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Getting Started

As you work with Shakespeare's masterpieces, you should endeavor to bring them to life in your own way, rendering the poet's words with feeling, with such gestures as you find appropriate, and with a clear sense of the intentions they appear to indicate, both for the characters who speak the lines and for the dramatic artist who composed them.

In a discourse at the beginning of Act 3, Scene 2, in *Hamlet*, the Prince of Denmark advises a troupe of visiting thespians to "**suit the action to the word, the word to the action**." In the exchanges that accompany this counsel, the protagonist says everything you need to know if you hope to imitate human behavior in a style that will seem natural. This should be your aspiration, and Hamlet's remarks should be your guide as you strive to acquire the necessary tools.

Explore the range of expressive possibilities in your own voice and movement. Experiment with variations in emphasis, phrasing, volume, and gesture. As you do so, you'll find that you make discoveries about techniques that will most effectively transmit what you perceive in the lines you're delivering.

Allow your work to grow and change. And don't forget that Elizabethan actors referred to themselves as "players." You should enjoy preparing your presentations, and you should experience delight as you unlock the charms of these scripts. Having read the complete play, you should **place yourself in the circumstances your character faces**, paying special attention to what happens immediately prior to each passage in which he or she appears. Then you should explore the words – the character's thoughts and feelings – with your voice and body.

Remember that **your object is to make the character your own** and, in so doing, to persuade an audience to accept you as that character and credit the words you speak as such. Resist the temptation to try impressing onlookers with any kind of overacting. More can often be achieved by doing less. A performer who is excessive in any way is rarely convincing.

You might find it helpful to **ask yourself a series of questions**. Exactly who is my character? In what situation do I, as this character, find myself? What revelations or pivotal decisions am I experiencing? What do I want to happen as a result of what I'm saying? Given my personality and my past behavior, how will I act to achieve my objectives? What is my mood or attitude at the beginning of each utterance? Has it changed by the end of the speech? If so, how and why?

A Quick Overview on Shakespeare's Language

As you work with any passage in Shakespeare, whether it happens to be in verse or in prose, and whether it occurs in a dramatic setting or in a lyric poem such as a sonnet, you'll find that certain patterns are almost always present. As director **Barry Edelstein** points out in a very useful book called *Thinking Shakespeare* (New York: Spark Publishing, 2007), as well as in his introduction to *Bardisms: Shakespeare for All Occasions* (New York: Collins, 2009), there are several steps to what he refers to as "Shipshape Shakespeare."

Of these the most important is to **know what you're saying**. You may find it helpful to paraphrase what you find in a Shakespearean text, rendering it as simply and concisely as possible in everyday speech. Having done so, you can then return to the poet's own words, confident that you are conveying something close to what he seems most likely to have intended as he wrote them.

Another thing to bear in mind is that **antithesis, the juxtaposition of opposites, is everywhere you look**. When you examine 3.2.74-76 of *Julius Caesar*, where Mark Antony says "I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him," you'll probably decide that the words an actor speaking this line will want to emphasize are *bury* and *praise*. These signal the options a character in Antony's situation must consider, and you'll notice that he opens his famous "Funeral Oration" by pretending to assure the audience that he is there not to defend the leader who has just been slain, but to align himself with Brutus and his fellow conspirators, men who've assassinated and now wish to dispose of Caesar without further scrutiny or incident. In

the lines that follow his first sentence, Antony proceeds to expand on, and cleverly manipulate, the distinctions he has drawn in his opening statement. "The evil that men do lives after them," he says, while "The good is oft interred with their bones." You'll notice that here again he employs parallel structure, this time to contrast *evil* with *good*, and to set *lives after them* in opposition to *is oft interred with their bones*. You'll find similar patterns not only in the remainder of Antony's speech, but in practically every clause of Shakespeare's work.

