(*Although you may have heard people refer to William Shakespeare’s writing as “Old English” or “Middle English,” those people are mistaken: “Old English” refers to English as it was spoken about 700 years before Shakespeare was born, and “Middle English” to the version of the language from about 250 years before Shakespeare was born. So that you can see for yourself how mistaken they are, here are some samples of what* ***Old English*** *and* ***Middle English*** *actually looked like, excerpted from the most famous works of literature written in them.*)

**the opening lines of *BEOWULF* (written approximately 750 AD; author unknown)**

Hwæt! We Gar-Dena    in gear-dagum

þeod-cyninga,    þrym gefrunon,

hu ða æþelingas    ellen fremedon!

Oft Scyld Scefing    sceaþena þreatum

monegum mægþum    meodo-setla ofteah,

egsode eorlas    syððan ærest wearð

feasceaft funden.    He þæs frofre gebad,

weox under wolcnum,    weorð-myndum þah,

oðæt him æghwylc    þara ymb-sittendra

ofer hron-rade    hyran scolde,

gomban gyldan.    Þæt wæs god cyning!

**the opening lines of *THE CANTERBURY TALES* (written 1387 by Geoffrey Chaucer)**

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote

The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,

And bathed every veyne in swich licour

Of which vertu engendred is the flour,

Whan Zephirus eek with his sweete breeth

Inspired hath in every holt and heeth

The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne

Hath in the Ram his halve cours yronne,

And smale foweles maken melodye,

That slepen al the nyght with open ye

(so priketh hem Nature in hir corages),

Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,

And palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,

To ferne halwes, kowthe in sondry londes;

And specially from every shires ende

Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,

The hooly blisful martir for to seke,

That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.

(*As you can see, Shakespeare’s writing is comparatively much easier to understand!*)

**Jacques’s speech from *As You Like It* (II.vii) – William Shakespeare (1599)**

 All the world's a stage,

And all the men and women merely players:

They have their exits and their entrances;

And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,

Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms.

And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel

And shining morning face, creeping like snail

Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,

Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad

Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,

Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,

Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,

Seeking the bubble reputation

Even in the cannon's mouth. And then the justice,

In fair round belly with good capon lined,

With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,

Full of wise saws and modern instances;

And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts

Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,

With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,

His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide

For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,

Turning again toward childish treble, pipes

And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,

That ends this strange eventful history,

Is second childishness and mere oblivion,

Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

**“The Flea” – John Donne (1631)**

Mark but this flea, and mark in this,
How little that which thou deniest me is;
It suck'd me first, and now sucks thee,
And in this flea our two bloods mingled be.
Thou know'st that this cannot be said
A sin, nor shame, nor loss of maidenhead;
    Yet this enjoys before it woo,
    And pamper'd swells with one blood made of two;
    And this, alas! is more than we would do.

O stay, three lives in one flea spare,
Where we almost, yea, more than married are.
This flea is you and I, and this
Our marriage bed, and marriage temple is.
Though parents grudge, and you, we're met,
And cloister'd in these living walls of jet.
    Though use make you apt to kill me,
    Let not to that self-murder added be,
    And sacrilege, three sins in killing three.

Cruel and sudden, hast thou since
Purpled thy nail in blood of innocence?
Wherein could this flea guilty be,
Except in that drop which it suck'd from thee?
Yet thou triumph'st, and say'st that thou
Find'st not thyself nor me the weaker now.
 'Tis true; then learn how false fears be;
 Just so much honour, when thou yield'st to me,
 Will waste, as this flea's death took life from thee.

