

Reading Shakespeare: A Primer

A number of factors make Shakespeare's plays difficult to read, including the linguistic challenges they present, the cultural differences between contemporary America and Elizabethan England that sometimes make the characters and their behavior seem strange to us, and the sophistication and depth of Shakespeare's characters, language, and ideas. However, with patience and experience, you might find that reading Shakespeare can be a stimulating challenge rather than a frustrating chore. I hope that in the end you will come to appreciate the plays and understand why they are still so widely read and performed today. Despite their superficial alienness, they have things to say about society and life and human nature that are universal and timeless.

Basic Strategies

There are a few simple steps that a reader of Shakespeare can take to make the reading easier.

Read a plot summary: Familiarizing yourself with the plot of the play before reading it can be extremely helpful. Although this approach may "spoil" your enjoyment of the unfolding of the plot, it will almost certainly make the reading easier. If you know in advance what occurs in a particular scene, it is much easier to make sense of the meaning of individual lines, and lines that you can't figure out will not prevent you from having a basic understanding of the scene. Familiarity with characters, their personalities and motives, is also helpful because it will help infer what kinds of things they are likely to say—foolish things, witty things, mournful things, kind things, or evil things, for example. Some editions of Shakespeare's plays contain summaries of each scene, and resources such as SparkNotes can also give you additional helpful information. Be sure, however, that you use these resources as a *supplement* to your own reading of the play, not as a substitute. It is important for you to go through your own process of analyzing, "decoding," and reflecting on the play. Remember, as well, that there is no single interpretation of the play (or of a particular line or speech) that is absolute or complete.

Consult a dictionary: Although difficult words and words with multiple layers of meaning are usually glossed (defined), it may be helpful to keep a dictionary with you for words that the editor decided not to gloss, or for additional insight into the meanings of certain words.

Check different editions: Many editions of Shakespeare's plays are available, and it may be helpful to consult multiple editions to find clear explanations of difficult words or obscure references.

Read out loud: Sometimes the meaning of a particular line or sentence, or the tone of a character's speech, will become more apparent if you read the play out loud. Words have an auditory quality and effect that may not be apparent from a silent reading, and hearing the words often gives us new insights into their possible meaning.

Watch a performance: Perhaps most importantly, it is helpful to remember that as plays, Shakespeare's works were originally intended to be *performed*, not read. As a result, things that are difficult to understand on the page often come to life when spoken and acted out by an actor who has a good understanding of the character and the meaning of the lines. The gestures, vocal inflections, facial expressions, and interactions of the actors, as well as the context of the stage scenery, help make the characters' emotions and the meaning of their words clear. Even when individual words or expressions aren't clear, the essential meaning of the lines is likely to be understandable. Try to find a good film version of the play to watch. And, of course, if you have an opportunity to see the play performed in a theater, take it!

Important Shakespearean vocabulary

Familiarity with these frequently used expressions will make Shakespeare's works much easier to read. They fall into two basic categories:

- ① words and forms that are not used (or are only rarely used) by contemporary English speakers and writers
- ② words that have a different meaning in Shakespeare's texts than they do in contemporary English

Note: This list is adapted from "Shakespeare: An Overview" by Sylvan Barnet, found in the Signet Classic editions of Shakespeare's plays, though I have made many additions and revisions.

