

Shakespeare's Language

Introduction

In Shakespeare's words lie all the clues to character and situation that any reader or actor needs. It's simply a matter of knowing how to find them. The clues are not necessarily in the meanings of the words - the rhythms of the language and the patterns and sounds of the words contain a great deal of valuable information.

Here are some suggestions for finding the clues in Shakespeare's language:

Blank verse

Both written and spoken language use rhythm - a pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Most forms of poetry or verse take rhythm one step further and regularise the rhythm into a formal pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. A formal pattern of rhythm is called **metre**.

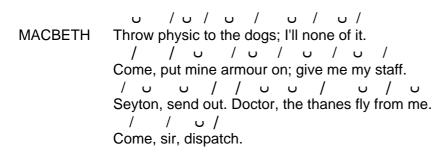
Shakespeare writes either in **blank verse**, in **rhymed verse** or in **prose**. Blank verse is unrhymed but uses a regular pattern of rhythm or metre. In the English language, blank verse is **iambic pentameter**. Pentameter means there are five poetic feet. In iambic pentameter each of these five feet is composed of two syllables: the first unstressed; the second stressed. The opening line of *Twelfth Night*, is a perfect iambic line:

'If music be the food of love play on'

With its unstressed and stressed syllables marked or 'scanned', it looks like this:

The rhythm of blank verse is conversational and with its dee DUM, dee DUM, dee DUM, dee DUM, dee DUM, dee DUM rhythm, it imitates the heartbeat.

In conversation, we often break the rhythmic pattern and this throws specific words into focus. Shakespeare does the same with blank verse: he often deviates from the perfect iambic line. When he does, it's a clue to a change in the character's feelings or thoughts or a change in situation or both. When the rhythm is changed, the energy and dynamic of the language have been changed. Feel how abrupt, uneven and ragged the rhythm is in the final scenes of *Macbeth* – here, Macbeth's last hope is dashed and Birnam Wood is seen to move to Dunsinane:



Page 1 © RSC

King Lear's anguished protest against the murder of Cordelia (and perhaps of the Fool as well) reverses the rhythmic order of the syllables as Lear's world itself has been incomprehensibly upended:

/ U / U / U / U / U KING LEAR Never, never, never, never, never.

In addition to the repetition of 'never,' the emphasis on the first syllables of each foot suggests a blocking, a refusal to accept the unacceptable. The unstressed syllable ending each foot communicates a sense of hopelessness.

When the line ends in an unstressed syllable rather than a stressed one, as is usual with iambic pentameter, this is sometimes called a **feminine** or **weak ending**. Several lines ending in unstressed syllables in a speech call for investigation on the part of the reader. Consider the opening lines of Othello's speech to the Venetian Senate:

OTHELLO

Most potent, grave and reverend signiors,

o / o / o / o / o / o

My very noble and approved good masters,

o / o / o / o / o / o

That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter,

o / o / o / o / o /

It is most true; true I have married her.

o / o / o / o / o / o

The very head and front of my offending

o / o / o /

Hath this extent, no more...

What accounts for this series of weak endings? Is Othello feeling defensive in putting his case to the senators? Or is he, with irony, subtly undermining their power and status? Or is there another reason? This is an actor's choice, but a choice that will have vital implications for characterisation.

Just as an actor will 'beat through' the verse (for example, by clapping), when looking for clues to his character's state of being, so students of Shakespeare can benefit from beating out the rhythms of the verse and considering what might explain deviations from the iambic line.

Rhymed verse

While blank verse forms the basis of Shakespeare's writing, he often uses rhyme. Frequently a rhymed couplet (a pair of lines whose end words rhyme) closes the scene and sometimes suggests what will come next:

HAMLET

The play's the thing

Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King.

Shakespeare uses rhyme and a variety of rhythm patterns to distinguish special characters such as the witches in *Macbeth* and Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

'Double, double, toil and trouble / Fire burn and cauldron bubble,' chant the witches .

In addition to the rhyme, notice that this is not an iambic line, being only four feet long and with the stresses reversed from the iambic. Shakespeare has created a special musical rhythm for these supernatural characters.

Page 2 © RSC

Shakespeare also uses rhyme to make comments and for special occasions such as songs and epilogues. Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and Prospero in *The Tempest* say farewell to the audience in rhyme.

Rhyme is a clue to character or situation. It is always helpful to ask why Shakespeare is using rhyme at a particular point and what effect it has.

Shakespeare's many songs use rhymed verse.

Prose

The convention in Shakespeare's time was to write plays in verse. His extensive use of prose is yet another sign of his inventiveness and capacity to break with custom when it served his plan.

He uses prose for a variety of purposes. Often lower class or comic characters speak prose while the more socially or morally elevated characters speak in verse, but this is far from always the case. Some of Hamlet's most important speeches, such as his advice to the players, are in prose. In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus chooses prose over verse when he sets out to convince the citizens that the conspirators were right to murder Caesar.