**excerpt from *Essay on Man* – Alexander Pope (1733)**

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| Know, then, thyself, presume not God to scan;The proper study of mankind is man.Placed on this isthmus of a middle state,A being darkly wise, and rudely great:With too much knowledge for the sceptic side,With too much weakness for the stoic’s pride,He hangs between; in doubt to act, or rest;In doubt to deem himself a god, or beast;In doubt his mind or body to prefer;Born but to die, and reasoning but to err;Alike in ignorance, his reason such,Whether he thinks too little, or too much:Chaos of thought and passion, all confused;Still by himself abused, or disabused;Created half to rise, and half to fall;Great lord of all things, yet a prey to all;Sole judge of truth, in endless error hurled:The glory, jest, and riddle of the world! Go, wondrous creature! mount where science guides,Go, measure earth, weigh air, and state the tides;Instruct the planets in what orbs to run,Correct old time, and regulate the sun;Go, soar with Plato to th’ empyreal sphere,To the first good, first perfect, and first fair;Or tread the mazy round his followers trod,And quitting sense call imitating God;As Eastern priests in giddy circles run,And turn their heads to imitate the sun.Go, teach Eternal Wisdom how to rule—Then drop into thyself, and be a fool! Superior beings, when of late they sawA mortal man unfold all Nature’s law,Admired such wisdom in an earthly shapeAnd showed a Newton as we show an ape. Could he, whose rules the rapid comet bind,Describe or fix one movement of his mind?Who saw its fires here rise, and there descend,Explain his own beginning, or his end?Alas, what wonder! man’s superior partUnchecked may rise, and climb from art to art;But when his own great work is but begun,What reason weaves, by passion is undone.**excerpt from *Jubilate Agno* – Christopher Smart (1763)**For I will consider my Cat Jeoffry. For he is the servant of the Living God duly and daily serving him.For at the first glance of the glory of God in the East he worships in his way.For this is done by wreathing his body seven times round with elegant quickness.For then he leaps up to catch the musk, which is the blessing of God upon his prayer.For he rolls upon prank to work it in.For having done duty and received blessing he begins to consider himself.For this he performs in ten degrees.For first he looks upon his forepaws to see if they are clean.For secondly he kicks up behind to clear away there.For thirdly he works it upon stretch with the forepaws extended.For fourthly he sharpens his paws by wood.For fifthly he washes himself.For sixthly he rolls upon wash.For seventhly he fleas himself, that he may not be interrupted upon the beat.For eighthly he rubs himself against a post.For ninthly he looks up for his instructions.For tenthly he goes in quest of food.For having consider'd God and himself he will consider his neighbour.For if he meets another cat he will kiss her in kindness.For when he takes his prey he plays with it to give it a chance.For one mouse in seven escapes by his dallying.For when his day's work is done his business more properly begins.For he keeps the Lord's watch in the night against the adversary.For he counteracts the powers of darkness by his electrical skin and glaring eyes.For he counteracts the Devil, who is death, by brisking about the life.For in his morning orisons he loves the sun and the sun loves him.For he is of the tribe of Tiger.For the Cherub Cat is a term of the Angel Tiger.For he has the subtlety and hissing of a serpent, which in goodness he suppresses.For he will not do destruction, if he is well-fed, neither will he spit without provocation.For he purrs in thankfulness, when God tells him he's a good Cat.For he is an instrument for the children to learn benevolence upon.For every house is incomplete without him and a blessing is lacking in the spirit.For the Lord commanded Moses concerning the cats at the departure of the Children of Israel from Egypt.For every family had one cat at least in the bag.For the English Cats are the best in Europe.For he is the cleanest in the use of his forepaws of any quadruped.For the dexterity of his defence is an instance of the love of God to him exceedingly.For he is the quickest to his mark of any creature.For he is tenacious of his point.For he is a mixture of gravity and waggery.For he knows that God is his Saviour.For there is nothing sweeter than his peace when at rest.For there is nothing brisker than his life when in motion.For he is of the Lord's poor and so indeed is he called by benevolence perpetually—Poor Jeoffry! Poor Jeoffry! The rat has bit thy throat.For I bless the name of the Lord Jesus that Jeoffry is better.For the divine spirit comes about his body to sustain it in complete cat.For his tongue is exceeding pure so that it has in purity what it wants in music.For he is docile and can learn certain things.For he can set up with gravity which is patience upon approbation.For he can fetch and carry, which is patience in employment.For he can jump over a stick which is patience upon proof positive.For he can spraggle upon waggle at the word of command.For he can jump from an eminence into his master's bosom.For he can catch the cork and toss it again.For he is hated by the hypocrite and miser.For the former is afraid of detection.For the latter refuses the charge.For he camels his back to bear the first notion of business.For he is good to think on, if a man would express himself neatly.For he made a great figure in Egypt for his signal services.For he killed the Ichneumon-rat very pernicious by land.For his ears are so acute that they sting again.For from this proceeds the passing quickness of his attention.For by stroking of him I have found out electricity.For I perceived God's light about him both wax and fire.For the Electrical fire is the spiritual substance, which God sends from heaven to sustain the bodies both of man and beast.For God has blessed him in the variety of his movements.For, tho he cannot fly, he is an excellent clamberer.For his motions upon the face of the earth are more than any other quadruped.For he can tread to all the measures upon the music.For he can swim for life.For he can creep.  |