



The big impact of a little word: / in Shakespeare and beyond

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Point of departure ...

- / is typically omitted from Shakespearean dictionaries (e.g. Crystal and Crystal 2002; Onions 1986), presumably on the assumption that:
 - (a) their meanings are obvious (because they are considered more or less the same as those of today), and
 - (b) they do not contribute much to understanding Shakespeare.

How was the 1st person singular pronoun said?

Shakespeare's was writing roughly half-way through the Great Vowel Shift.

i: > əɪ > aɪ

(cf. Crystal 2016)

But of course the older pronunciation was available as well (as today)

How was the 1st person singular pronoun written?

- Always “I”
- But the 1st person pronoun did not have a monopoly: it competed with the affirmative “Aye”, e.g.

Ros . Did your brother tell you how I counterfeyted to sound,
when he shew 'd me your handkercher?

Orl . I, and greater wonders then that. (AYL)

In the First Folio (1623), there are at least 302 instances of / (= Aye) out of 20,293 instances of / (1st pers. pronoun), i.e. about 1.5% of /.

Exploiting the ambiguity for light humour

[Speed and Protheus in Shakespeare's *Two Gentlemen of Verona*,
act 1, scene 1, First Folio 1623]

Pro. But what said she?

Sp. I.

Pro. Nod-I, why that's noddy.

Sp. You mistooke Sir: I say she did nod;
And you aske me if she did nod, and I say I.

Pro. And that set together is noddy.

A further homophone: / and *eye*

To me, fair friend, you never can be old,
For as you were when first your eye I eyed,
Such seems your beauty still. (Sonnet 104)

Sin of self-love possesseth all mine eye
And all my soul and all my every part;
And for this sin there is no remedy,
It is so grounded inward in my heart.
(Sonnet 62)

/ and the most frequent words in Shakespeare

<i>Shakespeare</i>	<i>Present-day Spoken English (BNC)</i>	<i>Present-day Written English (BNC)</i>
the and I to of a you my that in	the I you and it a 's to of that	the of and a in to (inf.) is to (prep.) was it

I and its most frequent collocates in Shakespeare

Top collocate one to the right (according to Log-ratio, a measure of *how big the difference is* between the (relative) frequency of the collocate alongside the node, and its (relative) frequency in the rest of the corpus): **am**

I-identity

Were I the Moor I would not be Iago
In following him I follow but myself...

... I am not what I am. (*Othello* 1.1.57)

/ and its most frequent collocates in Shakespeare

Top 25 collocates one to the right:

am, thanke, prethee, warrant, protest, pray, humbly, prythee,
beseech, hope, dare, saw, thinke, know, knew, could, owe,
perceive, will, wil, meane, have, would, can, have, feele, told,
doubt, have

/ and its most frequent collocates in Shakespeare

Expressing states: am

Expressing thoughts and feelings: hope, dare, saw, thinke, know, knew, perceive, feele, doubt

Doing relational work: thanke, prethee, pray, humbly, prythee, beseech, owe, protest

Securing meaning: warrant, meane,

Narrative (speech presentation): told

Other: can, could, will/wil, would, have, had, would

I and the most frequent three-word expressions in Shakespeare

Shakespeare	EModE Plays	Present-day Plays
I pray you I will not I know not I am a I am not my good lord there is no I would not it is a and I will	it is a what do you and I will it is not I have a I will not in the world I tell you I know not I warrant you	I don't know what do you I don't want do you think do you want I don't think to do with do you know going to be don't want to

Three-word lexical bundles in order of frequency (coloured items appear in another column)

Data in 2nd and 3rd columns draw from Culpeper and Kytö (2010)

Three word expressions in present-day plays

- In the Present-day Play-texts one can discern many fragments of questions; there is only one question fragment in the Early Modern data: WHAT DO YOU.
- Present-day questions orientate to beliefs, thoughts, wants and feelings. Note the high frequency of private verbs (*know, want, think*).
- Present-day Play-texts deploy the adjacency pair question as a central mechanism in not only creating the interaction but indirectly revealing information for the audience.

Theatrical context: The stage and staging



The adjacency pair in present-day drama

Frank What I want to know is what is it that's suddenly led you to this?

Rita What? Comin' here?

Frank Yes.

Rita It's not sudden.

Frank Ah.

Rita I've been realizin' for ages that I was, y' know, slightly out of step. I'm twenty-six. I should have had a baby by now; everyone expects it. I'm sure me husband thinks I'm sterile. [...]

Willy Russell, *Educating Rita*, 1981, p.8

Theatrical context: The stage and staging



Purpose-built outdoor theatres:

The Theatre (1576),
The Curtain (1577),
The Rose (1587),
The Swan (1595),
The Globe (1599), and
The Fortune (1600).

Three word expressions in EModE plays

-
- A trend in the Early Modern data is for the lexical bundle to begin with a first person pronoun
 - Especially notable trend for Shakespeare, where it combines with verbs relating to states, desires and knowledge. *I pray you* is most distinctive.
 - Perhaps reflects a tendency for characters to present themselves (and others) relatively directly (including via soliloquies and asides).

I in Shakespeare's soliloquies (Sean Murphy)

- 1,600 instances of I (1,801 with I'll)
- Most frequent collocates: WILL, 'LL, SHALL
- Frequent clusters: I WILL BE, I WILL NOT, BUT I WILL, WELL I WILL.

Therefore, **I will be** sudden and dispatch. *King John* IV.i

I'll have her **but I will not** keep her long *Richard III* I.ii

Well, I will look further into it; *The Merry Wives of Windsor* II.i

- Makes the reader / listener aware of the speaker's resolve, be it volition, obligation or future intention, thus characterising, and creating expectations as to the direction of the plot.
- On 31 occasions, determination is expressed by inverting the pronoun and auxiliary after adverbs such as *now*, *here* and *then*, for emphasis: "**Now will I** [go] to the Goths" *Titus Andronicus* III.i

I and Desdemona

TOTAL	2753
I	132
my	79
and	61
you	60
to	57
not	48
me	47
do	44
the	41
him	41
lord	39
that	38

I and Desdemona

Desdemona's keywords

	Raw freq.	Log-L.	LogRatio
prithee	8	16.47	3.24
lord	39	64.82	2.74
lost	7	10.4	2.53
alas	8	8.7	2.04
him	41	24.75	1.41
do	44	19.64	1.18
my	79	28.03	1.03
me	47	11.61	0.84
i	132	26.85	0.76

For Othello: *I* is ranked 109, *me* 70 and *my* 74

I and Desdemona

-
- I am very sorry that you are not well
 - I am most unhappy in the loss of it
 - I have not deserved this
 - you are the lord of duty, I am hitherto your daughter
 - That I did love the Moor to live with him
 - O! but I fear - How lost you company?
 - I am not merry, but I do beguile
 - I have no judgment in an honest face
 - Tell me, Othello: I wonder in my soul,
 - I do not know; I am sure I am none such

Summary/conclusions in brief

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- /, as a triple homophone, affords some creativity.
 - / plays an important role in creating character identities (in expressing states, thoughts and feelings, and constructing character relations), and in speech report.
 - / is particularly frequent in Shakespeare, especially as part of three-word bundles (*I pray you* being most distinctive).
 - It is key to soliloquies.
 - It is key to certain characters, e.g. Desdemona

It should not be ignored!