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Published in:
Notes and Queries

DOI:
[10.1093/notesj/gjx152](https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjx152)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Gregersen, S. (2017). 'To Dare Larks' in Early Modern English. *Notes and Queries*, 64(4), 537-540.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjx152>

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Gregersen, Sune. 2017. 'To dare larks' in Early Modern English. *Notes and Queries* 64(4), pp. 537–540. DOI: 10.1093/notesj/gjx152

This is a **preprint** version of a research note published in *Notes and Queries* by Oxford University Press. Please refer to the version of record, which can be found online at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjx152>.

PREPRINT

‘TO DARE LARKS’ IN EARLY MODERN ENGLISH

In Old and Middle English, the verb dare belonged to the inflectional class known as preterite-presents. As such, it lacked the usual present tense ending in the 3rd person sg. (OE dearr, ME dar) and had an irregular past tense form (e.g. OE dorste, ME durst, etc.).¹ However, from Early Modern English dare also occurs as a regular weak verb with the 3rd person sg. present tense form dares and the past tense form dared. The older past tense form durst eventually becomes obsolete in the written standard language, but survives until at least the nineteenth century in non-standard dialects.²

Such a change, a shift from an irregular to a regular inflectional class, is probably to be regarded as a conventional case of analogy. However, there is another change to dare in the Early Modern period which is harder to explain. Whereas in Old and Middle English the verb was generally used with infinitive phrases,³ from the late sixteenth century it is also attested with direct object noun phrases. The Oxford English Dictionary gives meanings such as ‘venture upon, run the risk of meeting, meet defiantly’ with inanimate objects:

A Crown’s worth tugging for, and I wil ha’t

Though in pursute I dare my ominous Fate.⁴

¹ Cf. the Oxford English Dictionary (s.v. dare v.¹) for forms and spelling variants.

² J. Wright, English Dialect Dictionary, Vol. II (London, 1906), s.v. dare v.¹.

³ Cf. the Dictionary of Old English (doe.utoronto.ca), s.v. dearr, and the Middle English Dictionary (quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med), s.v. durren v. Online sources accessed 18 Jun 2017.

⁴ 1611 T. HEYWOOD Golden Age I. sig. B2 (OED, s.v. dare v.¹, 4.).

With a person as the direct object, the meaning is ‘challenge or defy’: ‘What wisdom is this in you to dare your betters?’⁵ The OED also mentions the now obsolete pattern ‘dare sb. out’, as well as the pattern with a to-infinitive after the direct object, which is still used in Present-Day English: ‘dare sb. to do sth.’:

I dare him therefore
To lay his gay Comparisons a-part.⁶

The development of these transitive uses is mysterious in light of what is generally known about grammatical change: transitive verbs often change into auxiliary verbs that combine with infinitives, but changes in the other direction are considered exceptional by most linguists.⁷ Accordingly, the corresponding verbs in a number of related Germanic languages are not used transitively with the meaning ‘challenge, defy’.⁸

However, there may be an overlooked factor which can explain the development of this innovative transitive pattern. For there used to be another verb dare in English, indexed as dare v.² in the OED, which had weak morphology and could be used both intransitively and transitively in Early Modern English. The intransitive use with meanings such as ‘hide, cower, gaze’ appears to be the older one, and is attested quite frequently in Middle English, e.g. in The Owl and the Nightingale:

⁵ 1589 ‘M. MARPRELATE’ Hay any Worke for Cooper 37 (OED, s.v. dare v.¹, 5.a.).

⁶ a1616 SHAKESPEARE Antony & Cleopatra (1623) III. xiii. 24 (OED, s.v. dare v.¹, 5.b.)

⁷ Cf. e.g. B. Heine, Auxiliaries (Oxford, 1993), Ch. 2; T. Kuteva, Auxiliation (Oxford, 2001), 110f; P. J. Hopper & E. C. Traugott, Grammaticalization, 2nd edn. (Cambridge, 2003), Ch. 5.

⁸ E.g. Dutch durven (Woordenboek der Nederlandsche Taal, gtb.inl.nl), Swedish töras (Svenska Akademiens ordbok, saob.se), and Danish turde (Ordbog over det danske Sprog, ordnet.dk/ods). Online sources accessed 18 Jun 2017.

Ich mai i-son so wel so on hare

Theȝ ich bi daie sitte an dare.⁹

At some point a transitive pattern starts to occur, meaning ‘frighten, mesmerize’. The first attestation with this meaning in the OED is dated to 1547, but if the following example of a passive participle from the early 15th century is not a scribal error, we may antedate it with about a century:

Siles doun on aithire side selcuth kniȝtis,

Sum darid, sum dede, sum depe wondid.¹⁰

In the sixteenth century, we often find the verb used in the phrase to dare larks, which means to catch larks by mesmerizing them, either with a hobby or a ‘daring glass’ (cf. OED, s.v. daring n.²). Thomas Cranmer describes the practice when he criticizes an opponent for leading their discussion away from the heart of the matter, ‘Like vnto men that dare larkes, which holde vp an hoby, that the larkes eies beyng euer vpon the hoby, shuld not see the nette that is layd on theyr heades.’¹¹ Shakespeare refers to the practice in Henry VIII:

⁹ a1250 Owl & Nightingale 384 (OED, s.v. dare v.², 1.). There is also a single Old English attestation of the verb, apparently with the meaning ‘hide’, cf. DOE, s.v. darian v.

