

Shakespeare's language

The English Shakespeare used is different in some ways from the English we use today. It is also found in the Authorized Version of the Bible and in the Book of Common Prayer, so although it is archaic, generations of speakers of English have grown up with it in churches and schools as well as in the theatre. When you know about a few basic principles, it is really not very different from modern English and you can understand it easily. The most important thing to remember is that there was a familiar form of *you*: *thou*, rather like German *du*. So the personal pronouns in their subject, object and possessive forms were:

I	me	my	mine
thou	thee	thy	thine
he	him	his	his
she	her	her	hers
it	it	its	its
we	us	our	ours
ye / you	you	your	yours
they	them	their	theirs

There were also different forms of the verb for *thou* and for *he / she / it*:

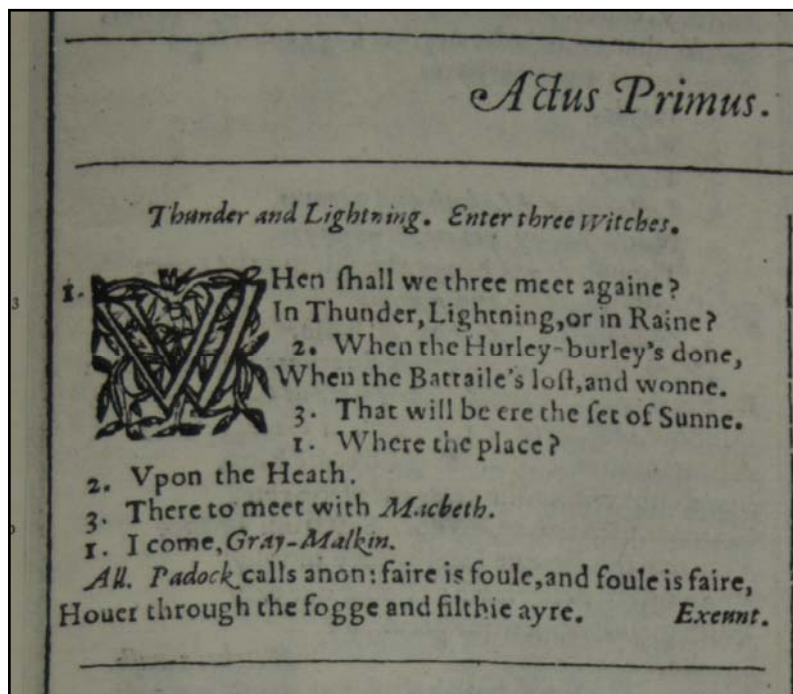
I come	I am	I have	I do
thou comest	thou art	thou hast	thou dost
he/she/it cometh	he/she/it is	he/she/it hath	he/she/it doth

The questions could be made by simple inversion (*Comest thou?*). Sometimes the subject could follow the verb in a positive sentence too, as in German: (*Thus answer I in name of Benedick*).

Some words and structures were in common use in Shakespeare's time but not now, like:

hither (to here)	thither (to there)
hence (away from here)	thence (away from there)
yea / aye (yes)	yon (the one over there)
lo (look, what a surprise)	nay (no)
marry (really, well)	alas (what a pity, sadly)
ere (before)	anon (soon)
wherefore (why)	an (if)
I would fain... (I would like to)	whereof / whereby (of which / by which)
Methinks... (I think...)	
to beseech (ask / beg)	
to bid (tell someone to do something)	
to betide (happen / come to)	

In Shakespeare's time there were no dictionaries, so there was no standard spelling. Shakespeare, in the signatures we have, spelt his name differently each time. So many spellings of words were different from those used today, as you can see in this extract from the First Folio: the first published collection of Shakespeare's plays:



[Michael Mitchell]