

Folger Edition: 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 in life – intervene between his speaking and our hearing. Most of his immense vocabulary 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 actors 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 *Macbeth*, for example, you will find the words *aroint thee* (begone), *runnion* (a slatternly woman), *coign* (corner), *anon* (right away), *alarum* (a call to arms), *sewer* (a servant who oversees the serving of food), and *hautboy* (a very loud wind instrument designed for outdoor ceremonies, the forerunner of the orchestral oboe). 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. *Macbeth*, for example, builds, in its opening scenes, a location, a past history, and a background mythology by references to “the Western Isles,” to “valor's minion,” to “Bellona's bridegroom,” to “thanes,” “Sinel,” “Glamis,” and “Cawdor,” to “kerns and gallowglasses,” to the “Weird Sisters,” to “Norweyan ranks,” to “Inverness” and “Saint Colme's Inch.” These “local” references build the Scotland that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth inhabit and will become increasingly familiar to you as you get further into the play.

In *Macbeth*, as in all of Shakespeare's writings, the most problematic words are those that we still use but that we use with different meanings. In the second scene of *Macbeth* we find the words *composition* (meaning “terms of peace”) and *present* (meaning “immediate”); in the third scene *choppy* is used where we would use “chapped” or “wrinkled,” *addition* where we would use “title”; in the seventh scene, *receipt* is used to mean “receptacle.”

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 in order to create the rhythm he seeks, sometimes to use a line’s poetic rhythm to emphasize 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 sentence 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 scenes of *Macbeth*, when Ross says (I.iii 101-102) “As thick as tale/Came post with post,” and when the witch says (I.iii 24) “Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine,” they are using constructions that place the subject and verb in unusual positions. 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”). Banquo’s statement to the Weïrd Sisters at I.iii 57-58, “My noble partner/You greet with present grace and great prediction,” is an example of such an inversion. (The normal order would be “You greet my noble partner with present grace and great prediction.”) Lady Macbeth opens her soliloquy in I.v with such an inverted structure: “Glamis thou art, and Cawdor” (an inversion that increases the emphasis on the names “Glamis” and “Cawdor”); she uses another such inverted structure in I.vii 73-74 when she says to Macbeth, “his two chamberlains/Will I with wine and wassail . . . convince” (where the “normal” structure would be “I will convince [i.e., overcome] his two chamberlains with wine and wassail.”).

In some plays Shakespeare makes systematic use of inversions (*Julius Caesar* is one such play). In *Macbeth*, 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.) Malcolm’s “This is the sergeant/Who like a good and hardy soldier, fought / ‘Gainst my captivity” (I.ii 4-6) separates the subject and verb (“who fought”); the Captain’s “No sooner justice had, with valor armed,/Compelled these skipping kerns to trust their heels” (I.ii 32-33) interrupts the two parts of the verb “had compelled” (at the same time that it inverts the subject and verb; the normal order would be “No sooner had justice compelled. . .”); a few lines later, the Captain’s “the Norweyan lord, surveying vantage,/With furbished arms and new supplies of men,/Began a fresh assault”(I.ii 34-36) separates the subject and verb (“lord began”). In order 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 *Macbeth*. For example, when the Captain, at I.ii 11–25, tells the story of Macbeth’s fight against the rebel Macdonwald, he uses a series of such interrupted constructions:

The Merciless Macdonwald

(Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him) from the Western Isles
Of kerns and gallowglasses *is supplied*;

...

But all's too weak;
For *brave Macbeth* (well he deserves that name),
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valor's minion, *carved out his passage* ...

Here the interruptions provide details that catch the audience up in the Captain's story. The separation of the basic sentence elements "the merciless Macdonwald is supplied" forces the audience to attend to supporting details (of why he is worthy to be a villain, of how he has been supplied with soldiers from the Western Isles) while waiting for the basic sentence elements to come together. A similar effect is created when "brave Macbeth carved of his passage" is interrupted by a clause commenting on the word "brave" ("well he deserves that name"), by a phrase that describes Macbeth's mood ("Disdaining Fortune"), and by two further phrases one of them the complex "with his brandished steel / Which smoked with bloody execution," and one of them a simple description, "Like valor's minion."

Occasionally, rather than separating basic sentence elements, Shakespeare simply holds them back, delaying them until much subordinate material has already been given. Lady Macbeth uses this kind of delaying structure when she says, at I.vi 22–24, "For those of old/And the late dignities heaped up to them,/We rest your hermits" (where a "normally" constructed English sentence would have begun with the basic sentence elements "We rest your hermits"); Macbeth, in his famous soliloquy at I.vii 1-28, uses a delayed construction when he says (lines 2-7), "If th' assassination/Could trammel up the consequence and catch/With his surcease success, that but this blow/Might be the be-all and the end-all here,/But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,/We'd jump the life to come" (where the basic sentence elements "We'd jump the life to come" are delayed to the end of the very long sentence).

