

Appendix C: A Primer on Early Modern English

Pronouns

In modern English, we use “you” as the second person personal pronoun without distinction between singular or plural, subjective or objective. Archaic pronouns are more precise:

| | Subjective | Objective | Possessive (Attributive /Substantive) |
|-----------------------------|------------|-----------|---|
| <i>th-</i> forms (singular) | thou | thee | thy/thine |
| <i>y-</i> forms (plural) | ye | you | your/yours |

A common misunderstanding involves the word “ye” in something like “Ye Olde Shoppe.” The word written “ye” is pronounced “the” and is no different than our definite article. The confusion arises because English used to have letters in the alphabet other than the twenty-six with which we are now familiar. These included *eth* (representing the unvoiced “th” in “thin”) and *thorn* (representing the voiced “th” as in “the” or “that”). Both *eth* and *thorn* are still used in Icelandic. When handwritten, *thorn* resembled a backward “y,” and thus the word had something of the appearance of “ye,” allowing “ye” to be used as a variant for “the” (as was sometimes done, by the way, in the 1611 King James Version).

Regular Verbs

In the singular, verbs were conjugated somewhat differently than we do today:

| Present | Past |
|---|--|
| I love thou lovest he/she/it loveth | I loved thou lovedst he/she/it loved |

Irregular Verbs

| | To be | To have | Active Verb | Auxiliary Verb |
|---------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|--|--|
| Present Tense | I am thou art he/she/it is | I have thou hast he/she/it hath | I do thou doest he/she/it doeth | I do love <i>thou dost love</i> he/she/it doth love |
| Past Tense | I was thou wast he/she/it was | I had thou hadst he/she/it had | I did thou didst he/she/it did [or occasionally diddest] | I did love <i>thou didst love</i> he/she/it did love |

The past tense is often formed by using the auxiliary verb “to do”; rather than “thou lovedst him,” “thou didst love him.”

Subjunctive Mood

The subjunctive mood, used to indicate some sense of doubt, speculation or condition, used to be more common than it is today. When old maps say “there be dragons here,” they mean “there are probably dragons here” or “there may be dragons here.” Compare the following:

| | |
|--------------|---------------------|
| Indicative: | God saves the Queen |
| Subjunctive: | God save the Queen |
| Imperative: | God, save the Queen |

In the subjunctive, the present tense of the verb “I am” becomes “I be, thou be, he be, we be, ye be, they be.” The past tense is “I were, thou wert, he were, etc.” In the subjunctive, “thou hast” becomes “thou havest,” and “he hath” becomes “he haveth.” Thus, “If a man haveth a vineyard...” is subjunctive, introducing a conditional clause.

Imperative Mood

We no longer include the subject of the commanded action in an imperative; generally, we would just say “clean the room” rather than “you clean the room.” In Jacobean, this pronoun generally was included. So while we would say “therefore, be perfect,” the KJV says “be ye therefore perfect.”

Indefinite Article

We use the indefinite article “a” before a consonant (“a bus”), but “an” before a vowel (“an apple”). The original indefinite article was “an.” By the mid-twelfth century, the “n” was being dropped before consonants. Because the letter “h” at one point had a softer pronunciation than it does today, “an” was often used before words beginning with “h” where we would use “a” today. So, Esau was “an hairy man.”

Possessives

The form of the possessive adjective varies depending on whether it is used attributively or as a predicate. Attributive use means the adjective is closely linked with the noun and “attributes” some characteristic directly to it: “it is *thy* book.” Predicate adjectives are usually separated from the noun by a linking verb: “the book is *thine*.” Also, if the word following the adjective begins with a vowel, the adjective will end with the “n” sound: “mine eyes have see the glory.” (As with the indefinite article, the form with the final -n was the original form.)

Some Common Stumbling Blocks

Shew. This word is pronounced just like our “show,” not like “shoe” (or a bad Ed Sullivan impression). Compare English “sew.”

Cleave. This is an example of a word that can have diametrically opposed meanings. It can mean “split,” as with a meat cleaver, but also “adhere,” as in Adam and Eve being

commanded to “cleave unto each other.” Originally, these were two distinct words (OE *cléofan*, to split, and oe *clifan*, to stick).

By and by. Not “eventually,” as in modern English, but “immediately.”

Withal. “With,” “besides,” “nevertheless.”

Wherefore. “For what reason or purpose,” “why.” When Juliet asks “wherefore art thou Romeo?”, she is not asking where he is hiding, but rather why he had to be born a Montagu.

Without. This can not only mean “lacking,” it can also mean “outside of.” So when we sing “There is a green hill far away, without a city wall...” we do not mean that the hill is lacking a wall, but is located outside the city wall.

Meet. “Appropriate, worthy of.” (Not to be confused with “mate”).