

Assignment guidelines: Shakespeare's vocabulary

Choose a word in *Hamlet* whose meaning is unfamiliar to you, or whose use in Shakespeare seems different from contemporary definitions. (The most creative responses often pick a term that seems ordinary, but, when studied, reveals historical difference between early modern English usage and our own. Wholly unfamiliar terms work well, too, though!)

Preliminary work:

1) Look up the word in the Oxford English Dictionary. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) offers a wealth of information about each word it contains. It tells us the word's **etymology** (that is, its roots or origins). It sketches the word's **history**, offering examples of its use drawn from various sources at different times. Moreover, it offers a **full range of definitions** for the word.

To access the OED, go to www.baruch.cuny.edu/library/ → Students → Databases → Oxford English dictionary.

Read through the entire entry. Take notes on how the word's etymology and history change your sense of the word.

2) Look through the relevant Shakespeare play for instances of the word. Take notes on which definition(s) seem to be in play. Does Shakespeare use the word in multiple ways? (If so, does he activate more than one sense or meaning at once? Or does its meaning vary from passage to passage?)

To find the word quickly in a Shakespeare play, feel free to use a searchable online version. This is a good place to start: <http://www.folgerdigitaltexts.org/>

Blog post: In a 350-400 word blog post, share your findings with the class. Your post should consist of:

- A brief overview of the word's etymology, history, and relevant definitions.
- An account of 2-3 passages in your play that really showcase Shakespeare's use of this word. If the word shows up time and again, choose carefully. If it shows up only once, dig deeply into the passage it informs.
- A statement or claim about the word's significance to the poem as a whole. Tell us why your word matters. "If we understand the meaning and history of the word _____, the following aspects of *Othello* (or *Lear*, or *The Tempest*) are enriched or illuminated: _____."