Shakespeare's sentences are sometimes complicated not because of unusual structures or interruptions or delays but because he omits words and part 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 *Macbeth*, Shakespeare uses omissions to great dramatic effect. At I.iii 105-108, Angus says to Macbeth, "We are sent/To give thee from our royal master thanks,/[We are sent] Only to herald thee into his sight,/Not [to] pay thee" (the omitted words, shown in brackets, add clarity but slow the speech). At I.iv 48–49, Duncan's cryptic "From hence to Inverness/And bind us further to you" would read, if the missing words were supplied, "Let us go

from hence to Inverness, and may this visit bind us further to you.” Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy, at I.v 15-33, would read, with the omitted subject and verbs in place, “Thou wouldst be great,/[Thou] Art not without ambition, but [thou art] without/The illness [that] should attend it.” Later in the soliloquy, at I.v 51-54, she again omits words in saying, “Stop up th’ access and passage to remorse,/[So] That no compunctious visitings of nature/[Will] Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between/Th’ effect and it,” and again at I.vii 80-82, where she asks Macbeth, “What [can] not [you and I] put upon/His spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt/Of our great quell?” In reading *Macbeth* one should stay alert for omitted words, since Shakespeare so often uses this device to build compression and speed in the language of this play.

Shakespearean Wordplay

Shakespeare plays with language so often and so variously that books are written on the topic. Here we will mention only two kinds of wordplay, puns and metaphors. A pun is a play on words that sound the same but have different meaning. In many plays (*Romeo & Juliet* is a good example) Shakespeare uses puns frequently; in *Macbeth* they are rarely found (except in such serious “punning” as Macbeth’s “If it were done when ‘tis done...”). Perhaps the play’s most famous (and the most shocking) pun is Lady Macbeth’s “If he do bleed,/I’ll gild the faces of the grooms withal,/For it must seem their guilt” (II.ii 71-73), where she seems to be playing with the double meaning of guilt/ gilt. Such wordplay is rare in *Macbeth*.

A metaphor is a play on words in which one object or idea is expressed as if it were something else, something with which it shares common features. For instance, when Lady Macbeth says (I.v 28-29) “Hie thee hither/That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,” she is using metaphoric language: the words that she wants to say to Macbeth are compared to a liquid that can be poured in the ear. Her instruction to Macbeth (I.v 76-78), “Look like th’ innocent flower,/But be the serpent under ‘t,” uses metaphor to draw a picture of how Macbeth should look in order to hide his evil intentions. Metaphors are often used when the idea being conveyed is hard to express; through metaphor, the speaker is given language that helps to carry the idea or the feeling to his or her listener – and to the audience. Lady Macbeth uses metaphor to convey her contempt for Macbeth’s cowardice (I.vii 39-42): “Was this hope drunk/Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?/And wakes it now, to look so green and pale/At what it did so freely?” And Macbeth expresses his own lack of valid motivation before the number through a horseback-riding metaphor. (I.vii 25-27): “I have no spur/To prick the sides of my intent, but only/Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself...”

***Macbeth’s* Language**

Each of Shakespeare’s plays has its own characteristic language. In *Macbeth*, one notices particularly the deliberate imprecision of some of the play’s words. Macbeth’s lines (I.vii 1-2) “If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well/It were done quickly” not only play with the imprecise verb “done” but also refer to some unmade “it.” In the next sentence, we learn that “it” is “th’ assassination” (a word that Shakespeare invents for this play, as he does so many other words) – but the imprecision is characteristic of *Macbeth’s* language. We hear it again in Lady Macbeth’s “Wouldst thou have that/Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life/And live a coward in thine own esteem...?” (I.vii 45-47) where “that which thou esteem’st the ornament of life” is perhaps, the crown – or, perhaps, the kingship. The sense is clear, but the language seems deliberately vague, deliberately flowery, as if designed to cover over the serpent under it. In reading *Macbeth*, one must sometimes

be content to get the gist of the characters' language, since in such lines as "the powers above/Put on their instruments" (IV.iii 279-80) no precise "translation" exists.

Implied Stage Action

Finally, in reading Shakespeare's plays you should always remember that what you are reading is a performance script. The dialogue is written to be spoken by actors who, at the same time, are moving, gesturing, picking up objects, weeping, shaking their fists. Some stage action is described in what are called "stage directions"; some is suggested within the dialogue itself. Learn to be alert to such signals as you stage the play in your imagination. When, in the third scene of *Macbeth*, Banquo says (I.iii 44-47), "You seem to understand me/By each at once her choppy finger laying/Upon her skinny lips," the stage action is obvious. Again, his words to Macbeth (I.iii 54-55), "Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear/Things that do sound so fair?," indicate that the actor playing Macbeth gestures in a fairly obvious way. It is less easy later in the scene to imagine exactly what is to take place just before Banquo says (1.3.82-83), "The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,/And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?" The director and the actors (and the reader, in imagination) must decide just how the witches "melt...into the wind." Learning to read the language of stage actions repays one many times over when one reaches a crucial scene like that of the banquet and its appearing and disappearing ghost (III.ii) or that of the final duel in V.viii, in both of which scenes implied stage action vitally affects our response to the play.

It is immensely rewarding to work carefully with Shakespeare's language so that the words, the sentences, the wordplay, and the implied stage action all become clear – as readers for the past four centuries have discovered. It may be more pleasurable to attend a good performance of a play – though not everyone has thought so. But the joy of being able to stage one of Shakespeare's plays in one's imagination, to return to passages that continue to yield further meanings (or further questions) the more one reads them – these are pleasures that, for many, rival (or at least augment) those of the performed text, and certainly make it worth considerable effort to "break the code" of Elizabethan poetic drama and let free the remarkable language that makes up a Shakespeare text.