

OAS Humanities Skill Module: The Oxford English Dictionary

“A skill module on using the dictionary?” you ask, “I learned how to use the dictionary in second grade!” Before you scoff too much at the prospect of exploring the wonders of the OED let’s take a short detour into the works of one of the greatest English poets, John Milton. In *Paradise Regain’d* Milton imagines a conversation between Satan and Jesus in which Satan make the following claim:

To whom the Tempter, impudent, replied:--
"I see all offers made by me how slight
Thou valuest, because offered, and reject'st.
Nothing will please the difficult and nice,
Or nothing more than still to contradict.
On the other side know also thou that I

On what I offer set as high esteem,
Nor what I part with mean to give for naught,
All these, which in a moment thou behold'st,
The kingdoms of the world, to thee I give
(For, given to me, I give to whom I please),
No trifle; yet with this reserve, not else--
On this condition, if thou wilt fall down,
And worship me as thy superior Lord
(Easily done), and hold them all of me;
For what can less so great a gift deserve?"

160

Take a few moments, imagine you are writing an literary analysis paper and explain in 200 words or so what you think Satan means when he make the statement “Nothing will please the difficult and the nice.”

Now go to the databases page on the library website (it’s under the “Research Tools” drop-down menu), click on the “O” in the alphabet on the top of the page, and then on the OED link. Enter the word “nice” into the “Find Word” box. You will notice that several possible entries appear depending on what part of speech you are searching for (noun, adjective, verb). Click on the first entry of “nice” and look at entry 1.a. Surprised? Does your literary analysis reflect the meaning of the term in Milton’s time?

Now write a few sentences about how your understanding of the Milton passage has changed. Perhaps you now understand the awesome power of the OED to help you understand texts from which you are historically distant!

The OED is a dictionary of the history of all words in the English language. It traces the meanings of words and how they change over time, along with charting their etymologies (their source languages – one of my favorite etymologies is from the word asphalt. It’s from the Classical Greek σφραλλειν, which means “to trip,” therefore a-sphallein, asphalt, is the place where you don’t trip!), when they were first used in print or manuscript, and how their spellings have changed. At the top of the “nice” entry you will see several buttons you can turn on to display these different parts of the entry.

Spend some time playing around with the OED; it's fun! When you've spent some time messing around with the different functions of the OED, choose one word you thought was particularly interesting and write 500 words telling me about it. Remember from now on NEVER to cite any other dictionary in a paper for your classes.