

Cooper Cherry

Laird

English 3319

April 27, 2004

The English of *Julius Caesar*

At the time of Shakespeare's writings there was a greater amount of plasticity to the language than today. There were no dictionaries, and spelling left to the discretion of the author. It was impossible to appeal to grammar books as well; as they were not published until the 17th century. Also, emphasis on word order was not quite as strict as it is today. Shakespeare's English is very close to our own; there are only a few subtleties that separate his dialect from our own. This becomes apparent when examining the: grammar, syntax, spelling, and vocabulary of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. There is much less of a difference between early modern English as there is between Old English and Middle English.

First we shall examine Shakespeare's grammar, and more precisely his use of pronouns. During Shakespeare's time the pronouns thee, thy, thine, and thou coexisted with the pronoun you. In act I, scene I of *Julius Caesar* we have Flavius addressing a commoner "Speak, what trade art thou?" (*J.C.* I.I.7). Flavius' use of the TH form of the pronoun indicates to us that Flavius is speaking to someone who is beneath him in social

standing. The Y form of the pronoun was the more familiar and polite way to address someone. This difference in pronoun usage is directly related to the French and Latin influence on the English language. During Shakespeare's time this distinction was still relatively present. We find both forms of pronouns throughout his writings. Another, better example of this usage is when Marullus addresses the commoner asking him "What dost thou with thy best apparel on?" (*J.C. I.I.10*). Once again, a commoner is addressed with the TH form of the pronoun. We have since dropped the Th pronouns from our parlance, and now the y forms are used solely. When the second commoner addresses Marullus he uses the Y form of the pronoun "Nay, I beseech you, sir, be not out with me: yet, if you be out, sir, I can mend you." (*J.C. I.I.16-17*). The commoner is addressing someone of higher social standing than himself; therefore he uses the Y form of the pronoun. The Y form is the more polite and respectful form of the pronoun. It is the Y forms of pronouns that have survived to be the sole usage in present-day English. During Shakespeare's time both the eth verb ending form and the es form were in usage. We have since ceased to use the eth endings on verbs. The eth verbs were somewhat tied to the th forms of pronouns. The eth endings were much less likely to be used in conjunction with the y forms of pronouns.

Many peculiar variations of grammatical structures appear throughout his works. One of the peculiarities of Shakespeare's use of English is that his verbs do not always agree with his subjects. Shakespeare commonly would use a singular verb for a plural subject. This is exemplified in the quote, "Three parts of him is ours already," (*J.C.I.iii.154-55*). Shakespeare also uses double comparisons. This can be exemplified in the quote, "With the most boldest and best hearts of Rome," (*J.C.II.i.121*). Shakespeare sometimes what we would consider to incorrect forms of pronouns as in the following, "What conquest brings he home? What tributaries follow him to Rome" (*J.C.I.i.24-25*). Him should be substituted in this case instead of he. What seems very curious is that the line immediately following the misuse of pronoun case is followed by the correct usage. One must simply attribute this to the lack of grammatical authority. In addition to the use of double comparisons, Shakespeare also used double negatives. In present-day English this is considered an error; however, in Shakespeare's time double negatives were used to emphasize something. Shakespeare substituted parts of speech for each other as well, most notably with nouns and verbs.

Next we shall examine Shakespeare's syntax. There was more plasticity in word order during Shakespeare's time. A typical sentence in English follows the pattern: subject, verb, and then

object. This same pattern was true during Shakespeare's time; however, he was much more likely to switch the order around than in present-day English. Often he would invert this order. In the quote "Go you down that way towards the Capitol," the verb comes before the subject and object (*J.C.* I.I.55). Another example is when Brutus says to Cassius "Vexed I am," (*J.C.* I.II.46). This sentence structure is: object, subject, followed by verb. In present-day English this statement would be, "I am vexed," this follows the standard pattern of: subject, verb, and then object. The quote "Stand you directly in Antonius' way," exhibits Shakespeare's utilization of the polite Y form of the pronoun as well as an example of rearranged syntax. The structure of this sentence is verb, subject, followed by object. In present-day English this sentence would be, "You stand directly in Antonius' way."

Shakespeare took a great amount of license in spelling. There were no English dictionaries during his lifetime, so spelling was very arbitrary. There was very little, if any uniformity in spelling. Shakespeare took great liberties with apostrophe usage. For example, in the quote When Brutus says to Cassius "Be not deceiv'd: if I have veil'd my look," the apostrophe takes the place of the ed ending (*J.C.* I.II.44). This is not a formal convention of written modern English. In formal writing, contractions are not allowed. Contractions are most

commonly utilized in dialogue or when representing dialect. Contractions, though they are not recognized as formal written modern English do have a set usage. Certain verbs have informal status as verbs that are allowed to be used in contractions. Though Shakespeare is writing dialogue, the more likely explanation of his liberties with contractual endings is that he simply felt at liberty to do so at his whim.

Lastly we shall examine Shakespeare's use of vocabulary. As one might expect, many of the words Shakespeare uses have dropped from common usage or changed meaning. Many examples of archaic vocabulary permeate *Julius Caesar*. The verb pray as used in "I pray you, do," has passed out of common usage (*J.C. I.II.33*). During Shakespeare's time this verb meant "To ask earnestly, humbly, or supplicatingly, to beseech; to make devout petition to; to ask (a person) for something as a favour or act of grace" (OED). Today, the verb pray's meaning has narrowed to the specifically religious denotation. Another verb that has passed out of usage is the verb wont. Cassius uses this verb as he says to Brutus "I have not from your eyes that gentleness And show of love as I was wont to have," (*J.C. I.II.39-40*). The Oxford English Dictionary defines wont as "To make (a person, etc.) accustomed or used to (occas. with)." Unlike pray, which has narrowed in usage, wont has simply completely dropped out of usage.

The English language has undergone many changes throughout its relatively short history. Though not as radical as the differences between other stages in the development of the English language; there are many notable differences in Shakespeare's English, and its modern equivalent. These differences can be observed in the categories of: grammar, syntax, spelling, and vocabulary. Upon study of these four categories, it becomes clear that the English language has been, and will always be in a perpetual state of transition.

Works Cited

Craig, W.J., ed. "Julius Caesar." *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*. London: Oxford University Press: 1914;
Bartleby.com, 2000. 3 May 2004
<<http://www.bartleby.com/70/>>.

Oxford English Dictionary. Ed. J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989. OED Online. Texas State University-San Marcos Alkek Lib., San Marcos, TX. 3 May 2004 <<http://dictionary.oed.com/>>.