

# The English Project – The Tragedy of King Lear and Old English

Using ideas and quotes from Christopher Mulvey

## Learning Questions:

- How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?
- How did the Renaissance and European influences lead to further changes in Early Modern English?

# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

Blow, wind, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!  
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,  
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder,  
Strike flat the thick rotundity o' th' world!  
Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once  
That make ingrateful man!

*(King Lear Act 3, Scene 9)*

# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

## **Challenge!**

In the previous extract there is:

- One word from Celtic
- One word from Greek
- ten words from Latin and French
- Fifty-two from Old English

Use your etymological knowledge and common sense to find them all!

# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

It may be no surprise that there is only one word from Greek, 'cataracts', and even that came to English by way of Latin.

**Why do you think this is?**

It is something of a mystery that there is only one Celtic word. That word is 'Lear'. It derives from the name of the Celtic god Lir.

**Why do you think there are no words from Lir's language in Lear's speech?**

# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

**Let's go back in time....**

The invaders (Angles, Saxons, Jutes, to name a few) adopted almost no words from Brittonic, the Celtic language of the territory we now call England.

However, eventually those invaders did adopt some Brittonic stories.

**Why do you think the stories were adopted  
but not the language?**



# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

**Watch out for this common misconception!**

The old explanation for the absence of Brittonic words in English was that the Germanics swept the Celts west into Wales and Cornwall.

DNA analysis says that was not what happened. Germanic warriors took Celtic wives, and Celtic genes survive but hardly any Celtic words. There is 'brock' meaning 'badger'. There are Avon and Ouse both meaning 'river'. There is 'dad' meaning 'dad'. The limited list says something about those warriors and those wives, but it is not clear what it says.





# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

We date the history of the English language from the arrival in Britannia of those Germanics. That is an artificial, if convenient, starting point. The English language is as old as language itself.

Before it was English, it was West Germanic.

Before it was West Germanic, it was Germanic.

Before it was Germanic, it was Proto-Indo-European. That is the ancestor language of peoples from the Atlantic to the Urals and from the Himalayas to the Satpuras.

# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

The Indo-European language families of Western Europe are the Hellenic (including Greek), the Italic (including Latin and French), the Celtic (including Gaelic and Brittonic) and the Germanic (including English and German).

**Use a world map to find the places that these languages are spoken, do you notice anything interesting?**



# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

From 600 onwards, written records began to appear in Anglian, Mercian, West Saxon and Kentish, the four major dialects of Old English.

Kentish has left little trace in Modern English, but West Saxon gave rise to West Country English, Mercian to Midlands English and Anglian to North Country English and Scots.



# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

## Research task!

1. Use the internet to find examples of language from the West Country, the Midlands and the North and Scotland.
2. What are the key differences in these dialects and accents?

**Think about lexis, phonology particularly**



Mercian was the predecessor of Shakespeare's childhood English.

West Midland English is what Shakespeare spoke as a boy. It had its own accent, vocabulary and grammar.

These features, what the Victorians called Warwickshireisms, can be detected in his plays. Words and personal names provide the greatest number, but perhaps the most significant feature is a grammatical one.

West Midlanders said 'he walks' not 'he walketh'.



# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

- Shakespeare uses both 'walks' and 'walketh' in his plays.
- He regularly wrote 'he walketh'. He would have heard that in the speech of Londoners who came from the West Country.
- 'Walketh' had a rhythmically useful extra syllable, and Shakespeare took advantage of that as and when needed.



# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

People came to London speaking every kind of English, but, primarily, London's English was East Midland English.

That was the dialect closest to Shakespeare's own, and, at the West End of London, East Midland English was turning itself into a prestige dialect.

**What is meant by 'a prestige dialect'?**

**What could have contributed to it becoming prestigious?**



# How did the Renaissance and European influences lead to further changes in Early Modern English?

At the same time, English was turning itself into a learned language so that it could be a vehicle for every kind of knowledge.

To do that, written English was regularizing its spelling and grammar and expanding its vocabulary. Between 1500 and 1700, it took some 20,000 words from Latin.



How was Early Modern English influenced  
by features of Old English?

**Research!**

How was this step towards standardising  
English related to the Renaissance (especially  
the link with Latin)?



# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

The influx of neologisms and borrowings caused some scholars to worry about whether there would be anything English left in the English language at all!

They thought that the changing language was bad for society and education, and that language should be stopped from changing.

These people took a **prescriptivist** approach to language.



# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

We know that English language is a fluid, ever growing language and that change is inevitable. But did the prescriptivists have a point?

**Was the English language losing touch  
with its roots?**

How was Early Modern English influenced  
by features of Old English?

**Let's look back at Shakespeare's King  
Lear to investigate this ourselves.**

# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

This requires a different approach to words than a study of their origins.

We need to look both at the classes of words that make a language function and at the kinds of language that Shakespeare gave his characters.

# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

We can separate the grammatical word classes into two groups:

## **Open class – the lexical/content word classes**

These tell us what a sentence is actually about.

## **Closed class – the grammatical/function word classes**

These help to give more grammatical meaning to a sentence.



# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

Open class	Closed class
Nouns Verbs Adjectives Open-type adjectives	Determiners Prepositions Modal verbs Pronouns Closed-type adjectives Conjunctions

**Look back at the extract from King Lear.**

- 1. In one colour highlight the open class words, and in another highlight the closed class words**
- 2. Look back at the starter activity. Do you notice anything about the word class and the origin of the word?**

Blow, wind, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!  
You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,  
Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,  
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*(King Lear Act 3, Scene 9)*



# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

In the closed-class words, there is not one of French or Latin origin.

- 1. What could this indicate about the influences on language at the time?**
- 2. Think about the emotions that King Lear is expressing in this extract, how could that be related to Shakespeare's language choices?**



# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

Languages borrow open-class words from other languages all the time. They do not borrow closed-class words.

However, there is an exception to that rule: English has borrowed pronouns (and much else) from another language.

# How was Early Modern English influenced by features of Old English?

Joseph Bosworth and Thomas Toller's *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* contains some 10,000 headwords.

Most of them we are still using in everyday speech. They might be called the root vocabulary of English.

In Bosworth and Toller, we find all of Lear's closed-class words: all, and, at, have, my, of, once, our, that, the, thou, till, to, you, your. Several are repeated several times.

## The next stage of research:

- Research Samuel Johnson and the problems he had with his dictionary
- Explore the grammatical rules that the prescriptivists established and which ones we still use today.