

Reading Shakespeare's Language

For many people today, reading Shakespeare's language can be a problem—but it is a problem that can be solved. Those who have studied Latin (or even French or German or Spanish) and those who are used to reading poetry will have little difficulty understanding the language of Shakespeare's poetic drama. Others, however, need to develop the skills of untangling unusual sentence structures and of recognizing and understanding poetic compressions, omissions, and wordplay. And even those skilled in reading unusual sentence structures may have occasional trouble with Shakespeare's words. Four hundred years of "static"—caused by changes in language and life—intervene between his speaking and our hearing. Most of his immense vocabu-

lary is still in use, but a few of his words are not, and, worse, some of his words now have meanings quite different from those they had in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the theater, most of these difficulties are solved for us by actors who study the language and articulate it for us so that the essential meaning is heard—or, when combined with stage action, is at least *felt*. When reading on one's own, one must do what each actor does: go over the lines (often with a dictionary close at hand) until the puzzles are solved and the lines yield up their poetry and the characters speak in words and phrases that are, suddenly, rewarding and wonderfully memorable.

Shakespeare's Words

As you begin to read the opening scenes of a play by Shakespeare, you may notice occasional unfamiliar words. Some are unfamiliar simply because we no longer use them. In the opening scenes of *Hamlet*, for example, we find such words as *parle* (i.e., discussion, meeting), *soft* (an exclamation meaning "hold" or "enough" or "wait a minute"), and *marry* (an oath "by the Virgin Mary," which had by Shakespeare's time become a mere interjection, like "indeed"). Words of this kind are explained in notes to the text and will become familiar the more of Shakespeare's plays you read.

Some words are strange not because of the "static" introduced by changes in language over the past centuries but because these are words that Shakespeare is using to build a dramatic world that has its own geography and history and story. *Hamlet*, for example, builds, in its opening scenes, a location, a past history, and a background mythology through references to "the

Dane," to "buried Denmark," to Elsinore, to partisans and jointresses, to Hyperion and Niobe and Hercules. These "local" words and references (each of which is explained in notes to this text) build the world of Denmark that Hamlet, Gertrude, and Claudius inhabit and that will become increasingly familiar to you as you get further into the play.

In *Hamlet*, as in all of Shakespeare's writing, the most problematic words are those that we still use but that we use with a different meaning. In the first scene of *Hamlet* (1.1.14), the word *rivals* is used where we would use "companions." At 1.1.44 we find the word *his* where we would use "its" and at 1.1.134 the word *still* used (as it most often is in Shakespeare) to mean "always." At 1.1.67, *sensible* means "confirmed by the senses"; at 1.1.169, *extravagant* means "wandering"; and at 1.2.66, *cousin* is used (as it is generally in Shakespeare) to mean simply "kinsman." And at 1.2.278, where Hamlet says, "I doubt some foul play," we would say, "I suspect some treacherous action." Again, such words are explained in the notes to the text, but they, too, will become familiar as you continue to read Shakespeare's language.

Shakespeare's Sentences

In an English sentence, meaning is quite dependent on the place given each word. "The dog bit the boy" and "The boy bit the dog" mean very different things, even though the individual words are the same. Because English places such importance on the positions of words in sentences, on the way words are arranged, unusual arrangements can puzzle a reader. Shakespeare frequently shifts his sentences away from "normal" English arrangements—often to create the rhythm he seeks, sometimes to use a line's poetic rhythm to empha-

size a particular word, sometimes to give a character his or her own speech patterns or to allow the character to speak in a special way. Again, when we attend a good performance of the play, the actors will have worked out the sentence structures and will articulate the sentences so that the meaning is clear. In reading for yourself, do as the actor does. That is, when you are puzzled by a character's speech, check to see if the words are being presented in an unusual sequence.

Look first for the placement of subject and verb. Shakespeare often places the verb before the subject (e.g., instead of "He goes," we find "Goes he"). In the opening scene of *Hamlet*, when, at line 73, Horatio says "So frowned he once," he is using such a construction, as he is at line 91, when he says "That can I." Such inversions rarely cause much confusion. More problematic is Shakespeare's frequent placing of the object before the subject and verb (e.g., instead of "I hit him," we might find "Him I hit"). When Horatio says, at 1.1.78, "In what particular thought to work I know not," he is using such an inverted construction (the normal order would be "I know not in what particular thought to work"). Horatio uses another such inversion later in the same scene when he says (at lines 170–71), "of the truth herein / This present object made probation."

