

Exercise 2

Choose a single word in a short speech or exchange from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ten lines or so, that strikes you as rich, puzzling, mysterious, etc.: a word that you think matters to the play and that you want to understand better. (Some good examples, which you should feel free to use, are below.)

Look that word up in the *OED* (www.oed.com).

Consider the word's etymology (where it comes from, and what meanings it had in its tributary languages, especially Latin).

Consider the variety of its definitions at the time of the play (ca. 1595). Which senses are active? What do they mean to each other?

Explore the significance of the word in its context in a 700-word essay, drawing on your understanding of what it meant in the period. Offer a close reading of the passage that turns on your word, showing your reader what its history and range of meanings make possible for the play.

This is an exercise in Shakespeare's language, beginning with the basic building blocks, his words. The point of the exercise is to practice thinking about the historical richness of English. Whenever we read closely, we weigh the possible senses and associations of particular words. Does this word have more than one meaning? Is it a word from a particular territory of life, the law, say, or economics, or medicine? (What world of diction does it come from?) How is it being used in the passage—are any of its multiple meanings or associations activated by the particular context? Is Shakespeare using them? Is the character?

Reading modern literature, we can search our own experience. Reading backward across four hundred years, we sometimes need the help of a historical dictionary. When you consult the *OED*, you will see that each entry begins with an etymology, and then (often) gives several senses, with historical examples. On our Blackboard site, under "Resources," there is a guide to using the *OED* that will explain both, but a few words of advice here.

Etymology. English in 1595 was still something of a young language in literature, and any educated person knew Latin. That means that if the word had a Latin origin, it would be recognized, and could be used by a poet with expectation that readers would get it. So, for example, when Antipholus of Syracuse speaks of how the water droplet "confounds itself" (1.2.38), the *OED* tells us that the word is made from the Latin prefix *con-* (together) and the verb *fundere* (to pour). For someone who knows Latin, that is, the

word is more liquid than we might have thought. It will be up to you as a reader and a critic to decide whether the etymology is relevant in a given case. It should also be said that many of Shakespeare's words come not from Latin, but from Old and Middle English or from the northern, Germanic languages. In these cases, it is likely only OE or ME senses that would be relevant (there was little knowledge in England of the time of the history of, for example, Old Norse). As ever, the difference between Latinate and Anglo-Saxon words is itself important, and is still, for us, almost intuitive: Latinate words sound, in general, more formal, conceptually rich, and cosmopolitan, English plainer, more down-to-earth and rustic. Some Latinate words come to us via French, Italian, or Spanish, and a set of familiar prejudices can often be detected in sixteenth century usage—that the Continental Europeans are more sophisticated than the English, craftier, maybe shiftier. Every good writer of English draws on the resources of this double heritage, and Shakespeare is a virtuoso.

Multiple senses. As you will see, the OED not only tells you *what* a word has meant, but *when* it meant that: you are looking for senses active in 1595. So, when in *MND* we hear that the moon has “bored” through the earth's center, the OED will let you know that “bored” did not mean “uninterested” until the 19th century. (Rats!—there goes that idea; but close reading involves entertaining some strange hypotheses, as well as having the confidence and courage to let go of them if they don't play out.) If your word has multiple senses—and you should look for one that does—the question becomes, which are active in the passage you are studying? Are they picked up by other words? Do they resonate with any of the ideas in the passage, the scene, the play? Sometimes, other senses just lie dormant. If you are convinced that they are active, your challenge is to interpret that richness, to understand what work that surplus of meaning does in the passage you have chosen. Is there a less obvious sense that is the hidden truth of a more obvious sense? Does the multiplicity or ambiguity allow a character to speak in code? To whom? Knowingly, or unknowingly? Does it fit the scene to other moments of the play in a surprising way? Does it make for a joke? An irony? And so on.

All of which is to say again, this is an exercise in close reading that should turn on a particular word, and make use of the historical resources of the OED to understand what Shakespeare had to work with when he wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. You are free to choose your own word, and some rummaging around in that great dictionary is always a good thing to do. A couple that would be interesting: “confusion” (used by Lysander at 1.1.149 and again by Theseus at 4.1.109) and “translated” (used by Helena at 1.1.191, of Bottom at 3.1.113, and by Puck/Robin at 3.2.32). If you choose a word used multiple times, you can make reference to other occurrences, but your essay should be anchored in a particular passage. The “Resources” section of our Blackboard site has searchable texts of the plays which may be helpful.