¹⁰ a1400–50 Alexander 3044 (OED, s.v. dare v.², adj.). The dictionary classifies this as a derived adjective and mentions that another MS. has the variant <dasyd>.

¹¹ 1551 T. CRANMER Answer S. Gardiner 121 (OED, s.v. dare v.², 5.)

Let his Grace go forward,
And dare vs with his Cap, like Larkes.¹²

However, the verb is also found outside of this collocation, showing that it was a productive transitive verb:

For our approach shall so much dare the field
That England shall couch down in fear and yield.¹³

Michael L. Samuels has suggested that dare v.² disappeared from the language to avoid confusion between the two verbs.¹⁴ But could it be that the transitive use of dare v.¹, such as in ‘dare sb. (to do sth.)’, developed through conflation of the two verbs, and that dare v.² has thus survived indirectly? If that is the case, it would make the development of transitive dare v.¹ much less mysterious. At first glance it may seem unlikely, for the verbs can actually be considered antonyms – dare v.¹ means ‘have sufficient courage to do something’, while one of the possible meanings of dare v.² is ‘cower, be afraid’. However, in their transitive uses the two verbs come much closer to each other semantically. The former means ‘challenge, defy’, while the latter can mean ‘frighten’, and both thus imply an asymmetry in terms of courage between the subject and the object. In fact, there are some early attestations where either of the two interpretations seems possible: ‘An English man hath three qualyties, he can suffer no

¹² 1623 SHAKESPEARE & J. FLETCHER Henry VIII III. ii. 283 (OED, s.v. dare v.², 5.)

¹³ Henry V, IV. ii. 34-5 (ed. G. Taylor, Oxford, 1982).

¹⁴ M. L. Samuels, Linguistic Evolution (Cambridge, 1972), 69.

partner in his love, no stranger to be his equal, or to be dared by any.’¹⁵ This could be read both as ‘to be challenged/crossed by anyone’ or ‘to be frightened by anyone’. Similarly, in the following, ‘challenged’ and ‘frightened’ both seem possible:

Of heauen, or hell, God, or the Diuell, he earst nor heard nor carde,
Alone he sought to serue the same that would by none be darde.¹⁶

Furthermore, while the verbs evidently go back to different sources, the Old English preterite-present verb *durran and the weak verb *darian, their formal similarity was noticed by Early Modern writers. Edmund Spenser puns on the two verbs in The Faerie Queene,¹⁷ and in his dictionary The Guide into Tongues, John Minsheu actually suggests that dare v.² is derived from dare v.¹: ‘to Dare, an old English word, for to stare, because they which behold a man stedfastly with a wide open staring eie, are said to bee bold or daring.’¹⁸

In some later dictionaries, the expression dare larks is glossed under dare ‘have courage’, but this may be because dare v.² had by then become obsolete. Since it was found in earlier works of literature, including Shakespeare, nineteenth-century

¹⁵ J. Lyly, Euphues and his England, in: Complete Works, Vol. II (Oxford, 1902 [1580]), 89.

¹⁶ W. Warner, Albions England, 2nd edn. (London, 1597), 230. Accessed 18 Jun 2017 through Early English Books Online, quod.lib.umich.edu/e/ebo/A14783.0001.001.

¹⁷ ‘Enclos’d the bush about, and there him tooke / Like darred larke, not daring up to looke’, The Works of Edmund Spenser, Vol. VII (London, 1805 [1596]), 199-200.

¹⁸ Minshæi Emendatio, vel à mendis Expurgatio, seu Augmentatio sui Ductoris in Linguas, The Guide into Tongues, 2nd edn. (London, 1627), 197. Thijs Porck (pers. comm.) points out that Minsheu may have meant the false etymology as a joke.

lexicographers thought it necessary to include it.¹⁹ However, in some non-standard dialects the meaning ‘frighten’ survived at least until the nineteenth century, as evidenced by the OED and Wright’s English Dialect Dictionary. Interestingly, some dialects also had a meaning ‘deter by threatening, forbid’ (e.g. in Yorkshire *dar ’em frae’t*, ‘frighten them from doing it’), but Wright takes this to be a use of dare v.¹ rather than dare v.². It would be interesting to investigate how long dare v.² survived and whether speakers interpreted it as a separate verb from dare v.¹.

Three observations have been made here which may serve as circumstantial evidence for conflation of dare v.¹ and dare v.² in Early Modern English. Firstly, there are attestations where either of the senses ‘challenge’ and ‘frighten’ appear to be possible; secondly, the formal similarity was evident to writers at the time; and thirdly, later lexicographers were not able to distinguish the two verbs. It may well be impossible to prove that the two verbs did indeed interact in the way proposed here, but I think it is at least worth entertaining the idea and considering what might count as support for (or counterevidence of) this ‘conflation’ hypothesis. In any case, the development of transitive dare v.¹ is puzzling – could dare v.², as in to dare larks, be the missing piece of the puzzle?

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¹⁹ In N. Webster’s American Dictionary of the English Language (New York, 1828), the expression to dare larks is treated as a specialised use of the weak verb dare ‘challenge, provoke, defy’. R. Nares’ A Glossary (Stralsund, 1825) also seems to indicate that dare with the meaning ‘terrify’ is a specialised use of ‘courage’ dare. Finally, C. Richardson repeats Minshew’s etymology in A New Dictionary of the English Language (London, 1839).