Why does Shakespeare shift from verse to prose? The conversational tone of prose can make a character seem more natural at a particular moment or it can indicate the degeneration of a noble nature as it does with Othello. A swift movement from prose to poetry or the reverse is always an indication that a change is taking place. Shakespeare is remarkably skillful in his flexible use of verse forms and prose.

While verse is more formally structured than prose, prose is not necessarily more free from rules. In fact, prose can be more subtly and sometimes more artificially structured than verse. Shakespeare regularly uses a number of rhetorical devices to give his prose form and coherence. Important among these are **alliteration**, **assonance**, **repetition**, **antithesis**, **lists** and **puns**. These are described briefly below. These also appear in verse. Most of them are employed in Brutus's speech, which begins:

BRUTUS

Romans, countrymen, and lovers, hear me for my cause and be silent that you may hear. Believe me for mine honour, and have respect to mine honour, that you may believe. Censure me in your wisdom, and awake your senses that you may the better judge. If there be any in this assembly, any dear friend of Caesar's, to him I say that Brutus' love to Caesar was no less than his. If then that friend demand why Brutus rose against Caesar, this is my answer: not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more...

Page 3 © RSC

Shakespeare's tools for verse and prose

Here (in alphabetical order) are brief explanations of some of the major language devices Shakespeare uses to make meaning in his verse and prose. Shakespeare did not necessarily give them the technical labels in bold below - he simply used these verbal strategies to great effect. It is perhaps not so important to know the technical terms as it is to appreciate how Shakespeare achieves his effects and to recognise the clues they offer us.

Alliteration is the repetition of consonants in words close together. It commands attention, emphasises special words and helps to link ideas. It can be used for comic or satiric effect, as Beatrice does in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Hear how she tuts and taunts Benedick with her repetition of 't's:

BEATRICE And men are only turned into tongue, and trim ones too.

Antithesis uses a parallel sentence structure to compare two opposing ideas. Shakespeare is very fond of this device and uses it often, for coherence and to point up the key ideas in the passage. Here are two examples:

MACBETH This supernatural soliciting

Cannot be ill, cannot be good.

RICHARD III And if King Edward be as true and just

As I am subtle, false and treacherous

Antithesis is a major feature of Shakespeare's prose and always deserves our attention. It is a clue: what idea is being emphasised? Why? Notice how often Brutus uses antithesis in the speech from *Julius Caesar* cited above.

Assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in the same phrase or verse line. Again, this is done for emphasis. Vowels carry much of the music and feeling of the verse and the repetition of them strengthens the emotion, mood or atmosphere described. Ophelia's pain in reflecting on the change in Hamlet is captured in the repeated 'o', 'eh' and 'aw' sounds, almost like wail of grief:

OPHELIA O, what a nOble mind is here O'erthrOwn.

The cOUrtier's, sOldier's, schOlar's eye, tOngue, swOrd,

Th'ExpEctation and rOse of the fAIr stAte,

The glAss of fAshion and the mOUld of fOrm,

Th'ObsErved of All ObsErvers, quite, quite dOwn.

Page 4 © RSC

A marked pause within a verse line is called a **caesura**. It is usually indicated with a full stop or a semi-colon. It slows down the line and marks a change of some kind, often an emotional change. Shakespeare used it with increasing frequency as he developed his poetic technique. See how often Hermione uses it in this brief extract from *The Winter's Tale*, written late in Shakespeare's career:

HERMIONE The Emperor of Russia was my father.

O that he were alive, and here beholding His daughter's trial! That he did but see

The flatness of my misery; yet with the eyes

Of pity, not revenge!

What clues to Hermione's emotional state do these strong breaks give us? How would they help to guide an actor's way of speaking the lines?

A verse line which only makes sense when it runs on and stops at a caesura in the following line is called **enjambment**, from the French word for 'to straddle'. It's the opposite of an **end-stopped line** whose sense is contained within the line. Many more end-stopped lines are to be found in Shakespeare's early plays, while enjambment is a feature of his later work. Enjambment can give emotional urgency to a thought by providing the energy to drive it on. It can also seem more natural than a more self-contained verse line. Notice the examples of enjambment in Hermione's speech above and compare this passage from *Romeo and Juliet*, a much earlier play.

PRINCE ESCALUS A glooming peace this morning with it brings.

The sun for sorrow will not show his head.

Go hence, to have more talk of these sad things.

Some shall be pardon'd, and some punished.

Half and shared lines are deviations from the standard iambic pentameter line spoken by a single character. A half line can be anything from a single syllable to three or four iambic feet: it's an incomplete iambic line. Why, we need to ask, has the character not completed the line? What is the internal or external reason? Unless there is an interruption, a half line indicates a pause and we are invited to wonder what fills this pause.

Two or more **shared lines** between two or more characters make up one line of verse. Here is a sequence from *Macbeth* which contains both shared and half lines. Why does Shakespeare write shared lines for the characters at this point in the play? What fills the pauses of the half lines?

LADY MACBETH I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.

Did not you speak?

MACBETH When?

LADY MACBETH Now?

MACBETH As I descended?

