



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:

u / u / u / u / u /
'If mu sic be the food of love play on'

u = weak / = strong

The rhythm of blank verse is conversational and with its 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:

MACBETH u / u / u / u / u /
Throw physic to the dogs; I'll none of it.
/ / u / u / u / u /
Come, put mine armour on; give me my staff.
/ u u / / u u / u / u
Seyton, send out. Doctor, the thanes fly from me.
/ / u /
Come, sir, dispatch.

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

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 **t**urned into **t**ongue, and **t**rim ones **t**oo.

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 fAlr stAte,
 The glAss of fAshion and the mOUIld of fOrm,
 Th'ObsErved of All ObsErsers, quite, quite dOwn.

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 onomatopoeic, 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.

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>

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