You'll also begin observing that **one of Shakespeare's techniques is language that varies in height**, shifting between elevated, Latinate words like "interred" and more simple phrases like "in their bones." You'll discover, too, that **verbs frequently serve as pivotal markers**. To illustrate this point, Mr. Edelstein refers to a passage in Hamlet's most famous soliloquy, where the Prince observes that fear of the afterlife can be so paralyzing that it "*puzzles* the will" and "*makes* us rather *bear* those ills we *have* / Than *fly* to others that we *know* not of." Not all of the verbs that have been italicized in this rendering of the utterance will receive equal stress, of course; in the final line, for instance, *others* and *of* will probably be accorded more emphasis by experienced performers than will *fly* and *know*. But paying close attention to the action words in any of Shakespeare's phrases, and deciding which of them to accent for the most natural cadence, will pay rich dividends.

Let's now devote a few paragraphs to **scansion and meter**. An overwhelming majority of Shakespeare's verse lines are in *iambic pentameter*, a form whose normal rhythmic count (*meter*) is five (*penta*) units, or metrical feet, most if not all of which are *iambs* (unstressed syllables followed by stressed ones, as in "New *York*"). Some iambic pentameter lines are nearly as regular as a ticking metronome. Consider 2.1.204 of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for example, where Helena tells Demetrius "The *more* you *beat* me *I* will *fawn* on *you*." This line is metrically regular, with five unstressed syllables followed in normal order by five stressed ones. But even here you'll notice varying levels of emphasis, with *beat* and *fawn*, the words that focus on the contrast between aggressive action and passive reaction, receiving more stress than *more*, *I*, and *you*. What you'll find elsewhere is that for expressive purposes Shakespeare frequently goes to even greater lengths to keep his verse lines from becoming monotonously predictable. For one thing, he substitutes other types of metrical feet for iambs. The most common variations are *trochees* (stressed-unstressed, as in "*Bos*ton"), *spondees* (stressed-stressed, as in "*Nashville*"), *anapests* (unstressed-unstressed-stressed, as in "Tennes*see*"), and *dactyls* (stressed-unstressed-unstressed, as in "*Mich*igan"). Another common substitution, particularly in the final position of an iambic line that has a "feminine" (unaccented) ending, is the *amphibrach* (unstressed-stressed-unstressed, as in "Chi*ca*go"). And quite often we encounter *pyrrhic* feet (unstressed-unstressed), usually in positions where strongly accented syllables, frequently in spondaic feet, occur either just before or just after. Now let's examine a few passages that may help illustrate these points.

In the most famous clause in *Hamlet*, the Prince says "To *be* or *not* to be, *that* is the *ques*tion." Here you'll notice that after the *caesura*, the brief pause that divides a typical Shakespearean line into two segments, the playwright substitutes a trochee ("*that* is") for the expected iamb. The result is to put more than usual stress on the initial word of that phrase, pairing it with a hyper-stressed *not* in the first half of the line. You will observe, too, that as a consequence of the accents on *not* and *that*, the intervening phrase "to be" has so little emphasis on its verb that it becomes a pyrrhic foot.

One of the most adept of Shakespeare's metrical virtuosi is Polonius, who artfully protests to the Queen that he uses "no art at all." Among the speeches in which he displays his technique most cleverly is the one in 2.2.86-92 where he says

> My *liege* and *ma*dam, *to* ex*pos*tu*late*
> What *ma*jest*y* should *be*, what *du*ty *is*,
> Why *day* is *day*, *night night*, and *time* is *time*,
> Were *no*thing *but* to *waste* night, *day*, and *time*;
> There*fore* since *bre*vity *is* the *soul* of *wit*,
> And *te*dious*ness* the *limbs* and *out*ward *flou*rishe*s*,
> I *will* be *brief*. Your *no*ble *son* is *mad*.

Here you'll notice that Polonius alternates between pretentious, polysyllabic Latinate words like *expostulate* and short, plain ones like *day*, *night*, and *time*. You'll observe, too, that the longer words he employs can be uttered more rapidly, whereas the short ones, with their long vowels, require you to slow down as you speak them (note the spondee "night night" in line 3). You'll find that most of the lines in this passage are metrically regular. In the fifth line, however, you'll detect something unusual with *brevity*. The only way to make this word fit the normal pattern is to abbreviate it to "brev'ty" by eliding (omitting) or gliding over the *i*. In short, the meter encourages you to impose brevity upon *brevity*.

