

LANGUAGE IN ROMEO AND JULIET

by

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Because most English teachers cover a Shakespearean work at least once during their career, I have undertaken this report and designed it as an instructor's aid. The language changes that have taken place since Shakespeare's time present many problems for today's students, problems which today's teachers cannot always answer.

For the purpose of this study, I chose the play Romeo and Juliet. It may not be Shakespeare's finest work, but it is widely anthologized and the plot is one that is common even in this society. The fact that the play is frequently performed, that it has been adapted to more modern terms in West Side Story, and that there is an appealing movie version available makes the choice seem even more logical. Because the hero and heroine are close to the same age of the students, there is an extra bond between the two distant generations. Most students can identify easily with the young lovers. Since Romeo and Juliet is so widely published it is possible to find many good editions on the market. I chose the Signet Classic because it is readily available and inexpensive, and because its editing flaws are infrequent. Line numbers refer to the Signet edition, but any other text will have similar line numbering so that it is possible to apply this discussion to any other text.

The question the teacher must answer is "Why do the students resist Shakespeare in the original form and yet enjoy and understand the paraphrased version?" The main reason is that the language becomes an obstacle. The differences that hinder today's students are of two kinds: (1) changes which by today's standards make Shakespeare's normal everyday

speech sound too formal, and (2) certain resources that writers could use then that have been lost and hence are no longer appreciated. In Early Modern English (EModE), which stretches from approximately 1500 to 1700, many of the transitions between Old English and Modern English are very noticeable. An example is the use or omission of auxiliary do. Around the turn of the 17th century, do was optional in questions and negative statements, and it could be used in a declarative sentence without signalling special emphasis.¹ Examples of the unusual use of do can be found throughout the works of Shakespeare. G. L. Brook cites some of the best ones in his book The Language of Shakespeare. From Richard the Second, III,ii,100 comes the question, "Revolt our subjects?",² and a negative omission can be found in the second part of Henry the Fourth, IV,i,107, "It not appears to me."³ The use of do that does not add emphasis appears often too, as in the example from Julius Caesar, III,ii,65, "I do entreat you, not a man depart."⁴ Since these sentences now sound unusual, readers may feel they were meant as examples of formal speech, whereas the truth may be that all people spoke similarly.

Besides the language conventions just mentioned we must consider special resources which include the thou and you distinction, which was followed closely before and during the EModE period. The options of thou and you are varied and complex. You was always required when addressing a plural audience, and it was also accepted as the signal of a formal or respectful relationship when used in the singular. Either thou or you could be used as an insult or to show extreme emotions when it was used in its opposite context. While Capulet, as Juliet's

father, should address her using the familiar form thou, his switch to you when he is angry would have been noticed and understood by the Elizabethan audience.

Another special resource involves the choice of one pronunciation over another. The pronunciation options were created by an occurrence labeled the Great Vowel Shift, which altered the long vowels. This gradual shift covered many years, affected dialects differently, and did not change all loan words in the same manner.

This study is concerned with those pronunciations that create difficulties in understanding for today's students; and also with morphological options that allowed for a choice between thou and you, and the endings -eth or -es on the third person singular verbs; with vocabulary alterations; and with sentence structures that now seem unnatural. The final section of the study is a look at two characters who represent two extremes of language use, the illiterate and informal compared to the very formal.

PRONUNCIATION

Between Middle English, a time period covering approximately 1350-1500, and our Modern English, the language has undergone many pronunciation changes. This slow, gradual process was hardly noticeable during any one lifetime because both the old and the new forms were used side by side. The major change that occurred is called the Great Vowel Shift, which affected the long vowels. Some of the changes were completed by the 1590's and others occurred after Shakespeare's death. These latter changes are the ones that upset the Elizabethan

rhymes for us. Since each regional dialect underwent the shift at a different rate, Shakespeare had even more possible variety by picking a dialectal pronunciation to suit his purpose.

The diagram below shows the movement of the long vowel sounds that gradually took place.⁵ The location on the chart roughly corresponds to the location in the mouth where the sound is formed. The diphthongs formed first and left the opening for the next vowel to assume. During the EModE period in some dialects the diphthongs were still forming and the change had developed only as far as the schwa compound at the top of the scale.