LADY MACBETH Ay.

MACBETH Hark!

Who lies i' the second chamber?

LADY MACBETH Donalbain.

Page 5 © RSC

Shakespeare's prose and poetry are full of **lists** and **ladders**. He uses these when characters are intensifying an idea or feeling - when they are raising the stakes. In prose especially, a list or ladder helps to give form and unity to the text. Here is Rosalind from *As You Like It*:

ROSALIND

There was never anything so sudden, but the fight of two rams, and Caesar's thrasonical brag of I came, saw, and overcame. For your brother and my sister no sooner met, but they looked; no sooner looked but they loved; no sooner loved, but they sighed; no sooner sighed, but they asked one another the reason; no sooner knew the reason, but they sought the remedy...

Onomatopoeia is the use of a word which sounds like what it means. Here are two examples of a device frequently found in Shakespeare's verse and prose:

Sometimes a thousand *twangling* instruments Will *hum* about mine ears...

(The Tempest, Act 3 Scene 2)

The moon shines bright. In such a night as this, When the sweet wind did gently *kiss* the trees...

(The Merchant of Venice, Act 5 Scene 1)

Shakespeare is a master at creating mood and atmosphere through the sounds of the words. Although only 'kiss' in the passage above may be strictly onomatopoetic, notice how the sounds of many of the other words contribute to the spirit of the speech together with its gentle rhythm. The length and quality of the vowel sounds are one tool Shakespeare uses; the sounds of consonants are another.

Compare this line to the ones above:

But since I am a dog, beware my fangs, The duke shall grant me justice

(The Merchant of Venice, Act 3 Scene 3)

Hear the hisses, the bullet-like monosyllables, the hard plosive consonants. Shakespeare can make music of infinite variety with his command of language.

Page 6 © RSC

The Elizabethans were an aural society, good at listening, and they relished wordplay. Shakespeare's plays are full of wordplay in the form of **puns**. Shakespeare's puns can sometimes be more difficult for today's readers because many of them are topical, referring to events and attitudes of the time. A **pun** is a play on meaning of the same or two similar words, like this, from *Twelfth Night*:

VIOLA Save thee, friend, and thy music! Dost thou *live* by thy tabor?

FESTE No, sir, I *live* by the *church*.

VIOLA Art thou a *church*man?

FESTE No such matter, sir. I do *live* by the *church*;

for I do live at my house, and my house doth

stand by the church.

Mercutio makes a more sombre pun when, dying, he says:

MERCUTIO Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a *grave* man.

Notice how the effect of the pun exchange from *Twelfth Night* above depends upon **repetition** of words and phrases. Shakespeare uses repetition extensively in his plays and poetry to heighten dramatic effect, to comment ironically, to create wit, and to link situations, thoughts and feelings.

Repetition of words and phrases is always worth investigating. Here is a famous instance of repetition, heavy with irony. Notice the shared line which, together with the repetition, tells us so much about the character relationships at this point in the play:

OTHELLO Is he not *honest*?

IAGO Honest, my lord?

OTHELLO Honest? Ay, honest.

Simile and metaphor are two ways of creating **word pictures**. In the Elizabethan theatre audiences were called on to use their imaginations to create the scenery of the play: the Elizabethan stage was relatively bare compared to most modern theatre practice.

Shakespeare's word paintings can take us in a moment from Egypt to Rome, from England to France. They can enliven and illuminate private feelings and public debate. In a breath, Shakespeare can move from very plain language to the most extravagant similes and metaphors.

Similes enrich description by comparing two seemingly unlike things using 'like' or 'as.' **Metaphors** do the same but miss out the comparative words.

Notice how Macbeth moves from a simile in the first line into an extended metaphor in the rest of the passage:

MACBETH And pity, like a naked new-born babe,

Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin, horsed

Upon the sightless couriers of the air,

Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye

That tears shall drown the wind.

Metaphors and similes like these offer us insight into the way a character thinks. They are a valuable clue.

Page 7 © RSC

Further reading

These are only some of the many ways in which Shakespeare uses words to create meaning. If you would like to learn more about Shakespeare's language, how it works and how his technique evolved as he developed his stagecraft, here are some books and websites which will provide more information:

- The Actor & the Text by Cicely Berry, Virgin Publishing, 1993
- The Working Shakespeare Collection: A Workbook for Teachers by Cicely Berry, Applause Books, 2004
- Shakespeare's Advice to the Players by Peter Hall. Oberon Books, 2003
- Shakespeare's Language by Frank Kermode, Penguin Books, 2001
- Shakespeare's Wordcraft by Scott Kaiser, Limelight Editions, 2007
- Glossary of Literary Terms University of Cambridge A handy, clearly written all-on-one-page glossary: http://www.english.cam.ac.uk/vclass/terms.htm
- What is iambic pentameter? BBC Learning Zone
 A video of young students learning about meter:
 http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningzone/clips/what-is-iambic-pentameter/9891.html

Written by Mary Johnson Edited by Suzanne Worthington RSC Education

Page 8 © RSC