In the next line, meanwhile, you'll observe that you need to do something similar with the word *tediousness*, pronouncing it "*te*-jus-ness." And if you do a metrical count, you'll discover that this line has twelve syllables and six feet, rather than the ten and five you'd normally expect. Instead of a regular pentameter, in other words, it's hypermetric; it's a *hexameter* (a six-foot line). Fittingly, in terms of what Polonius is trying to convey, it turns out to be a line with "outward flourishes."

The kind of rhetorical skill that Polonius exhibits here is by no means unusual, and one of the things that make Shakespeare fun is watching for this kind of elegant variation. *Richard II* is a play in which the playwright's verse tends to be unusually regular. It can thus be puzzling to come across a lengthy and peculiarly inarticulate speech that York delivers in 2.2.98-122 after he's received several pieces of disturbing news. In the early printings the passage concludes like this:

> I *should* to *Pla*shy *too*, but *time* will *not* per*mit*.
> *All* is un*ev*en, and *ev*ery *thing* is *left* at *six* and *se*ven.

The first of these sentences, like the penultimate line in the speech from Polonius that we looked at earlier, is a hexameter. The second is even more hypermetric; it's a seven-foot line, a *heptameter,* and appropriately the words *six* and *seven* (which allude to the metrical lengths of these two lines) occur in the sixth and seventh feet. You'll notice, too, that this final line is "uneven" in other ways. There is a trochaic substitution in the first foot ("*All* is"). There are either amphibrachs or elisions (omitted or unvoiced syllables) in *uneven* (depending on whether or not you shorten it to "unev'n") and *every* (depending on whether you shorten it to "ev'ry"). And the concluding phrase, "and seven," must be treated either as an amphibrach (resulting in a feminine ending) or handled in such a way as to yield a *seven* which is elided to "sev'n." For many actors, the option that will seem most in keeping with what this passage conveys is to highlight the unevenness of the verse by voicing every syllable in the final line. In any case, it should now be clear that the operating procedure that will prove most helpful in this instance (in keeping with what Polonius says in *Hamlet*, 2.2.101-3) is

> That we find out the cause of this effect,
> Or rather say, the cause of this defect,
> For this effect defective comes by cause.

A later poet, Alexander Pope, was keenly attuned to the kind of metrical virtuosity you find in passages such as these. In *An Essay on Criticism* (1711), he says
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> True ease in writing comes from art, not chance,
> As those move easiest who have learned to dance.
> 'Tis not enough no harshness give offense,
> The sound must seem an echo to the sense:
> Soft is the strain when Zephyr gently blows,
> And the smooth stream in smoother numbers flows;
> But when loud surges lash the sounding shore,
> The hoarse, rough verse should like the torrent roar;
> When Ajax strives some rock's vast weight to throw,
> The line too labors, and the words move slow;
> Not so when swift Camilla scours the plain,
> Flies o'er th' unbending corn, and skims along the main.

Let's draw these reflections to a close with some additional pointers. One is that **Shakespeare's verse lines need to be encountered one at a time**, with attention to the way they tend to build toward the phrases that conclude them, even when there is no punctuation at the end (when they are *enjambed*, joined to the next line) and they carry over without interruption to the words that follow. Barry Edelstein suggests a couple of devices that may help you see the advantages of this technique. One is to take a sheet of paper and slide it down the page one line at a time, thereby compelling yourself to focus entirely on that line before moving on to the next one. Another is to make a list of the final words in the passage you've selected, noticing as you do so that these tend to be words that are fundamental to what is going on in the speech.

