Topic: Archaic Language in Shakespeare's works
Level: C1
Time: 90 minutes

Aims

- to develop students' awareness of changes in grammar since Shakespeare's day, and some key items of Shakespearean vocabulary, so that students are better able to understand Shakespeare in the original
- to introduce students to some famous quotations and a well-known Shakespearean speech from Romeo and Juliet

Introduction

According to linguist David Crystal, only 5 to 10 per cent of Shakespearean English is different from modern English. However, even that small percentage can confuse students and make the plays and poems seem quite inaccessible. In this lesson, students will learn about grammatical changes since Shakespeare's time, and, depending on their first language background, may discover that Shakespearean English is actually closer in some ways to their own language (many Latin-based languages still have the equivalent of the 'thou' form, and more conjugations of the verb than modern English). They will also learn some common vocabulary items and use their knowledge to 'translate' Shakespeare into modern-day English, as well as attempting to write in Shakespearean language themselves.

Preparation and materials

Make one copy of the worksheets for each student. If you feel it would be useful, you may also wish to make and give your students copies of one or both of the following:

- **Glossary of Shakespearean language (Task 3)**
- **Juliet's speech and a modern equivalent (Task 4)**

Both of these pages can be found at the end of this lesson plan.

Procedure

Warmer – some famous quotes (15 mins)

The warmer is intended to draw students' attention to certain grammatical aspects of Shakespeare's language, as well as giving them the opportunity to discuss some of Shakespeare's wise sayings.

a. Ask students to work in pairs or small groups and find the modern-day equivalents of the underlined words. These should be quite easy to guess from context.

Answers

1. Doth – does   **2.** Thou – you   **3.** Thy – your   **4.** Hath – has
                         Canst – can

b. Then ask them to discuss whether they agree with the quotes. The meaning of each quote is below, if they need help.

Answers
1. A stupid person thinks he is wise, but a wise person knows that he knows nothing.
2. The most important thing is to be true to yourself.
   If you do that, then inevitably, you can't be false to anyone.
3. Listen to everyone but speak only to a few (or listen much more than you speak).
4. Often, when people make jokes, there is actually a lot of truth in what they are saying.

Task 1 – reading about Shakespeare's grammar (5 mins)

Ask students to read the text and discuss the questions with a partner.

Answers
1. 'Thou' was used as second person singular, 'you' as second person plural. 'Thou' was also the more familiar form (like 'tu' in French), and 'you' the more formal form (like 'vous' in French).
2. Thou hast, he hath
3. Examples here would be French, German, Portuguese, Polish, etc. There are also similar differences between familiar and formal modes of address in many non-European languages.

Task 2 – Shakespeare's grammar (10 mins)

Students then use the words from the warmer and the text in Task 1 to complete the grammar tables. This should be quite a straightforward task, but take the opportunity to briefly draw their attention to some of the other forms, such as 'art', 'wert', 'hadst', 'dost' and so on. Other examples would be 'wilt' for 'will' and '(e)th' on the end of most third person verbs – 'blesseth', 'goeth' and so on.

Answers
1. thou
2. thy
3. hast
4. doth
5. canst

Task 3 – Shakespearean vocabulary (15 mins)

Ask students to try to match the Shakespearean vocabulary on the left with the modern-day equivalents on the right. Some of these are quite easy, others a little trickier.

Note: If you want, you can make extra copies of this glossary, which can be found on page 5 of this lesson plan.

Answers
1. Fain – willingly (e.g. I would fain help thee – I would willingly help you)
2. Farewell – goodbye
3. Nay – no
4. Oft – often
5. Woo – flirt or romance (verb)
6. Lest – for fear that, in case (e.g. I dare not help thee lest I be punished – I daren't help you in case I get punished)

7. Wherefore – why (as in the famous quote 'Wherefore art thou Romeo?' – Why are you Romeo?)
8. Methinks – I think
9. Pronounce – say (Still used in wedding ceremonies when the priest says 'I now pronounce you man and wife' – I now say that you are married.)
10. Ay – yes
11. Swear – promise (It doesn't mean using a bad word.)
12. Twas – it was (There are other common contractions as well, such as 'tis (it is), to't (to it), o' (of or on).)
13. Perjury – telling a lie (This is still used in legal language to mean telling a lie in court.)
14. Else – otherwise (e.g. Tell me the truth else I cannot help thee – Tell me the truth or/otherwise I can't help you.)
15. Prithee – please (Usually used at the beginning of a sentence, not the end – e.g. Prithee, help me.)