'a: he	<i>fellow</i> : ① companion [e.g. <i>fellowship</i>]
<i>abuse</i> : deceive	② low person [often insulting if directed at someone of approximately equal rank]
<i>accident</i> : occurrence; happening [as in something happening by chance—"by accident"]	<i>fond</i> : foolish
<i>advertise</i> : inform	<i>free</i> : ① innocent ② generous [e.g. <i>free-spending</i>]
<i>affections</i> : emotions	<i>glass</i> : mirror [e.g. <i>looking-glass</i>]
<i>an, and</i> : if [also "and if"]	<i>hap/haply</i> : chance/by chance (as in <i>happen</i>)
<i>annoy</i> : harm	<i>happy</i> : lucky
<i>anon</i> : ① immediately ② soon	<i>hast, hath</i> : archaic forms of <i>have</i>
<i>appeal</i> : accuse	<i>head</i> : army
<i>art</i> : ① are ② skill	<i>hie</i> : to go quickly; hurry
<i>artificial</i> : skillful	<i>his</i> : ① his ② 's [a way of showing possession]
<i>as</i> : as if	<i>hither</i> : to this place; here
<i>brave</i> : splendid; excellent [e.g. <i>Brave New World</i>]	<i>humor</i> : ① mood [e.g. "in a good <i>humor</i> "] ② a bodily fluid that was thought to affect one's health and temperament
<i>but</i> : ① if only; only; just [e.g. "But see it for yourself, and you will agree."] ② except ③ yet; however	<i>it</i> : ① it ② its
<i>censure</i> : opinion	<i>marry</i> : ① "by the Virgin Mary" [an interjection or light oath] ② indeed ③ to wed
<i>cheer</i> : ① face ② frame of mind [e.g. "good cheer"]	<i>o'er</i> : over
<i>choler</i> : anger	<i>oft</i> : often
<i>choleric</i> : ill-tempered; easily angered	<i>pray</i> : ① please ② beg
<i>chorus</i> : a single person who comments on the events	<i>soft</i> : "Hold on!"
<i>closet</i> : small private room [in contemporary British English, a "water closet" is a bathroom]	<i>sound</i> : to measure
<i>competitor</i> : partner	<i>steal</i> : to come or go secretly [in addition to its more common usage]
<i>conceit</i> : idea; imagination	<i>still</i> : ① always; continually ② also; in addition; besides
<i>cousin</i> : kinsman; relative	<i>temper</i> : ① temperament [e.g. "ill-tempered"] ② to soften; to mitigate
<i>coz</i> : cousin [relative]	<i>that</i> : so that
<i>cunning</i> : skillful	<i>thee</i> : informal/familiar form of <i>you</i> [objective]
<i>disaster</i> : evil astrological influence [the root <i>aster</i> means "star"]	<i>thence</i> : from there
<i>doom</i> : judgment	<i>thither</i> : to that place; there
<i>dost</i> : archaic form of <i>do</i>	<i>thou</i> : informal/familiar form of <i>you</i> [subjective]
<i>entertain</i> : receive into service [somewhat like our usage in expressions like "entertain an idea"]	<i>thy</i> : informal/familiar form of <i>you</i> [possessive]
<i>envy</i> : malice; ill will; hatred	<i>trow</i> : believe
<i>ere</i> : before	' <i>twas</i> : "it was"
<i>event</i> : outcome [e.g. "in the <i>event</i> that..."]	<i>whence</i> : from which place, source, or cause
<i>excrement</i> : outgrowth of hair	<i>wherefore</i> : why
<i>fact</i> : evil deed	<i>whither</i> : to what place
<i>fancy</i> : ① to love [e.g. "to <i>fancy</i> a person"] ② imagination [e.g. <i>fanciful</i> , meaning "imaginative"]	<i>withal</i> : ① with ② with that ③ besides; nevertheless
<i>fell</i> : cruel [e.g. " <i>fell</i> deeds"]	<i>would/wouldst</i> : want to [used to indicate desire]

The list above clarifies the meaning of the famous line spoken by Juliet, "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" She's asking him, though she doesn't know he can actually hear her, "Why are you Romeo?" or "Why do you have to be named Romeo?" His identity as the son of her father's bitter enemy presents a major problem for her, and she wishes that he had another name so that there would be no obstacle to their love.

Make regular use of the glosses that are provided in most editions of Shakespeare's plays; without such supplementary information, some of the vocabulary of Shakespeare's plays is simply not intelligible to a modern reader. If

you read through the lines and the glosses several times until the unfamiliar language becomes familiar, it will be much easier to understand.

Keep in mind that many words in Shakespeare's English are slightly different (often shorter) versions of words that we still use today:

Her father loved me, oft invited me...

(*Othello* Act 1, Scene 3)

Oft, a shorter form of *often*, occurs quite frequently in Shakespeare's plays: it is an oft-used expression.

She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange...

(*Othello* Act 1, Scene 3)

The word *passing* here is a variation of *surpassing(ly)*: "She swore, truly, it was strange, it was **surpassingly** strange."

Recognizing connections between Shakespeare's language and contemporary English will make it not only easier to understand when no gloss is available, but also easier to absorb and remember.

Interpreting Shakespeare's Punctuation, Syntax, and Diction

Another challenge presented by the language of Shakespeare's plays is that even when we understand the superficial meaning of the individual words or the overall meaning of a character's speech, sometimes the reasons for his word choices and word order are still unclear. With practice at translating individual lines, speeches, and exchanges between characters into contemporary English, these choices become easier to understand, and eventually lines that would have seemed strange and indecipherable will become clear to you on your initial reading. When you get to the point at which you don't have to expend so much effort to understand each line, reading Shakespeare's plays becomes much more enjoyable, and you can more easily appreciate their brilliance.

Use of apostrophes to show metrical elision: Because much of the speech in Shakespeare's plays is written in verse (usually iambic pentameter), there are strict rules about the number of syllables in each line. One tool that provides flexibility for writers trying to make words fit the meter of a given line is called **metrical elision**. (You might also see this referred to as **syncope**.) In Shakespeare's plays, apostrophes are often used to show the elision (omission or removal) of certain sounds or syllables to make words fit the metrical requirements of the line.

One of the lines quoted above from Act 1, Scene 3 of *Othello* is an example of this:

She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange...

