

## *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 their meanings in the literary works you are studying.

- 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).

## **OED Reports**

Use the guidelines on the previous page as the basis for a brief report that you will share with the class (a written version of your report will be handed in to me to be graded).

As you read a play or poem by Shakespeare, choose several words that seem to you to be particularly evocative, moving, funny, exotic, erotic, beautiful, or disturbing (if your analysis focuses on a sonnet or a speech in a play, look up *all* the words). You don't need to choose words that are unfamiliar to you—in fact, one of the aims of this exercise is to help you think about how Shakespeare exploits unconventional meanings of common words. Words that Shakespeare returns to again and again (especially within a single work) are also good candidates for investigation. Go to the library and look up your words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition (this is a substantial revision of the first edition, which is now largely obsolete), and after browsing for a while select one word that you think merits a more careful investigation. Although a version of the *OED* is available online at the Longwood University Library's web site (use the "browse" function if you consult this), I urge you make the trip to the library and spend some time indulging in the physical presence of this great scholarly achievement. It is a dictionary that is meant to be browsed in, read, and contemplated. Be sure to take a copy of the play or poem to the library with you so that your reflections can be guided by the context in which the word appears. Following the guidelines below, use the *OED* to develop **your own thoughts on what you think Shakespeare is trying to achieve (poetically, philosophically, dramatically) by using this word.**

Keep in mind that you don't need to answer or address all of these questions—part of your job is to use the questions and suggestions above as a guide to negotiating Shakespeare's language, and this involves developing an instinct for which questions are relevant, and which questions are not. If Shakespeare is not the first person to use the word, and the word has been around since the twelfth century, you don't need to point this out, unless you think Shakespeare is playing on a medieval meaning that is no longer current in Elizabethan English (e.g., "orgulous" in the opening lines of *Troilus and Cressida*). It's when Shakespeare appears to be using the word for the first time that this information might be meaningful. At the same time, don't spend three-quarters of a page talking about the etymology of the word unless you can honestly argue that Shakespeare is using the etymology to achieve something in his poetry. Also, if the word is used twenty or thirty times in a play, don't try to talk about every instance. Identify some general patterns of usage, and select a few examples to make your point.

Remember: Your goal is to use the *OED* to show how Shakespeare's language derives its power from the use of specific words and meanings. It's not enough simply to point out the definition of a word and move on—you must carefully explain *why* Shakespeare has chosen one word over others, and this often requires a considerable amount of contemplation and imagination on your own part (not to mention a great deal of time with your nose in the dictionary and concordance). And remember that Shakespeare is fond of ambiguity and contrariety—look for places where he appears to be drawing on multiple, and even contradictory meanings of words.