Task 4 – modern-day Shakespeare (20–30 mins)

a. Either in pairs, or as a class, elicit what the students know about *Romeo and Juliet.*

Synopsis of *Romeo and Juliet*

Romeo and Juliet are a young man and woman who belong to two families at war with each other. Despite this, they meet, fall in love and decide to get married secretly. Friar Lawrence marries them, hoping it will help the families to resolve their conflict. However, Romeo makes things worse by killing Juliet's cousin, Tybalt, in a fight and has to flee the city. Juliet's father, not knowing she is already married to Romeo, arranges for her to marry Paris. To avoid this, Juliet takes a sleeping potion, so that she will seem dead. Romeo doesn't get the message about this plan and, thinking that she is actually dead, poisons himself. Juliet awakes, finds Romeo dead and kills herself. The deaths of their children do lead to peace between the families.

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b. Make sure the students understand the context for the speech – Juliet has embarrassed herself by saying aloud that she loves Romeo when they have only just met. She didn't realise he was listening as she talked to herself about him.

- Then ask them to work together to try and write a modern-day version.
- There are no 'right' answers here, as it could be translated in various ways, but you could show them this possible modern-day version **(also available as a handout if you make copies of the final page of this lesson plan)**.

Because it's dark, you can't see my face.
Otherwise you'd see me blushing
About what you've heard me say tonight.
I would willingly stay polite and deny
What I have said. But forget about being polite,
Do you love me? I know you will say yes.
And I will believe you. But if you promise you love me
You might actually be lying. They say God laughs
When lovers lie to each other. Oh gentle Romeo,
If you do love me, say it truly.

Or if you think it's too quick and easy to get me to love you,

I'll frown and play hard to get* and say no to you

So you'll try harder to win me. But otherwise, I wouldn't act that way for anything.

To tell you the truth, handsome Montague, I'm too keen on you.

*when someone pretends not to be romantically interested in order to make the other person want them more

Task 5 – Talking like Shakespeare (15-25 minutes)

- Finally, ask students to work together to write a short Shakespearean-style dialogue. Encourage them to use the *thou/thy/thine* forms and the Shakespearean verb endings as well as some of the vocabulary. They should be able to have some fun with this task.

- When they are finished, get some pairs to read their dialogues aloud.

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5. Woo – flirt or romance (verb)

6. Lest – for fear that, in case (e.g. I dare not help thee lest I be punished – I daren't help you in case I get punished.)

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13. Perjury – telling a lie (This is still used in legal language to mean telling a lie in court.)

14. Else – otherwise (e.g. Tell me the truth else I cannot help thee – Tell me the truth or/otherwise I can't help you.)

15. Prithee – please (Usually used at the beginning of a sentence, not the end, e.g. Prithee, help me.)

Shakespeare's original version

Juliet: Thou know'st the mask of night is on my face,

Else would a maiden blush bepaint my cheek

For that which thou hast heard me speak to-night

Fain would I dwell on form, fain, fain deny

What I have spoke: but farewell compliment!

Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say 'Ay,'

And I will take thy word: yet if thou swear'st,

Thou mayst prove false; at lovers' perjuries

Then say, Jove* laughs. O gentle Romeo,

If thou dost love, pronounce it faithfully:

Or if thou think'st I am too quickly won,

I'll frown and be perverse an say thee nay,

So thou wilt woo; but else, not for the world.

In truth, fair Montague, I am too fond.

from *Romeo and Juliet*

A modern equivalent

Juliet: Because it's dark, you can't see my face.

Otherwise you'd see me blushing

About what you've heard me say tonight.

I would willingly stay polite and deny

What I have said. But forget about being polite,

Do you love me? I know you will say yes.

And I will believe you. But if you promise you love me,

You might actually be lying. They say God laughs

When lovers lie to each other. Oh gentle Romeo,

If you do love me, say it truly.

Or if you think it's too quick and easy to get me to love you,

I'll frown and play hard to get and say no to you

So you'll try harder to win me. But otherwise, I wouldn't act that way for anything.

To tell you the truth, handsome Montague, I'm too keen on you.