



Macbeth Archaic Language in *Macbeth*

Many people struggle with comprehension when reading Shakespeare's plays. One of the reasons for this is that our language has changed since Shakespeare's time. There are many words, phrases, and terms that were in common use then that are no longer used today. There are also words that are still used today but with a different meaning. Words and meanings that have fallen out of common use are referred to as *archaic diction*.

Pronouns

One specific and potentially confusing grammatical element from Shakespeare's time is the use of different words for today's *you* and *your*. Archaic diction is often filled with unfamiliar pronouns, such as *thee* and *thine* and *thou* and *thy*, or familiar pronouns with different meanings, such as the word *you*.

Study the following charts to familiarize yourself with common archaic terms. All cited quotes are from No Fear Shakespeare *Macbeth*.

Archaic Term	Modern Form	Archaic Usage Rule/Grammar
you (singular)	you (singular)	more polite and formal address, used as the object of a sentence "He has almost supped. Why have you left the chamber?" (1.7.29)
thou (singular)	you (singular)	more familiar and informal address, used as the subject of a sentence "Say to the king the knowledge of the broil / As thou didst leave it." (1.2.6-7)
thee (singular)	you (singular)	referring to a person, used as the object of the sentence "So well thy words become thee as they wounds[.]" (1.2.43)
you (plural)	you (plural)	plural, used when addressing a group "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so." (1.3.45-46)

ye (singular and sometimes plural)	you (plural)	plural, used to address several people in high positions (formal); also used to address one or more than one person in an informal manner "Are ye fantastical, or that indeed / Which outwardly ye show?" (1.3.54-55)
ye (definite article)	the	to modify a noun in the same way <i>the</i> is used today "ye olde shoppe"
thy	your	indicates ownership or possession; singular and followed by a word that begins with a consonant sound "So well thy words become thee as thy wounds[.]" (1.2.43)
thine	your	indicates ownership or possession; usually singular and followed by a word that begins with a vowel sound "To be the same in thine own act and valor" (1.7.40)

Common Verbs

Archaic Term	Formal Definition
'tis	it is
'twas	it was
'twere	it were
'twix	between two things; betwixt
art	are
doth	do
durst	dared
hast	have
hath	have
wilt	will

Note: Verbs ending in *-est* are related to the second-person pronoun *thou*.

Archaic Terms Found in *Macbeth*

Complete the last column with modern synonyms, idioms, or colloquial expressions.

Archaic Word	Formal Definition	Informal Definition	Modern Synonyms, Idioms, or Colloquial Expressions
adieu	goodbye	bye	
ague	illness, sickness, or fever	bug	
alack/alas	expression of sorrow, often an exclamation	Oh no!	
amiss	not right; wrong or out of place	wrong	
anon	in a little while; at once	in a second	
avaunt	Go away!	Get away!	
braggart	a person that brags or boast about accomplishments	a show-off	
doth	third person singular for <i>do</i>	does	
equivocator	a person who speaks ambiguously to hide the truth	a person who uses double speak	

fie	an exclamation to express disgust	Ugh!	
foisons	Scottish term for physical strength	energetic, strong	
hie	to go quickly	Hurry up!	
issue	archaic for <i>child</i> or <i>ancestor</i>	the child from a parent	
methought/methinks	I thought I think	N/A	
mirth	amusement, cheerfulness	happiness, enjoyment	
naught	nothing	all for nothing	
prithee	a polite request	please	
sirrah	a term used to address a servant or a person of lower stature	N/A	
unlineal	no direct descent in a family line	no children or heirs	
woe	sorrow, trouble, or concerns	sadness, problems	

RL.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

L.11-12.4 Determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases based on *grades 11–12 reading and content*, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies..