

Ask about English

Archaic English

A question from Mechekef in Algeria:

I would like to ask a question and I would be very thankful if you answered it. Sometimes you write 'had' as 'hath', 'give' as 'giveth' and 'should' as 'shouldst'. I can not understand this method of writing. I'll give you an example to explain clearly my question: 'Thou seest their eyes overflow with tears.' I look forward to your reply.

Sian Harris answers:

Hi there, thanks for your question. This is a really interesting one.

In some very old forms of English you will see these type of words – 'thou', 'giveth' 'hast' etc – most notably in certain religious texts such as The Bible or possibly English translations of The Qur'an. In other words, these forms are what we call 'archaic', meaning they're not in active use anymore, other than in either religious or ancient texts, or as they appear in literature and other forms of writing from previous centuries.

A specialist in the development and history of English would perhaps be able to tell you more about the origins and the use of the specific words in your example, but most of them would have been in use from around the 15th century onwards in a form now known by academics as 'Early Modern English'.

Although this was by no means used consistently if one examines different texts from the time, by about the 18th century, these forms were not so widely used and I can clarify that nowadays we would definitely not see or hear these in typical situations, spoken or written. In today's English, 'thou' would always be replaced with 'you', for example, 'seest' with 'see' and so on.

Audio available online at:

www.bbclearningenglish.com/radio/specials/1535_questionanswer

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