

Early Modern Lexicons & Lexical Changes

Fortunately for us, many Early Modern English lexicons, including some early dictionaries, are available online at LEME: <http://leme.library.utoronto.ca.ezp-prod1.hul.harvard.edu/>. First, explore a little. Recommended: click on the “Lexicons” tab, then “By Genre,” then “Hard Words.” Here you will find such gems as *The French Cook* and *The Mystery of Astronomy*. (Make sure you click “Show..... displayable texts” at the top of the page, lest you be sorely disappointed by the handful of texts that are catalogued but not available through the website.) Find three totally unfamiliar words and write them down. Come to section prepared to share & discuss. (Collect them all!)

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)

Next:

The biggest challenge to the modern reader of Early Modern texts is not obsolete words, but deceptively familiar ones. Listed here are some words that anyone today should recognize: all of them, however, have undergone fundamental and fascinating changes during or since the Early Modern period. Using LEME resources (or, in a pinch, the OED), try to answer these lexical riddles. Some may not have a clear answer, but all should provoke thought.

Villain – Said Lancelot Andrews in a sermon before the Queen, 1590: “*They be men, and not beasts; freemen, and not villains.*” In what sense was he using the word “villain”? Take a look at its etymology. Surprised? Why would association with this Latin root imply that someone is the opposite of a “freeman”? (If you can’t find the answer to this last question, speculate!)

Sentence – Shakespeare in *The Rape of Lucrece* writes: “Who fears a sentence or an old man's saw / Shall by a painted cloth be kept in awe.” What is the meaning of “sentence” here? (Hint: it’s not “judgment, decree”.) What degree of weight or seriousness does the word seem to carry? Try to find an earlier, pre-modern instance of the word. (Hint: Chaucer uses it a lot...) Does its weight / connotation differ? Finally: is the Early Modern sense of the word alive today – in some related adjective, perhaps?

Time – Richard Hooker writes in *Of the lawes of ecclesiasticall politie* (1597): “Now as Nature bringeth forth Time with Motion, so wee by Motion haue learned how to diuide Time, and by the smaller parts of Time, both to measure the greater, and to know how long all things else indure.” (Makes sense, right?) In your own words, describe what “time” means here. Now try to find that particular sense in the OED. Surprised by how far down it is? What are the earliest senses of the word? Did they persist in the Early Modern period?

Genius – Consider the following: 1) “There is none but he / Whose being I do fear: and, under him, / My Genius is rebuked; as, it is said, / Mark Antony's was by Caesar.” (MacBeth); 2) “He was so forlorn that his dimensions to any thick sight were invisible. He was the very genius of famine; yet lecherous as a monkey, and the whores call'd him mandrake.” (Henry IV part 2). Is the meaning of the word “genius” the same in these two passages? If not, how does it differ? Do either of these senses persist today? Finally, was the modern definition (e.g. Einstein) in use in the Early Modern period?

Wench – Nicolas Udall, paraphrasing Erasmus on the New Testament (1548), writes: “To whom it had been an happie chaunce to haue brought foorth a wenche, but a mucche more luckie happe it was, to haue brought foorth a soonne.” Does “wench” here mean anything apart from “girl”? Did its modern, derogatory sense occur in the Early Modern period? Can you think of any modern words that have both a negative and a neutral connotation? What linguistic or cultural mechanism prevents us from confusing them?