

Using *The Oxford English Dictionary*: A Checklist for Students

The Oxford English Dictionary (2nd ed.) is an indispensable tool for studying literature in English, especially in the case of writers from earlier periods such as Spenser, Shakespeare, and Milton. Use the checklist below as a guide for using the *OED* to develop arguments about the poetic function of particular words and how they affect the meaning or meanings of the literary works you are studying. This handout is mainly meant for Shakespeare students, but the guidelines can be adapted to the study of any English poet.

- Does the word have connotations that you weren't previously aware of? What are they?
- Is the word archaic or obsolete, or is it still in use today?
- Does the word have connotations in Shakespeare's time that it has since lost?
- Does the word contain a meaning for us that wasn't available to Shakespeare?
- When, and how, and through whom did the word enter the English language?
- Was Shakespeare the first person to use the word? If so, where does the word first appear, and in what context?
- Did the word continue to be widely used after Shakespeare?
- Can the word be used as a different part of speech (e.g., can it function as both a noun and a verb)? Was Shakespeare the first writer to use it as a different part of speech?
- Make sure you look at the definitions of a word's cognates—do they make you think about the word differently? The etymology of the word is usually included in the most simple form of the word, and similar sounding words might have different etymologies.
- What is the etymology of the word? Is the word Latinate or Anglo-Saxon (or Arabic, or Greek)? Are there etymological meanings of the word that Shakespeare might be playing on?
- What other writers use this word in Shakespeare's time, and in the three or four decades before and after Shakespeare wrote his major works? How does Shakespeare's use of the word compare to that of other authors?
- Look up the word in *The Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare* [REF PR2892 .S62]. How many times does Shakespeare use the word (and its cognates)? Are there particular plays in which the word appears frequently? How does Shakespeare use the word in other places?
- Look up the word in Williams's *Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Language* [PR 2829 .W55 1997] or *Shakespeare's Bawdy* [PR2892 .P27 1961] as well. You may want to check these specialized lexica even if you don't see an obviously sexual meaning in your word.

Comments:

- ▶ Remember to consult the list of abbreviations at the beginning of each volume of the *OED*.
- ▶ The bibliography at the end of volume 20 will help you track down the sources of the historical references quoted in the *OED*.
- ▶ Pay close attention to the word's part of speech. The meanings associated with one form of the word may or may not be relevant to others.
- ▶ If you use the online version of the *OED* make sure you use the "browse" function—this most closely simulates the way you would use the dictionary in the library. (Avoid the "search" function unless you really know what you're doing).