

Shakespeare

a guide for amateur actors



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Shakespeare's vivacious plays brim with life – they capture the spectrum of what it is to be human – to trust, to hate, to believe, conquer, to envy, to sorrow, search, to love, to fail, to rejoice, and to find God. The heartbeat of these plays is utterly relatable. Yet acting Shakespeare is also a challenge, if an extremely enjoyable and rewarding one. Shakespeare did not write only for the rich and educated, but for everyone, and anyone willing to use determination and whimsy can learn to act his plays.

Understand It

If this is your first time acting Shakespeare, do not be surprised if some of the language is unfamiliar to you. The more you submerge yourself in his world, the more natural it will become. Here are some tips for understanding:

Find a good edition of Shakespeare that explains unfamiliar words and references. This is not the same as a so-called “translation.” Shakespeare does not lead to be translated - his work is in English, and modern “translations” often lose the sense of what Shakespeare is really saying. Notes, on the other hand, respect Shakespeare's text while helping the reader understand it. Alternatively just use a good dictionary.

It can be easy to breeze through a Shakespeare speech without really taking time understand the character. You can slow your eyes down by covering up the lines you haven't read yet with a

sheet of paper, and reading it line by line, only moving on when you have absorbed what each line means. Remember, some sentences take more than one line!

Shakespeare's text was never meant for silent reading, but for performance. It sounds silly, but it is often truly easier to understand if you read it aloud – slowly.

It can also be a great idea to listen to the play as you read it – hearing professional actors performing the lines will help you understand the characters, the meaning of the words, and the emotions. There are many excellent audio recordings of the plays – the Folger Audio Editions are particularly good, and are available for immediate download for a reasonable price online. <https://www.folger.edu/podcasts-and-recordings#AudioEditions>

If a play is new to you, it is a good idea to try to see a version performed, either live or on film. Be careful – there are many faithful adaptations, but also others that are fundamentally different from the original, or which bring in offensive elements not present in Shakespeare.

Thee vs. You

Nowadays we think of the word “thou” as very formal in comparison to the word “you.” In Shakespeare's day, however, the exact opposite was true! Addressing someone as “you” was a sign of respect, and was far more formal. “Thou” was a familiar, informal address. You might call your king or your parents “you” out of respect, or God or someone you love when you want to emphasize how highly you esteem them. You might call your children, your friends, or your younger siblings “thou,” because you are on familiar terms with them. You might call God or someone you love “Thou” when you want to emphasize how close the two of you are. On the other hand, if you called your boss or the king “thou,” you might be showing them disrespect!

High Diction, Low Diction

Shakespeare writes like any good author – all of his characters have their own voice and their own way of speaking. One way he shows a character's background is through the use of high or low diction. High diction is fancy, poetic, and uses a greater vocabulary, while low diction is simpler, more rustic, and has a more common vocabulary. Courtiers tend to speak in high diction, while peasants speak in low. This is not always the case however, and often shows us a lot about a character's frame of mind. For example, in *Henry IV* young Prince Hal does not care at all about his responsibilities, and spends all his time playing pranks and drinking in taverns. Even though he is a prince, he often uses low diction. However, when he loses people he loves in war, he rethinks his life, and begins to aim higher. His diction slowly becomes higher and higher.

Prose and Verse

Another window into a character's frame of mind, who they are, etc. Is whether they choose to speak in prose or verse in a scene. Prose means ordinary talk without poetic rules to follow. It is often a sign of a character or scene being more ordinary. Verse, on the other hand uses poetic rules to make the speech tell us more about the character through hints in the rhythm. You can often tell the difference between prose and verse merely by how it looks on the page. Here are two examples. The first is prose, and the second is verse.

(1) QUINCE

Is all our company here?

BOTTOM

You were best to call them generally, man by man, according to the scrip.

QUINCE

Here is the scroll of every man's name, which is thought fit, through all Athens, to play in our interlude before the duke and duchess on his wedding-day at night.

BOTTOM

First, good Peter Quince, say what the play treats on; then read the names of the actors; and so grow to a point.

QUINCE

Marry, our play is "*The Most Lamentable Comedy and Most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisby.*"

BOTTOM

A very good piece of work, I assure you, and a merry.— Now, good Peter Quince, call forth your actors by the scroll.— Masters, spread yourselves.

QUINCE

Answer, as I call you.—Nick Bottom, the weaver.

BOTTOM

Ready. Name what part I am for, and proceed.

QUINCE

You, Nick Bottom, are set down for Pyramus.

BOTTOM

What is Pyramus? a lover, or a tyrant?

QUINCE

A lover, that kills himself most gallantly for love.

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(2) ROMEO. If I profane with my unworhiest hand

This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this:

My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand

To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.

JULIET. Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,

Which mannerly devotion shows in this;

For saints have hands that pilgrims' hands do touch,

And palm to palm is holy palmers' kiss.

ROMEO. Have not saints lips, and holy palmers too?

JULIA Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in pray'r.

ROMEO. O, then, dear saint, let lips do what hands do!

They pray; grant thou, lest faith turn to despair.

JULIET. Saints do not move, though grant for prayers' sake.

ROMEO. Then move not while my prayer's effect I take.

Thus from my lips, by thine my sin is purg'd. [Kisses her.]

