



# Shakespeare's Weird Words

## #2: Ways of saying yes and no, contractions, and shortened words

### Ways of saying yes and no

We still sometimes hear these old-fashioned words for *yes* and *no*. Think of the phrase, *All in favour, say "ay"*, when a group is making a decision.

Weird word	Meaning	Example
ay	yes	<b>Say ay and be the captain of us all.</b> In <i>The Two Gentlemen of Verona</i> , an outlaw wants Valentine to say 'yes' to a request to join them and be their leader.
nay	no	<b>Nay, that I will not.</b> In <i>The Two Gentlemen of Verona</i> , Julia says 'no' to Lucetta's suggestion of forgetting about Proteus and staying home.
yea	yes	<b>I am weary; yea, my memory is tired.</b> In <i>Coriolanus</i> , Martius is so tired after the battle that remembering a name is too difficult.



### Contractions

Shakespeare sometimes combines two words into one by using an apostrophe. We do the same thing today with words like *it's* and *don't*.

Weird word	Meaning	Example
is't	is it	<b>Is't possible?</b> So many unbelievable things happen in Shakespeare's plays that characters ask this question more than twenty times.
'tis	it is	<b>...'tis wonder that enwraps me thus...</b> In <i>Twelfth Night</i> , Sebastian tries to make sense of the fact that the rich, beautiful stranger, Olivia, has proposed marriage.
'twill	it will	<b>I dare lay any money 'twill be nothing yet.</b> In <i>Twelfth Night</i> , Sir Toby is willing to bet that Sir Andrew's proposed fight with Cesario will come to nothing.

## Shortened words

Shakespeare sometimes uses an apostrophe to shorten a word. We often do a similar thing today when we drop syllables or sounds in words because we're speaking quickly (for example, *wassup* instead of *what's up*, which is in turn a shortened form of the words *what is up*). Often, Shakespeare dropped sounds to make a word fit the metre of a poetic line.

Weird word	Meaning	Example
e'er	ever	<b>I love her ten times more than e'er I did.</b> In <i>The Taming of the Shrew</i> , Petruchio says this when hearing about Katharina's boldness.
even	evening	<b>I am very glad to see you. Good even, sir.</b> In <i>Hamlet</i> , the title character greets Horatio, a friend from university, in this way. 'Even' doesn't always mean evening; it's usually just in the phrase 'Good even' that it has that meaning.
ne'er	never	<b>I ne'er saw true beauty till this night.</b> In <i>Romeo &amp; Juliet</i> , Romeo says this upon seeing Juliet, in spite of having spent the first part of the play in love with someone else.
o'er	over	<b>These vows are Hermia's. Will you give her o'er?</b> In <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , Helena challenges Lysander's expressions of love. To <i>give over</i> means to abandon. It's a common usage in Shakespeare's plays.
oft	often	<b>Striving to better, oft we mar what's well.</b> In <i>King Lear</i> , Albany gives this warning to Goneril.
ope	open	<b>Winking mary-buds begin to ope their golden eyes</b> This song from <i>Cymbeline</i> describes marigold buds coming into bloom.

Sources for definitions:

*Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary & Language Companion*, by David Crystal and Ben Crystal (Penguin, 2002).  
Oxford English Dictionary Online, accessed through the Vancouver Public Library (2022)

## Explore

Using your newfound knowledge, see if you can figure out what each of these lines means:

<b>Nay, certainly, there is no truth in him.</b>	<b>What is't, a spirit?</b>
<b>'Tis partly my own fault.</b>	<b>'Tis no matter.</b>
<b>Who would e'er suppose They had such courage and audacity?</b>	<b>Is't so?</b>
<b>What time o' day?</b>	<b>Let's be calm.</b>
<b>Come, sit thee down upon this flow'ry bed.</b>	<b>Was't you he rescued?</b>
<b>With love's light wings I did o'erperch these walls.</b>	<b>I will not do't.</b>
<b>I wonder if Titania be awak'd.</b>	<b>I have met him oft.</b>
<b>Before you fight the battle, ope this letter.</b>	<b>Nay, I'll read it first.</b>



## Create!

Now that you know what these words mean, try using them in your own writing.

## So, who says these lines?

Here's who says each of the quotes on page 3, and in which play. (Tip: don't read this part before completing your exploration and reflection!)

**Nay, certainly, there is no truth in him.**

Celia in *As You Like It*

**What is't, a spirit?**

Miranda in *The Tempest*

**'Tis partly my own fault.**

Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

**'Tis no matter.**

Oliver Martext in *As You Like It*  
is just one example

**Who would e'er suppose  
They had such courage and audacity?**

Duke of Alençon in *Henry the Sixth, Part 1*

**Is't so?**

Princess of France in *Love's Labour's Lost*

**With love's light wings I did o'erperch these walls**

Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*

**Was't you he rescued?**

Rosalind in *As You Like It*

**What time o' day?**

Berowne in *Love's Labours Lost*

**Let's be calm.**

Menenius in *Coriolanus*

**Come, sit thee down upon this flow'ry bed**

Titania in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

**I will not do't**

The title character in *Coriolanus*

**I wonder if Titania be awak'd.**

Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

**I have met him oft.**

Silvius in *As You Like It*

**Before you fight the battle, ope this letter.**

Edgar in *King Lear*

**Nay, I'll read it first**

First Soldier in *All's Well that Ends Well*