Introduction

When Shakespeare was writing *Macbeth*, the English language was still evolving from Middle English to Modern English. You will be able to understand most of the text from *Macbeth*, but traces of language forms from Middle English may sometimes seem confusing. Before reading *Macbeth*, take a moment to explore these differences in this interactivity. Click the notes on the bulletin board to examine pronouns, verb forms, contractions, word order, and commonly used words typical of the Elizabethan age.

Pronouns

Getting to Know the Language of *Macbeth*

Pronouns

Writers in Shakespeare's time used the same personal pronouns that are used today, but they also held on to more archaic forms and meanings such as the ones below:

Subject Pronouns	Objective Pronouns	Possessive Pronouns
thou = you	**thee** = you	**thine** = your (before a vowel); yours
		thy = your (before a consonant)
		mine = my (before a vowel); mine

There were no strict rules determining when a writer could use *thou* or *you* to mean "you" or *thy* and *your* to mean "your," but often *thou* and *thy* were used when referring to someone of lower standing or social class. *You* and *your* were used when referring to someone of higher standing or social class.

Also notice that *thine* and *mine* were used before words beginning with vowels, whereas *thy* and *my* were used before words beginning with consonants.

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Verb Forms

Getting to Know the Language of *Macbeth*

Verb Forms

Shakespeare and other writers of his time continued to use verb forms inherited from Middle English. Observe the archaic forms of present-tense verb endings below:

Second Person Singular (you)	Third Person Singular (he/she/it)
-est	-eth
-st	-th

As you can see in the examples below, understanding the meaning of verbs is fairly easy since the verb stems are very similar to Modern English:

As **seemeth** by his plight = As **seems** by his plight
Which thou **esteem'st** the ornament of life = Which you **esteem** the ornament of life

Here are some common archaic forms of singular verbs in Shakespearean drama:

art = (you) are	**hast** = (you) have
dost = (you) do	**hath** = (he/she/it) has
doth = (he/she/it) does	**mayst** or **mayest** = (you) may

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EDUCATION

Contractions

Getting to Know the Language of *Macbeth*

Contractions

When you speak to other people in English, you usually make use of contractions, or shortened forms of words. In English, the missing letters are usually replaced by an apostrophe, as you can see in the following examples:

I'll = I will   let's = let us
you're = you are   ma'am = madam
can't = cannot   three o'clock = three of the clock

Many contractions used in Shakespeare's time have fallen out of use. Take a moment to view some examples of contractions that you may find in Shakespearean drama:

    i' = in
    o' = of; on
    o'er = over
    e'er = ever
    ne'er = never

Word Order

Word order in Shakespeare's day can sometimes feel awkward to speakers of Modern English, especially when it comes to asking questions. When you ask a question in Modern English that requires a "yes" or "no" response, you often use a form of *do* followed by the subject and then the main verb, as in:

Do <u>you</u> **vacation** in the Caribbean?

Sometimes you might want to put the main verb first and follow it with the subject:

Have <u>you</u> no shame?

The characters in Shakespeare's plays often ask questions by putting the main verb before the subject. Using the prior example "Do you vacation in the Caribbean?", a Shakespearean spin might sound like, "Vacation you in the Caribbean?"

If you ever find the word order of a question confusing, try adding the word *do* or *does* and switching the order of the main verb and subject, as in this example:

"**Goes** <u>Fleance</u> with you?" = *Does* <u>Fleance</u> **go** with you?

Common Words

Getting to Know the Language of *Macbeth*

Common Words

Here is a list of common words and their meanings that you may come across when reading *Macbeth* or other Shakespearean literature:

anon = soon
brave = courageous; splendid or excellent
cousin = any relative or close friend
cozen (or **coz**) = any relative or close friend
cur = a dog (sometimes used with a negative connotation or as an insult)
fain = gladly
forsooth = in truth; indeed
hautboy = an oboe, or woodwind instrument
hence = from here; from now
hither = here
mistress = a woman, especially the head of a household
tarry = to remain; to wait; to linger
thane = a Scottish noble who holds lands of the king, similar to an English earl
thence = from there; from that time
wherefore? = why?

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