If the words "it was" are written separately, with the vowel sound of *it* included in the line, the line would not be in iambic pentameter. It would have twelve syllables instead of ten, and the words *was* and *it* would be stressed, and the more important word *strange* would not be stressed. The words *'twas* and *o'er* both occur frequently in Shakespeare's plays because they are often useful in filling out the meter of a line appropriately. Here's another example of metrical elision:

Her collars, of the moonshine's wat'ry beams...

(*Romeo and Juliet* Act 1, Scene 4)

In this case, the three-syllable word *watery* is reduced to two syllables that fit the line perfectly and allow the last stress of the line to fall on the word *beams*.

Unusual syntax: One source of confusion is unusual syntax—word order and sentence structure. Much of the characters' speech in many of Shakespeare's plays is written in poetic verse, and the demands of rhyme and meter often result in, for example, the verb coming at the end of the line or before the subject. Sometimes these choices are made to achieve a certain dramatic effect or to give emphasis to a certain idea in the sentence.

Consider the closing couplet from the final scene of *Othello*, spoken by a gentleman who announces that he is leaving to give a report to government officials about the events that have just occurred:

*Myself will straight aboard, and to the state
This heavy act with heavy heart relate.*

straight: immediately; **state:** government

(*Othello* Act 5, Scene 2)

There are a few interesting features of these lines:

- ① The use of the pronoun *myself* instead of *I* is contextually appropriate because the speaker, Lodovico, is contrasting what he will do with what he has just suggested that someone else do. But it also happens that *myself*, a two-syllable word with the stress on the second syllable, fits the iambic pentameter of the line.
- ② The phrases “this heavy act” and “with heavy heart” occur one after the other. In normal syntax, this clause might be rendered as “and with heavy heart relate this heavy act to the state.” But by juxtaposing these two phrases, Shakespeare emphasizes the parallel structure and the repetition of the word *heavy*, giving the lines a poetic and emotional force that they would not otherwise have.
- ③ The placement of the verb *relate* is also a departure from normal syntax, but in this case the demands of end rhyme dictate its placement at the end of the line; it rhymes with *state*.

With such analysis, the reasons for and cleverness of Shakespeare’s syntactic choices become clear, and lines that at first seem unreasonably difficult become eloquent and beautiful (or hopefully at least interesting).

Parts of Speech: In Shakespeare’s language, as in poetry in general, parts of speech are often more flexible than they are in contemporary Standard English; words that are normally only used as one part of speech are sometimes used as another part of speech.

One common and relatively straightforward example is the use of adjectives as adverbs. In the lines below, the adjective *meek* is acting as an adverb:

*...Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek...*

borne: used, exercised; **faculties:** (political) power

(*Macbeth* Act 1, Scene 7)

Translated into contemporary English, these lines mean “Duncan has used his power meekly (humbly).”

Sometimes such flexibility of parts of speech is more unusual and potentially confusing, as in the lines below:

*...or heaven’s cherubin horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air...*

(*Macbeth* Act 1, Scene 7)

The word *horse* is normally a noun, of course, but in the example above, *horsed* is used as a participle meaning “mounted (upon a horse).”

Other Unusual Uses of Words: In general, Shakespeare was endlessly inventive in his use of the English language. Many words that are now frequently used in contemporary English were coined by Shakespeare; these words appeared for the first time in his plays. *Bedazzle*, *fashionable*, *outbreak*, *pander*, *sanctimonious*, and *vulnerable* are all examples of such words.

Shakespeare also used existing and familiar words in new ways. Sometimes, as discussed above, he used words as different parts of speech than they were normally used; sometimes these unusual usages involve a kind of reversal of meaning. In the lines above, the expression “sightless couriers” doesn’t mean “*blind* couriers,” as any contemporary English speaker would probably expect at first glance, but “*invisible* couriers”; they are “sightless” in the sense that they can’t be seen. Here is another example of this kind of unusual usage:

*He did command me to call timely on him.
I have almost slipped the hour.*

(*Macbeth* Act 2, Scene 3)

In this context, *slipped* means “let the hour *slip* by”; it is really not the subject of this clause (the speaker, Macduff) that is doing the slipping, but the object, *hour*. If we read these lines intuitively instead of following strictly logical analysis of the syntax, the meaning is easier to deduce. (Another way to interpret these lines is simply to think of *slipped* as a synonym for *missed*.)

Figurative language: One aspect of Shakespeare's diction that can cause confusion is his frequent use of figurative language. While many of these metaphors and similes are familiar to modern readers and immediately recognizable as examples of figurative language, others will be confusing for one reason or another. Keep figurative language in mind as one possible explanation for wording that is hard to understand.