In some plays Shakespeare makes systematic use of inversions (*Julius Caesar* is one such play). In *Hamlet*, he more often uses sentence structures that depend instead on the separation of words that would normally appear together. (Again, this is often done to create a particular rhythm or to stress a particular word.) Claudius's "which have freely gone / With this affair along" (1.2.15–16) interrupts the phrase "gone along"; Horatio's "When he the ambitious Norway combated" (1.1.72) separates the subject and verb ("he combated"), interjecting between them the object of the verb ("the

ambitious Norway"). To create for yourself sentences that seem more like the English of everyday speech, you may wish to rearrange the words, putting together the word clusters and placing the remaining words in their more familiar order. You will usually find that the sentences will gain in clarity but will lose their rhythm or shift their emphases. You can then see for yourself why Shakespeare chose his unusual arrangement.

Locating and, if necessary, rearranging words that "belong together" is especially necessary in passages that separate subjects from verbs and verbs from objects by long delaying or expanding interruptions—a structure that is used frequently in *Hamlet*. For example, when Horatio, at 1.1.92–110, tells the story of how King Hamlet won the Norwegian lands and how the prince of Norway seeks to regain them, he uses a series of such interrupted constructions:

our last king,
Whose image even but now appeared to us,
Was, as you know, by Fortinbras of Norway,
Thereto pricked on by a most emulate pride,
Dared to the combat; in which our valiant Hamlet
(For so this side of our known world esteemed him)
Did slay this Fortinbras, who by a sealed compact,
Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands . . .
Now, sir, young *Fortinbras,*
Of unimprovèd mettle hot and full,
Hath in the skirts of Norway here and there
Sharked up a list of lawless resolute. . . .

Here the interruptions provide details that catch the audience up in Horatio's story. The separation of the basic sentence elements ("our last king was dared to the combat") forces the audience to attend to supporting

details while waiting for the basic sentence elements to come together. In the second scene of *Hamlet* (at 1.2.8–14), Claudius uses the same kind of interrupted construction in his opening speech:

Therefore *our sometime sister*, now our queen,
Th' imperial jointress to this warlike state,
Have we (as 'twere with a defeated joy,
With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
In equal scale weighing delight and dole)
Taken to wife . . .

where the basic elements of the sentence are simply "we [i.e., I] have taken to wife our sometime sister [i.e., my former sister-in-law]." Claudius's speech, like Horatio's, is a narrative of past events, but the interrupted sentence structure here seems designed to add formality to the speech and, perhaps, to cover over the bald statement carried in the stripped-down sentence.

Occasionally, rather than separating basic sentence elements, Shakespeare simply holds them back, delaying them until much subordinate material has already been given. Marcellus uses this kind of delaying structure when he says, at 1.1.76–77, "Thus twice before, and jump [i.e., exactly] at this dead hour, / With martial stalk hath he gone by our watch" (where a "normally" constructed English sentence would have begun with the basic sentence elements: "He hath gone by our watch"); Barnardo's sentence that precedes the entrance of the Ghost at line 46 uses this same delayed construction, though the Ghost's entrance breaks off Barnardo's words before the subject of the sentence ("Marcellus and myself") finds a verb. Hamlet, in his first soliloquy (1.2.133–64), uses a delayed construction when he says (lines 158–61) "Within a month, / Ere yet

the salt of most unrighteous tears / Had left the flushing
in her gallèd eyes, / She married."

Shakespeare's sentences are sometimes complicated not because of unusual structures or interruptions or delays but because he omits words and parts of words that English sentences normally require. (In conversation, we, too, often omit words. We say "Heard from him yet?" and our hearer supplies the missing "Have you." Frequent reading of Shakespeare—and of other poets—trains us to supply such missing words.) In plays written five or ten years after *Hamlet*, Shakespeare uses omissions both of verbs and of nouns to great dramatic effect. In *Hamlet* omissions are less interesting and seem to be used primarily for compressed expression. At 1.1.31–32, for instance, Marcellus says "Therefore I have entreated him along / With us," omitting the words "to come" or "to go" before "along"; a few lines later, Barnardo omits the word "with" in the construction "let us once again assail your ears [with] . . . what we have . . . seen" (lines 37–39).