

Reading Shakespeare's Plays

Language

Before you start to read Shakespeare's plays, you will want to take a look at some of the language uses that might stand in your way of understanding the script.

Unusual Word Arrangements

Many of my students have asked me if people really spoke the way they do in Shakespeare's plays. The answer is no. Shakespeare wrote the way he did for poetic and dramatic purposes. There are many reasons why he did this--to create a specific poetic rhythm, to emphasize a certain word, to give a character a specific speech pattern, etc. Look at the following example:

I ate the sandwich.

I the sandwich ate.

Ate the sandwich I.

Ate I the sandwich.

The sandwich I ate.

The sandwich ate I.

This example shows us that these four words can create six unique sentences which carry the same meaning. When you are reading Shakespeare's plays, look for this type of unusual word arrangement. Locate the subject, verb, and the object of the sentence. Notice that the object of the sentence is often placed at the beginning (the sandwich) in front of the verb (ate) and subject (I). Rearrange the words in the order that makes the most sense to you (I ate the sandwich). This will be one of your first steps in making sense of Shakespeare's language.

Poetry

We speak in prose (language without metrical structure). Shakespeare wrote both prose and verse (poetry). Much of the language discussion we will have in this guide revolves around Shakespeare's poetry. So, it is important that you understand the following terms:

Blank Verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Iambic Pentameter: five beats of alternating unstressed and stressed syllables; ten syllables per line.

'So **fair** / and **foul** / a **day** / I **have** / not **seen**'

'The **course** / of **true** / love **nev**/er **did** / run **smooth**'

Appendix #15d

Who's Got the Rhythm?

Romeo's lament is an example of blank verse. The basic rhythm is da DA da DA da DA da DA da DA. But at the beginning of lines 2 and 6, Shakespeare alters this rhythm. In doing so, he brings attention to the words "why" and "feather."

In line 4, saying the word "serious" in two syllables instead of three ("SEER yus") keeps the rhythm on track.

- 1 Here's *much* to *do* with *hate*, \ but *more* with *love*.
- 2 *Why* then, \ O brawling *love*, \ O loving *hate*,
- 3 O *anything* \ of *nothing first* create;
- 4 O *heavy lightness*, \ *serious* *vanity*,
- 5 Misshapen *chaos* \ of well-seeming *forms*,
- 6 *Feather* of *lead*, \ bright *smoke*, cold *fire*, \ sick *health*,
- 7 Still-waking *sleep* \ that *is* not *what* it *is!*
- 8 This *love* feel *I*, \ that *feel* no *love* in *this*.

(Romeo and Juliet 1.1.172)

Notes:

- 3 "of nothing first create": created out of nothing in the first place.
- 5 "well-seeming": seemingly beautiful
- 7 "still-waking": always awake
- 8 "feel no love in this": doesn't love in return

Language Omissions

Again, for the sake of his poetry, Shakespeare often left out letters, syllables, and whole words. These omissions really aren't that much different from the way we speak today. We say:

"Been to class yet?"

"No. Heard Ulen's givin' a test."

"Wha'sup wi'that?"

We leave out words and parts of words to speed up our speech. If we were speaking in complete sentences, we would say:

"Have you been to class yet?"

"No, I have not been to class. I heard that Mrs. Ulen is giving a test today."

"What is up with that?"

A few examples of Shakespearean omissions/contractions follow:

'tis ~ it is

i' ~ in

ope ~ open

e'er ~ ever

o'er ~ over

oft ~ often

gi' ~ give

a' ~ he

ne'er ~ never

e'en ~ even

Unusual Words

Most of us run into problems when we come across archaic words that are no longer used in Modern English. Or worse, when we run across words that are still used today but have much different meanings than when Shakespeare used (or invented!) the words. This is particularly troublesome, because we think we know what the word means, but the line still doesn't make sense.

Although it is frustrating when we come across these unknown words, it is not surprising. Shakespeare's vocabulary included 30,000 words. Today our vocabularies only run between 6,000 and 15,000 words! Because Shakespeare loved to play with words, he also created new words that we still use today.

Source: www.shakespearehigh.com

Appendix #15e

The Globe Theatre

In 1599, the famous Globe Theatre was built. Referred to by Shakespeare as a "wooden O," the Globe had as many as 20 sides to give it a circular appearance. The theatre also had three levels, a variety of stages, and could hold up to 3,000 spectators. Shakespeare not only wrote plays for this theatre, he also acted upon its stage and helped pay for its construction.

Flag—Signified which type of play was being performed—black for tragedy; white for comedy, and red for history.

Upper Stage—This "chamber" was used for most bedroom and balcony scenes. The balcony above was used for musicians and sound effects.

Tiring House—Dressing and storage rooms. Actors rested here between scenes and changed into lavish costumes, which made up for the lack of props and scenery. The doors to the tiring house also served as actors' main entrances and exits.

Main Stage—Where main action of the play took place, especially outdoor scenes of battlefields, forests, or cityscapes.

Inner Stage—This stage was used mostly for indoor scenes. It had a curtain that could be opened or closed for scene changes.

The "Heavens"—Consisted of a canopy supported by pillars and a hut on top. The canopy shaded and protected actors from too much sun or rain. It also represented the sky and heavens and was painted with golden stars. The hut above was used for storage and additional sound effects such as alarm bells, cannon fire, and thunder.

Galleries—Three seating sections. Audiences paid more to sit on these tiered wooden benches under a thatched roof, which kept out rain.

Open Yard—Audiences paid one penny to stand here and watch the performance, rain or shine. Often these patrons, called "groundlings," would participate in the action of the play by throwing snacks and shouting at the performers.

Trappdoor—Actors playing ghosts or witches could rise or descend through this door built into the main stage. The cellarage underneath was referred to as "hell."