See how in Section 2 the lines are of a similar length, while in prose they can be any length at all? You can tell right away with your eyes, without even reading it, which one is probably prose and which verse.

Hints in the Verse – IAMBIC PENTAMETER

Shakespeare does not write in verse just to be beautiful or to show off. With verse, he can pull off many tricks that help the actor and the audience. In order to understand these tricks, we need to understand how to act to verse. Shakespeare uses more than one kind of verse, but his favourite is iambic pentameter. What does this mean?

First, we must understand what a rhythm is – which syllables are emphasized and which are not, rather like the beat of a piece of music. For example, in the waltz, the rhythm is “ONE-two-three, ONE-two-three,” or “STRONG-soft-soft, STRONG-soft-soft.”

Speech can have a rhythm too, depending on what syllables we emphasize (STRONG) and don’t emphasize (soft.) An iambic line uses this beat: “soft-STRONG,” and repeats it.

OK, so Iambic refers to the rhythm. Pentameter refers to the meter. Meter is how many times you repeat the beat in one line. Tetrameter means you have three repetitions of the rhythm in one line, quatrameter means four repetitions, pentameter means five, and so on. Since Shakespeare often uses iambic pentameter, with five iambic repetitions, his verse often has this beat:

“soft-STRONG soft-STRONG soft-STRONG soft-STRONG soft-STRONG.”

or

“ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM ba-DUM.”

For example, let’s look at two lines from Richard III.

RICHARD: Was ever woman in this humour wooed?
Was ever woman in this humour won?

In this line, we look first at what Richard is saying. Humour in this case means “manner,” or “way.” He has just been flirting with a young woman in a very strange way – during a funeral procession! He is asking himself if any woman was ever wooed – and won! – in this odd manner. That is not all there is to these two lines though.

Richard is speaking in iambic pentameter – try saying his words aloud rhythmically.

“was EV-er WO-man IN this HU-mour WOOED?
was EV-er WO-man IN this HU-mour WON?”

His words fall into the rhythm so well because iambic pentameter is a very natural rhythm for English speakers – our words often follow this pattern by accident. It’s handy for English-speakers to improvise in if they forget their lines, and still sound like they’re speaking Shakespearean verse.

Hints in the Verse: **BREAKING THE VERSE**

Verse is handy not only because it is beautiful and flowing, but because when Shakespeare throws something odd into the verse, that doesn't quite flow, it is a signal to the actor that the author wants him to pay special attention. It means, "This part is so important I'm breaking the verse scheme for it – figure out why and use it!"

For example, in the "Was ever woman," Richard spends a while talking to himself, amazed that he did something so politically incorrect as flirting at a funeral, and that he actually got away with it, and that she rather seems to like him! He is especially surprised, since he was the one who killed her husband and father, and before he showed up she was talking about how even though she doesn't know who murdered them, if she ever meets the man who did, he'll be sorry! Here's what Richard says:

What! I that kill'd her husband and his father-
To take her in her heart's extremest hate,
With curses in her mouth, tears in her eyes,
The bleeding witness of my hatred by;
Having God, her conscience, and these bars against me,
And I no friends to back my suit at all
But the plain devil and dissembling looks,
And yet to win her, all the world to nothing!
Ha!

Did you notice that "Ha!" breaks the verse form! All the lines before are in iambic pentameter. That Ha is one lonely syllable by itself. That means it's important. It also means Shakespeare is signaling to the actor to pause for little – after all, by rights, that line ought to have nine more syllables! It means, "Hey, actor, here's nine syllables worth of silence. Use it to do some stage business. You could stand speechless, because you're so amazed that worked! You could do a little happy dance. You could gloatingly admire your reflection in the window. Whatever it is – take those nine syllables worth to show the audience how taken aback you are!"

Or how about when he changes the verse in other ways? For example, when Richard talking with Anne during the funeral procession, he tells her that unless she can love him, he will take his sword to his own heart. She panics, and tries to talk him out of it. Suddenly, they both go from speaking in iambic pentameter to iambic tetrameter – each line has only six syllables instead of ten. This is a clue to the actors – "Pick up the pace! These lines are short – you can shoot them off rapid-fire and in a panicked manner!"

Hints in the Verse: **PROSE AND VERSE SHOW CHARACTERIZATION**

If a character usually speaks verse and then starts speaking prose, that is another clue to the actor. For example, remember how Prince Hal, as he became more kingly and responsible, started talking verse? In the sequel story, Prince Hal has become King Henry, and has become a hero, admired by all. However, in the process, he has slowly masked his personality and become less human. He struggles to truly be who he is, yet retain the kingliness he has acquired. At last, in the final scene, he comes to woo a French Princess. At first, he tries talking to her in verse, but then finds out she hardly speaks English! Immediately he switches to prose and low diction. He goes from

“Fair Katherine, and most fair, will you vouchsafe
To teach a soldier terms of endearments
That enter at a lady’s ear and plead
His lovesuit to her gentle heart?”

to

“Do you like me, Kate?”

As the scene goes on, and they grow to understand each other, he still speaks prose, but more complexly and beautifully. An actor who doesn’t notice these changes, and thinks of it all as “Shakespeare talk” will miss important things in the characterization!

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