Another thing you'll want to bear in mind is that meter and other considerations dictate that **familiar words are sometimes pronounced in varying ways** when you come across them in more than one Shakespearean passage. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, for instance, you'll observe that *revenue* is accented in today's usual fashion in 1.1.6 ("Long withering out a young man's revenue"). But when you look at 1.1.158 ("Of great revenue, and she hath no child"), you will

notice that the stress needs to fall on the second syllable rather than the first. It's also important to note that vowels you normally leave silent are frequently voiced in metrical contexts. In the passage we looked at earlier from *Julius Caesar*, for example, it may perhaps have caught your attention that *interred* becomes a three-syllable word (in-*ter*-red) in "oft interred in their bones."

Among the common words that vary according to where they occur in a given metrical context are *toward* and *towards*. British actors tend to treat these as two-syllable words no matter where they appear. Americans tend to err in the opposite direction and treat them as one-syllable words. Your key is to pay heed to how one pronunciation or the other coheres with the meter of the line in question.

Another trap that lies in wait for the unwary is a possessive like *mistress'* in a clause such as "My mistress' eyes are nothing like the sun" (Sonnet 130). In the 1609 volume in which this poem initially appeared (prior to the time when apostrophes were normally used to indicate possession), this word is rendered "Mistres," and it was meant to be pronounced as a two-syllable word (not *mistress's*). You should remember never to add a final *s* to a possessive that doesn't have one in the edition you're employing.

In Shakespeare's time, what we now call reflexive pronouns (myself, thyself, ourselves) were rendered as two words rather than one. Keep this in mind, and you'll rediscover the power that Shakespeare's contemporaries found in lines like

> Romeo, doff thy name,
> And for thy name, which is no part of thee,
> Take all my self.

Here you'll notice that "self" and "name" are balanced, contrasting, words. And you'll immediately see how much you gain in clarity and emotional impact by placing full stress on the word that concludes this sentence. Notice too that here, and generally elsewhere in the play, *Romeo* (like *Juliet*) functions as a two-syllable name ("*Rome*-yo"). A partial exception to this generalization occurs in the couplet that concludes the play, where all three syllables of the male protagonist's name (as distinguished from those of his female counterpart's name) are voiced:

> For never was a story of more woe,
> Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.

In addition to the many superb modern editions of Shakespeare that are now on the market, you'll be well advised, if feasible, to look at facsimiles of the printings that appeared in the playwright's lifetime (most of them in small volumes referred to by today's scholars as "quartos") and of the great collection that appeared in 1623 (now known as "The First Folio"). Doing so will make you keenly aware that the language of our playwright and his contemporaries was in many ways quite different from, and by no means necessarily inferior to, modern English. For a brief overview on some of its most salient characteristics, see the textual notes in any of the paperback volumes of **The Everyman Shakespeare**, edited by John F. Andrews. There you'll be reminded that before they became "literature" (published for readers to enjoy in the quiet of their homes), these classics were scripts for actors to render as words that would be heard by audiences in theaters like the Globe. For a more extended discussion of this topic, see **www.shakesguild.org/Site-Reading.pdf**.

There are a number of books that will be helpful if you'd like to study the playwright's work in greater depth. One that many performers find helpful is **Speak the Speech: Shakespeare's Monologues Illuminated** by Rhona Silverbush and Sami Plotkin (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2002). Another is **The Eloquent Shakespeare: A Pronouncing Dictionary for the Complete Dramatic Works, With Notes to Untie the Modern Tongue** by Gary Logan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

For a more concise orientation to the subject, see "Shakespeare's Poetic Techniques" by George T. Wright in Volume 2 (pages 363-88) of **William Shakespeare: His World, His Work, His Literature**, edited by John F. Andrews (New York: Scribners, 1985). And for a more general analysis of verse and its subtleties, see **Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry** by Laurence Perrine (New York: Harcourt Brace and World, 1963).

Should you be interested in more detail about ways in which the original printings of Shakespeare's poems and dramatic works differ from what you will normally encounter in modern editions, see **www.shakesguild.org/Site-Reading.pdf** and **www.shakesguild.org/Merchant.pdf**. Blue links to both articles are available at **www.shakesguild.org/Andrews.html**.