



AQA (A): Paper 1: core Shakespeare plays

AQA (B): Paper 1: Comedy and Tragedy core Shakespeare plays

WJEC (Eduqas): Paper 2: core Shakespeare plays

Past, present and future

Shakespeare and the story of English

Christopher Mulvey introduces an exciting project on the impact of Shakespeare's language

During the 400 years since Shakespeare's death, successive generations of scholars and theatrical practitioners have studied his language by the lights of their own times. The English Project is one of many institutions continuing such work in the present day (www.englishproject.org). What is special about this project is that it looks at Shakespearian language and performance in the context of globalised English, of variants of English elsewhere in the world and of the language's perpetual self-reinvention. Shakespeare's texts reveal where English comes from, what has gone into the making of English and even where English is going. But what do we mean by 'the language of Shakespeare'? It is a literary language — poetry, prose, his magnificent rhetoric, his blistering vocabulary. And it is obviously English — but not as we know it.

Beginnings and change

The English Shakespeare learned as a child is a descendant of Old English enriched by interaction with Danish, French and Latin. By the mid-sixteenth century at the time of Shakespeare's birth, the Old English (once called 'Anglo-Saxon' — the language of *Beowulf*) had long since become what historians of the language call Middle English and was on its way to Modern English. English has roots in Continental Europe and it arrived in the land that is now called 'England' when fifth-century migrants and invaders from the West Germanic regions brought their language over the North Sea and the Channel. ('England' and 'English' are derived from the name of one of the invading tribes, the Angles.) That English, Old English', was modified by Danish-speaking invaders (the Vikings) just as Middle English would be changed by French-speakers after the Norman Conquest. Shakespeare himself would not have used or known such terms, but the inventiveness of his English strongly suggests that he was conscious of how fluid English was, and its potential for growth and change. His English (which scholars call Early Modern English) was subject to the influence of scholars, clerics, civil servants and diplomats for whom Latin had been the

international language of communication but who then had to begin to conduct their transactions in the English language.

Global spread

Early Modern English was a language that few not born to it would bother to learn, yet by the time of Shakespeare's death in 1616, English could be heard in stations and settlements in Africa, Asia and America. In the seventeenth century it was still a language on which other languages made an impact, but by the nineteenth century, it had become a language that was making an impact on other languages. In the twenty-first century, that impact has become massive. The language of Shakespeare is now the global language, and though Spanish and Chinese have more native speakers, English as the leading medium for international communication is likely to prevail for some time to come.

There is nothing linguistically special about English and no intrinsic reason why it has achieved this commanding role. Any language that received the vocabulary boost that English received during the Renaissance, the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution could do the job. The worldwide British empire quite literally 'spread the word' and the USA now powers the dissemination of the language today. English became the language of shipping because the British navy dominated the oceans of the nineteenth century; it became the language of aviation because the USA dominated the skies of the twentieth century. Between them, the colonies of Britain and then the companies of the United States spread the English language. But it is not just the medium of travel and commerce. Cultural traffic relies on the global status of English, and Shakespeare continues to be a frequent flier. The impact of his verbal and theatrical language throughout the world is as exciting a subject for exploration as newly discovered countries were for his sea-faring contemporaries.

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