In a soliloquy in *Romeo and Juliet*, Friar Lawrence makes extensive use of figurative language to describe the growth of plants and the cycle of life and death:

*The earth that's nature's mother is her tomb.
What is her burying grave, that is her womb;
And from her womb children of diverse kind
We sucking on her natural bosom find...*

(*Romeo and Juliet* Act 2, Scene 3)

Here, the earth is being compared to several things:

- ① the "mother" of nature: Living things exist because of the earth and are dependent on it.
- ② the "tomb" and "burying grave" of nature: Dead things decompose and become part of the earth again.
- ③ the "womb" of nature: The earth produces ("gives birth to") living things in the form of plants.

This description suggests the cycle of life and death: things that die become nutrients for new things that are born. The earth is both tomb and womb.

In this passage, plants are figuratively described as "children." Because they absorb nutrients from the soil, they are like infants suckling on nature's bosom. (Syntactically, the last part could be changed to "And we find children of diverse kind sucking on her natural bosom.")

If you understand Shakespeare's use of figurative language, the passage is both clear and poetic, and even the unusual syntax isn't too problematic. If you don't grasp the figurative language, the passage may be terribly confusing.

Familiarity with common Shakespearean themes: Obviously, if we know what Shakespeare liked to write about, the ideas that he was concerned with, it's easier to figure out the significance of his characters' actions and words. Generally speaking, Shakespeare's plays are concerned with the kinds of themes and questions that have fascinated people of different time periods and cultures. Here are some examples:

- **the nature of romantic love:** Is love meaningful and substantial or shallow and fleeting?
- **lust and passion:** Desire can drive people to destructive and self-destructive extremes.
- **jealousy:** Jealousy makes people irrational, foolish, and violent.
- **revenge:** The desire for revenge often consumes those who seek revenge along with the targets of their revenge.
- **reason vs. passion:** These two fundamental forces of the human mind often cause internal conflict.
- **moral dilemmas:** Another source of internal conflict is situations in which people feel they have conflicting moral obligations.
- **appearance vs. reality:** Things are not always what they seem to be, and our judgments are often superficial and ill-informed.
- **stubbornness:** Those who refuse to be open-minded and objective or to be sympathetic toward others' feelings will pay a price for their stubbornness.
- **greed and ambition:** These forces of human nature are destructive (and usually self-destructive as well).
- **power:** Power tends to corrupt those who have it and make tyrants of them.
- **guilt:** People who commit evil acts are often deeply disturbed by feelings of guilt.
- **justice:** In one way or another, those who commit evil acts will eventually pay a price for their actions. But what exactly is the nature of "justice"? Human law is limited and imperfect.
- **fate:** People's lives are subject to many forces beyond their control or even their knowledge.
- **violence:** What drives people to commit acts of violence, and what are the consequences of such acts?
- **death:** All of us must ultimately face the inescapable fact of death. Does death make our lives meaningless?
- **immortality:** Because we all must die, we seek the power to live on in some way—through the lasting effects of our actions, for example.
- **the dead:** How do people continue to influence us after death (after violent deaths, in particular), through their demands on us, their need for justice, or the demands of our conscience or sense of obligation to them?

Using context clues: In the process of deciphering individual lines, consider their context. Who is saying the line, and what do we know about his or her personality, concerns, and motives? What is the overall point of the speech in which the line occurs? What is happening in the scene? (Is the line a comment on or a response to the action?) Knowledge of these contextual factors is often critical in gaining insight into cryptic lines.

Consider this couplet spoken by Macbeth:

...Whiles I threat, he lives.
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.

(*Macbeth* Act 2, Scene 1)

At this point in the play, we know that Macbeth is planning to murder Duncan, the king of Scotland. In the speech in which this line occurs, Macbeth is about to do the deed, but overcome with doubt and fear, he hesitates. Knowing this context, and keeping in mind Shakespeare's tendency to get creative with syntax and figurative language for poetic reasons, we can figure out the meaning of these lines:

- ① Conflict between passion and reason, the emotional and the rational, feeling and thought, is an important theme explored in a number of Shakespeare's plays.
- ② In general, Macbeth is commenting on his own reluctance to murder Duncan; *he* in the first line is Duncan.
- ③ As with many other words Shakespeare uses, *threat* is a shortened form of its contemporary equivalent: the verb *threaten* (meaning "to make threats").
- ④ The syntax of the second line is arranged to give emphasis to the important words *heat*, *deeds*, and *cold* (according to the iambic stresses of the line) and to set up the end rhyme of *lives* and *gives*.
- ⑤ The use of the words *heat* and *cold* can be understood metaphorically: *heat* is the passion that stimulates action; *cold* describes the more rational, unemotional state in which our reflections make us less likely to take risky or violent actions.

Having considered these factors, we can arrive at a reasonable interpretation of the lines: "While I make threats, he lives. Words give too cold breath to the heat of deeds." Or, more plainly, "He will stay alive as long as I do nothing but make idle threats. Talking about it makes me too calmly rational to commit an act of passion."