness' sake! what the dickens! but me no buts-it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare.