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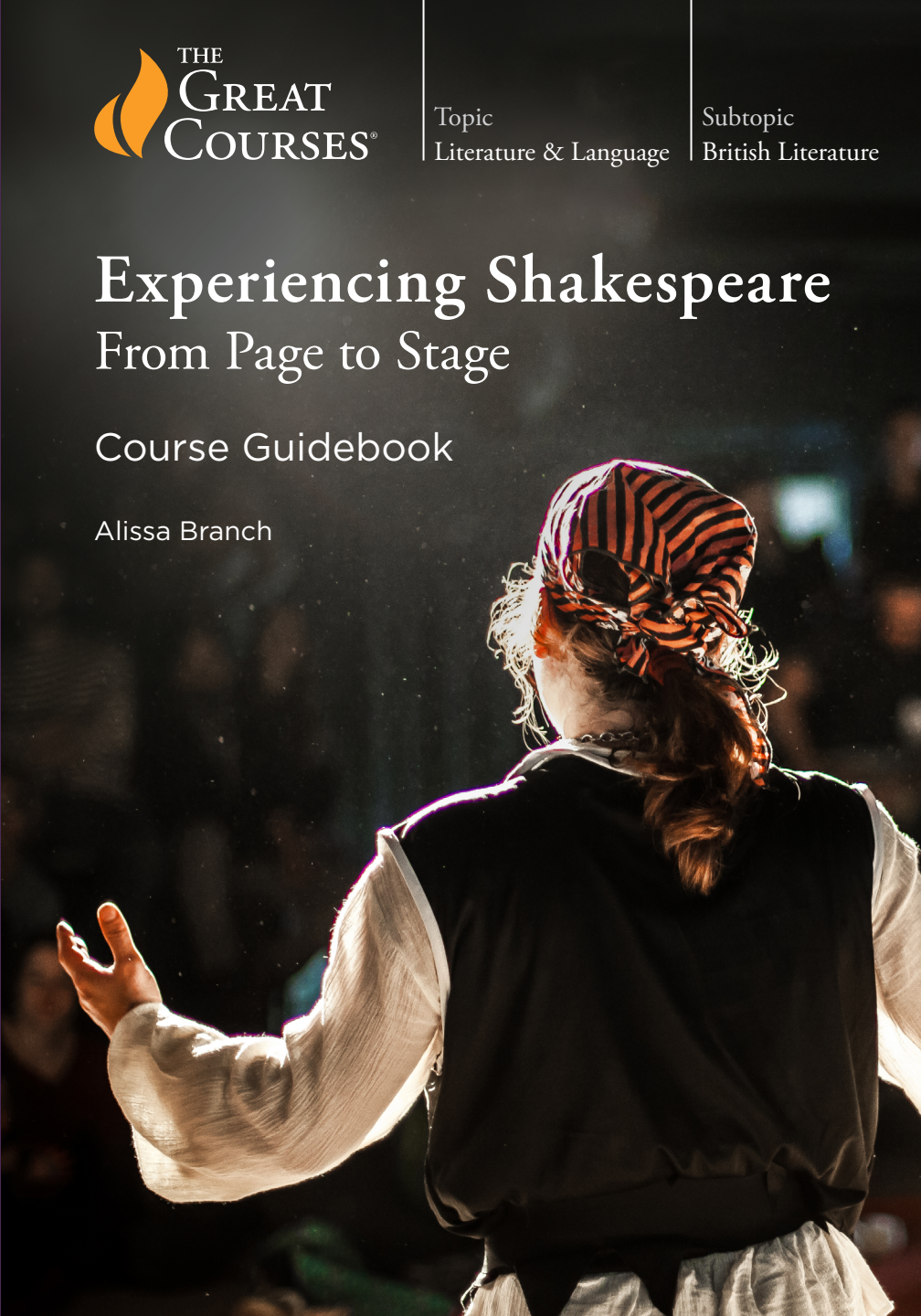
British Literature

Experiencing Shakespeare
From Page to Stage

Course Guidebook

Alissa Branch



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Experiencing Shakespeare: From Page to Stage

Scope

Unlike a novel, a play isn't meant to be read silently or by yourself. It's a template for action, written to be brought to life by the voices, movements, and imaginations of actors—and experienced by audiences in community with others. With the plays of William Shakespeare, this is even more true. Although he created incredibly deep, dimensional characters on the page, his plays are embedded with clues for how those characters are to be fully developed in performance—if you know how to look for them.

This video course illuminates Shakespeare's plays by taking you backstage, where you'll watch the act of theatrical discovery unfold. You'll discover the way his plays might have looked and sounded in Elizabethan theaters, compared with techniques used to act and produce modern productions. Throughout the video course, you'll watch as two professional Shakespearean actors explore his use of meter, rhetoric, wordplay, and other linguistic devices that make up his vivid imagery; you'll see the unexpected ways that each of these tools can be used to further develop characters. Then, the course will delve into the process of how actors apply this information during rehearsal, in preparation for their final performances of scenes from some of Shakespeare's most beloved plays. And as an extra layer of depth in each video lesson, you'll hear from noted Shakespearian actress Jane Lapotaire, who will share some insights she's gained from a lifetime of performance experience.

Whether you're new to Shakespeare or well versed in his plays, this course will expand your appreciation for his artistry and your understanding of the process used by the actors who perform his work.

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Reading versus Watching Shakespeare

Unlike a novel, a play is unfinished on the page. It's a template for action, meant to be brought to life by actors' bodies, voices, and imaginations and experienced by audiences. Plays aren't designed to be read silently. The word *play* implies an action, and experiencing a play is meant to be active and playful—for the performers and audience. Shakespeare plays require the actors and the audience to play.

This course will explore why the plays of William Shakespeare are still among the most staged more than 400 years after his death. It will examine how theatrical artists explore, rehearse, and perform Shakespeare's plays. It will take you backstage into the actors' process to illuminate and demystify the way artists bring Shakespeare's texts to life for a modern audience. It will culminate in performances of fully rehearsed and staged scenes from some of Shakespeare's most beloved plays.

The Unspoken Pact of a Play

Experiencing a play involves a willing suspension of disbelief. When you go to the theater, you make an unspoken pact with the actors. You agree to suspend your disbelief, embrace the story they tell you, and involve yourself in the imaginary circumstances of the play.

Likewise, the actors agree to present the story in a way that makes it feel spontaneous and exciting, as though the story were unfolding for the first time at every single performance.

Shakespeare's Prologues

The Chorus prologue speech in Shakespeare's *Henry V* addresses how a play works. This play begins with the actor voicing the Chorus, approaching the audience, and speaking directly to them.

> O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
> The brightest heaven of invention,
> A kingdom for a stage, princes to act
> And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!
> Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,
> Assume the port of Mars; and at his heels,
> Leash'd in like hounds, should famine, sword and fire
> Crouch for employment. But pardon, and gentles all,
> The flat unraised spirits that have dared
> On this unworthy scaffold to bring forth
> So great an object: can this cockpit hold
> The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
> Within this wooden O the very casques
> That did affright the air at Agincourt?
> O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
> Attest (in little place) a million;
> And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
> On your imaginary forces work.
> Suppose within the girdle of these walls
> Are now confined two mighty monarchies,

Whose high upreared and abutting fronts
The perilous narrow ocean parts asunder:
Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts;
Into a thousand parts divide one man,
And make imaginary puissance;
Think when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' the receiving earth;
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,
Carry them here and there; jumping o'er times,
Turning the accomplishment of many years
Into an hour-glass: for the which supply,
Admit me Chorus to this history;
Who prologue-like your humble patience pray,
Gently to hear, kindly to judge, our play.

It starts by acknowledging that the audience has come to hear a play. The "unworthy scaffold" is the stage, and the "wooden O" is the Elizabethan playhouse. The prologue wonders if the "unworthy cockpit" of the theater can hold all the wondrous figures mentioned in the play—and asks the audience to do some of the work in summoning them!

Shakespeare is saying that for live theater to work, the audience must commit to participating, to imagining the many extra people and places that cannot be shown onstage. He acknowledges that live theatrical performance is a collaboration between the many kinds of theatrical artists and the audience who comes to hear it. The prologue also asks the audience to hear the play gently and to judge it kindly. Thus, it establishes a friendly relationship with the audience and tells them how they should behave.

Shakespearean Language

It sometimes takes a minute for our ears to tune to Shakespeare's use of language. As you continue through this course, you will likely find that it gets easier for you to understand the text when you hear it.

The private journals written by audience members during Shakespeare's lifetime describe "hearing" a play, while modern audiences tend to describe "seeing" or "watching" a play. The word *audience* has its roots in the word *audio*, and this reference to the audience's ears is informative.

In Elizabethan theaters, there was a back wall to the stage, but not much scenery was built. The audience was expected to imagine what they could not see by listening to the words. Thus, acting Shakespeare requires the actor to paint the scenery with their words, to use their vocal and physical instruments to express the story and create the onstage world for the audience. Shakespeare gives the actors clues about how to do that. This series of lessons and demonstrations will explore these clues.

William Shakespeare's Beginnings

The Shakespeare authorship question refers to the argument made by some 19th- and 20th-century scholars that the author William Shakespeare from the small town of Stratford-upon-Avon was simply a front for some other author who did not want their identity to be publicly known. These scholars argued that it was unlikely or impossible for a boy from relatively ordinary circumstances in rural England to write plays with such soaring language, deep understanding of characters ranging from kings and queens to servants, and searing insight into the human condition.

They further argued that William Shakespeare did not have the aristocratic upbringing or familiarity with the royal court necessary to write such grand plays. However, most scholars and performing artists today have dismissed this idea as a fringe theory—and a classist one. Artists throughout history have proven that greatness can arise from any kind of beginning or life experience.

This series of lessons speak of William Shakespeare, the playwright from Stratford-upon-Avon who lived from April 1564 to April 1616. Because he lived more than 400 years ago, there aren't many remaining records of his life.

William Shakespeare grew up the son of a successful glove maker and almost certainly attended the town's grammar school. He married, had three children, and eventually left his family in Stratford while he moved to London as a young man—at least part-time—to participate in the theater. He worked as an actor, a successful playwright, and a partner in a popular acting company. He retired to Stratford and died there at the age of 52.

English grammar schools prized classical literature and history, taught pupils Greek and Latin, and required much oral recitation. It seems clear, then, that Shakespeare did receive a rigorous education by any modern standard and could have learned the skills necessary to become a playwright and an actor.

Because modern actors don't know much more about his life, Shakespeare's written words are the ultimate guide to performing his plays. They are all that can be known about his intentions and are the primary tool for the creation of a visceral experience of his stories onstage.

Prologue to *Romeo and Juliet*

This prologue deals directly with the audience's expectations for a play in performance. *Romeo and Juliet* begins with an actor coming onstage and talking directly to the audience.

> Two households, both alike in dignity,
> In fair Verona where we lay our scene
> From ancient grudge break to new mutiny
> Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
> From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
> A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
> Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
> Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
> The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
> And the continuance of their parents' rage,
> Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
> Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage;
> The which if you with patient ears attend,
> What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.

Comparing the Prologues

Like in *Henry V*, this prologue acknowledges that the audience has come to a theater to see a play, and it's worth noting that the actor's acknowledgment of the audience is a device Shakespeare uses brilliantly and often.

Romeo and Juliet also apologizes for what it cannot accomplish. It asks the audience to listen with patient ears to hear all that was missed in the prologue. But the prologue gives an astounding amount of information: The play is about two households of similar social status.

These two families have an ancient grudge. The play is set in Verona, Italy. The kids from these families fall in love and eventually kill themselves because they can't be together—which causes so much shock and grief that the families finally decide to make peace.

Amazingly, Shakespeare managed to transmit that much information in 14 lines of verse and 140 syllables of language. The language is incredibly dense. No syllable in a verse line is wasted, which you will learn more about, when examining the structure of blank verse—the verse form used by Shakespeare.

In *Henry V*, the actor is concerned with whether the production can do justice to the size of the story: the battlefields, the legions of soldiers, and the royal personalities depicted. The prologue apologizes for the lack of spectacle and asks the audience to fill things in using their imagination.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, the actor asks the audience to be patient but also outlines the plot of the play. We can't know for sure why Shakespeare does that; thus, we must make an educated guess and then determine how to use the prologue effectively.

How to Play the Prologue

The plot is not new. The story of star-crossed lovers who aren't supposed to be together predates Shakespeare. Thus, the action of the play wouldn't be a mystery to Elizabethan audiences. Perhaps Shakespeare is asking the audience to pay attention to how it's told, rather than what will happen.

Now that you have a clearer understanding of how the prologue functions, it can be tried in a slightly different way. Imagine you're a character who realizes you have only one minute to tell the audience all of this information because you don't want the play to start late—or perhaps because some members of the Montague and Capulet families are already starting to spar and spat with each other on the stage, and you want to make sure the audience has the information necessary to understand the action!

This prologue feels different. It applies a clear intention to the piece—a specific reason to have to say it out loud. It sounds more urgent, engaging, suspenseful—and sets the tone for what would undoubtedly be an energetic, dramatic night at the theater.

Thus, it's not enough for the actor to simply understand the logic of the thoughts and say the lines; they must know why they're saying them. With the help of a director, actors must decide this about every single line they speak onstage. And they need to base their decisions on their understanding of the playwright's original intention. The process of deciding the character's intention—and then practicing how to accomplish that intention—is what much of the rehearsal process is about. Actors today have the added challenge of ensuring that the old-fashioned language is decipherable to the audience.

Dialects in Shakespearean Plays

Although the Shakespearean lines are written for English speakers, the tradition is to have actors speak with their own regional dialects unless the character is from a place outside of the norm of the play. Thus, American actors speak with an American dialect—though if they were playing Princess Katherine of France in *Henry V*, for example, they might speak with a French dialect to make it clear that the character is from somewhere outside of the world of the play.

This tradition is partly because that's what sounds most natural for the actors; it is also because a British dialect in Shakespeare's London sounded different than a standard British dialect does today. In fact, linguists believe that a British dialect in 1600 sounded more like the current American Appalachian accent! Thus, actors tend to use intentional dialect sparingly, as an acknowledgment that actors from any geography can use his words effectively.

In lesson 2, you'll learn about the history of Shakespeare in performance to give you a useful perspective for the rest of the course. Lesson 3 will start to dig more deeply into the many techniques modern actors use to perform Shakespeare clearly and effectively.

Because Shakespearean performances have been happening for more than 400 years, there's much information that can't be known for sure. It can't be known exactly what performance techniques looked or sounded like in Elizabethan times, or what Shakespeare's intentions were when he wrote the plays. So, students of Shakespeare must be detectives, mining the scripts for meaning and discovering how to present them in a way that speaks to modern artists and audiences. They should acknowledge the performance traditions but also make the work their own.

William Shakespeare is the most written-about playwright. There have been many books written about how to act Shakespeare. However, most of the actors' real work and training happens live as actors speak the words aloud to each other and are heard by the audience, bringing the text alive in that moment.

In the rest of this course, you will go behind the scenes to see how Shakespeare's words are transformed as they move from the page onto the stage.

Reading

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Plays in the Elizabethan Age

As mentioned in the last lesson, there is no definitive way of knowing exactly how the first performances of Shakespeare's plays looked or sounded on stage. Most performing artists would give a great deal to watch a recording of an original Elizabethan performance, or (better yet) to sit down with William Shakespeare himself over a bottle of ale to ask him a couple of questions.

However, modern actors must rely on journal entries, theatrical documents, and the scripts themselves to piece together what Shakespeare's plays looked and sounded like during the playwright's lifetime.

The Elizabethan Period

The Elizabethan period refers to the years in which Queen Elizabeth I was the reigning monarch—1558 until her death in 1603. *Elizabethan drama* refers to theatrical comedies, dramas, and histories written and performed during this time. The methods used to produce and perform Shakespeare's plays during that period are referred to as Elizabethan original practices.

The London that greeted Shakespeare when he moved from Stratford-upon-Avon in the 1570s was a large, bustling city with rich artistic traditions. The plays performed by the time Shakespeare arrived in London were secular. Elizabethan plays are characterized by exciting plots, three-dimensional characters, and varying locales, even including fantastical places. The comedies often involve mayhem caused by disguises, misunderstandings, and mistaken identities. The tragedies are filled with flawed heroes fighting for love, revenge, the crown, and their honor.

Performances by Day or by Night

These plays were performed daily by professional actors in Elizabethan playhouses—large, round, open-air wooden structures, with thatched roofs covering a small portion of the ceiling. Thus, when Shakespeare's characters begged the gods for mercy, Elizabethan actors were actually looking up at the sky and the heavens. When Romeo compared Juliet to the sun (or the moon), the sun was shining on the actor as he spoke of it: The sun is mentioned rather than the moon because Elizabethan plays were originally performed in daylight. There was no safe way to light the theater at night.

Thus, the actors could also see the audience. In plays of the 20th and 21st centuries, written in a style called stage realism, the audience is often a silent voyeur, sitting in the darkness apart from the action of the play, and the actors focus only on each other, keeping their circle of attention onstage.

In contrast, having the audience in open view of the actors encouraged interaction between the actors and their audience. The people of this time viewed going to a play as a sport that expected, invited, and required their participation.

Elizabethan Audiences

Elizabethan audiences included members of all classes, and the playhouse was one of the only places where upper-class nobility and lower-class commoners might enjoy a shared experience. The more expensive tickets were for seats higher up, in the upper balcony, and ticket prices descended with each floor of seating.

The theatergoers at floor level were known as groundlings because they stood on the ground in a pit at the base of the stage—sometimes leaning up against the floor of the stage, which had a platform—a thrust—that stuck out into the audience. The groundlings were rowdy and casual: They drank beer, ate snacks, clapped and booed at will, and called out their approval or disapproval to the actors.

Knowing the size of the space, shape of the stage, and general architecture of the theater helps modern artists understand what was required of the performers as Shakespeare's words were first spoken aloud onstage. Shakespeare was writing for an Elizabethan theater—a bustling, unpredictable, playful place, filled with different classes of people near each other.

Shakespeare's actors would therefore be prepared to deal with any kind of disruption, and they would often make use of the disruptions in a humorous way. This might sound unthinkable to a modern actor, who expects a polite and quiet audience, but this robust interaction was the norm in Shakespeare's day. Those unscripted moments may have felt particularly charged and alive because they were being made up in the moment.

Because theatrical audiences were comprised of all levels of society, Elizabethan playwrights had to write for all of them—from the highest class to the lowest and bawdiest audience members. Therefore, Shakespeare's plays are often called universal, containing elements that speak to all kinds of people and social classes across time.

The Lord Chamberlain's Men

In 1559, Queen Elizabeth I issued a proclamation that professional actors must be licensed to perform, which paved the way for professional companies. Noble citizens were then issued rights to look after these new, licensed, and stationary companies of performers—the professional Elizabethan acting company was born.

Most of Shakespeare's plays were created for—and performed by—the Lord Chamberlain's Men, which changed its name to the King's Men when James I ascended to the British throne in 1603. They played first at a theater called the Theatre, then at the Globe Theatre. They also played at the courts of both Elizabeth I and James I.

One of the most prominent players in the Lord Chamberlain's Men was Richard Burbage, who played Hamlet, Lear, and Othello, among others. By his death in 1619, Burbage was considered one of the greatest tragedians of his time. Will Kempe was also a prominent player, acting in many of Shakespeare's comic roles, including Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*, Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and Falstaff.

Actor Richard Burbage

Writing for the Actors

Because Shakespeare had a long-term working relationship with this company of actors, theater historians believe it's likely that he wrote some of his greatest roles for these specific actors. Historians enjoy lively debate about how much of the text for these roles might have been influenced—or even directly added—by these actors, in collaboration with Shakespeare.

This seems more plausible than the idea that the name William Shakespeare was a front for some other writer. It also aligns with the way new play development works today. Modern professional playwrights often write roles with specific actors in mind, then workshop the play in a theater with these actors to allow them to hear the play aloud. The actors can then help the playwright hone the script.

Shakespeare also writes some of his own opinions about acting directly into his texts. In *Hamlet*, for example, he has a group of players come to perform a play for the king, and Hamlet instructs them. In his advice to the players, Hamlet channels the playwright's voice to describe what good (and bad) acting might look and sound like.

He tells the actors to let their bodies behave naturally. He advises them to let the words and behavior flow so naturally that the actor appears to be "holding the mirror up to nature"—a phrase and idea that, like many other phrases written by Shakespeare, is still well known today. The actors need to make the actions and words appear to be spontaneous and lifelike.

It's likely that the relatively large size of the stages, and the tradition of performing outdoors, combined with Shakespeare's soaring language and the heightened emotional stakes of the characters, required Elizabethan actors to employ heightened vocal and physical choices.

Shakespeare and Modern Actors

Learning to understand rhythm and notice each word choice in Shakespearean texts affect the way modern actors approach modern texts. The alliteration, repetition, and other language clues used by Shakespeare also appear in modern plays.

Once an actor has killed a character in a duel or gotten down on their knees to beg the gods for help, they aren't afraid of any other bold physical choice that might be necessitated by a modern text. It's worth it for an actor to get Shakespeare training—even if they don't plan to spend their whole career in classical theater.

As mentioned earlier, in the 1500s, the performances were mostly in outdoor theaters or indoor royal court settings. And most historians believe that the costumes worn by actors at that time were simple Elizabethan attire. And in some companies, actors had one set of "acting clothes," which they might augment with extra pieces to signify a change of character or the passage of time. Historians also believed there were

few props, and—since they were performing outside—little or no lighting effects. Thus, the language provided by Shakespeare had to do the bulk of the work for the audience, filling in for the lack of visual spectacle an audience might expect today.

Gender and Race in Shakespeare's Plays

Women were not allowed on the stage in Shakespeare's day, so adolescent boys trained as apprentices and played the youthful female roles. The audience, having never experienced anything different, freely accepted this practice. Elizabethan actors were Caucasian, so white actors played roles like Othello, a practice that would never be acceptable today. Today, many professional companies cast female actors in traditionally male roles, and many also commit to casting 50% of the roles with actors of color.

Although Elizabethan audiences accepted boys in women's roles, it's important to note that in some cases, Shakespeare uses a tongue-in-cheek verbal device to acknowledge that boys were playing girls. In some of his comedies, boy actors were playing female characters who decided to dress up like boys.

In *As You Like It*, Rosalind goes from wearing boys' clothes for most of the play back into girls' attire at the end. The boy actor would have walked forward, dressed as a female character, and spoken these words:

> It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue;
> but it is no more unhandsome than to see the lord
> the prologue. If it be true that good wine needs
> no bush, 'tis true that a good play needs no
> epilogue; yet to good wine they do use good bushes,
> and good plays prove the better by the help of good
> epilogues. What a case am I in then, that am
> neither a good epilogue nor cannot insinuate with
> you in the behalf of a good play! I am not
> furnished like a beggar, therefore to beg will not
> become me: my way is to conjure you; and I'll begin

> with the women. I charge you, O women, for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you: and I charge you, O men, for the love you bear to women—as I perceive by your simpering, none of you hates them—that between you and the women the play may please. If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me and breaths that I defied not: and, I am sure, as many as have good beards or good faces or sweet breaths will, for my kind offer, when I make curtsy, bid me farewell.

In this speech, Shakespeare is having a character directly address the audience, including them in the storytelling experience. He's winking toward the gender confusion in the play and the audience. He's discussing forward-thinking topics, such as gender norms and female agency, saying that the women should like "as much of the play as please[s]" them.

Because the play is a comedy about love, he's also having the main character poke fun at both the men and women in the audience. Shakespeare often mocks the foolish, simpering ways we all sometimes behave when we're in love.

The Evolution of Performance

There were various historical pauses in performances of Shakespeare plays between 1593 and 1613. In 1593 and again in 1603, the theaters were closed due to the plague. Those who perform Shakespeare today can relate to this forced hiatus due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In 1596, objections were raised by city and religious leaders concerning the continued rowdiness, fighting, drinking, and sanitary conditions in the theaters. All theaters were moved outside the city limits, to the south banks of the Thames, where several professional theaters, including the modern Globe Theatre, are still located today.

In 1613, a cannon misfired at the Globe Theatre. Sparks caught the thatched roof and burned it to the ground. It was rebuilt the next year with a tile roof.

Humanizing Shakespeare

Shakespeare was a working actor and playwright, trying to write for and please two distinctly different monarchs over the course of his career while overcoming various social difficulties and pandemics. Actors tend to think of his texts as being sacred. There is hero worship, playfully referred to as bardolatry, that can infect those who love and perform his language. They might even think of Shakespeare's work as the highest poetic form.

While some of that may be true, it's also important for modern performers to humanize him. In addition to being a poetic genius with an incisive understanding of human behavior, William Shakespeare was also simply an actor and playwright, a man working hard to make a living. He undoubtedly wanted his work to be popular and widely performed. He needed his work to please not only the aristocracy and the commoners, but also the queen (and later the king).

If you think about Shakespeare—living away from his home and family, trying to make a career in the theater, and sending money home when he could—you can start to understand his plays a little differently. Shakespeare uses a wide vocabulary in his plays. He managed to write work that appeals to all levels of society. And he's an undisputed master of the verse form he employs. But he was merely a human being trying to make sense of the world and reflect it through his art.

Shakespeare, like other artists throughout history, was using art to try to filter, understand, and share his experience of being human. If you can get over your literary awe, you can use a critical lens to see that some of his work is better constructed than others. You can then start to understand that there is no one correct way to perform Shakespeare's plays. You can start to accept that each actor and director is going to interpret and present Shakespeare's work differently.

The ability to critically observe, explore, and play with Shakespeare's texts is crucial to the success of anyone attempting to perform his work. If actors are too much in awe of the text, they can't make it their own or make it feel spontaneously alive and playful. Some actors playing Hamlet get to the "To be or not to be" speech and shut down. They wonder how they can do justice to one of the most famous speeches in the English language. It can seem a daunting task. The key to overcoming that hurdle is to think about why Hamlet says those words aloud and then treat it like any other piece of text, making it as clearly motivated as possible.

A play is a template for action, an unfinished work waiting for actors, directors, and theatrical technicians to bring it to life. The next lesson will start to break down the way actors learn to access and make use of Shakespearean verse to do that.

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Secrets of Shakespeare's Verse

Today's actors must discover how to honor the complex language Shakespeare wrote for his characters while still making it sound natural and spontaneous. For most actors, this takes plenty of practice. And like an audience member attending a Shakespeare play for the first time, actors approaching Shakespeare sometimes find the verse intimidating at the beginning of their training.

Some actors may feel that the rhythm of the verse "traps" them. They may be afraid that it sounds unnatural when spoken aloud. But the rhythm of the verse supports rather than hinders actors. To clarify this idea, this lesson will begin by examining how the verse itself works and how actors "decode" it.

Iambic Pentameter

Shakespeare writes his plays in a form called blank verse, or iambic pentameter—one verse line is made up of 10 beats, positioned in a roughly unstressed-stressed pattern.

If you speak these lines out loud, the words fall out in that unstressed-stressed rhythm:

> But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
> It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Shakespeare knew how to arrange the words, but the verse pattern is also close to the way much of the English language naturally falls out of our mouths. The Elizabethans spoke a language that naturally lent itself to the patterns found in iambic pentameter. In fact, it would sound strange if you tried not to use an iambic rhythm to say those two lines.

Thus, you could say that Shakespeare wasn't doing anything particularly mysterious by using iambic pentameter. He was simply going with the flow of the language he spoke. Shakespeare is good at placing words in a verse line that reflects and enhances the English language's natural iambic tendency.

If you clap out a simple iambic rhythm, you might find that you can think of simple thoughts that fall out with that rhythm, simply because of the way you pronounce and stress certain syllables in words you use every day. Another thing you may notice about the rhythm of the verse is that it mimics the rhythm of the human heartbeat. Thus, we are carrying iambic rhythm in our bodies all the time—but we didn't know to call it that!

Shakespeare is easier to memorize when you are in motion. Some actors might pace the floor while working on memorization. And it turns out that Shakespeare is also utilizing a rhythm that we carry in our footfalls when writing in iambic rhythm. If actors can learn to think of Shakespeare's verse form as something that they already carry in their physical bodies, rather than a rule they have to learn, they can start to make his language their own.

Shakespeare does a good job making the rhythm work—he doesn't need the actors to overdo it. But for now, instead of getting immediately hung up on how many beats there are per line, the next section will approach the text by examining something called antithesis.

Antithesis in Shakespeare

Antithesis refers to the way Shakespeare routinely arranges contrasting images and ideas in close proximity to each other. Hamlet's "To be, or not to be" speech—possibly the most famous speech in Shakespeare—is an example of this.

> To be, or not to be, that is the question,
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
> And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
> No more; and by a sleep to say we end
> The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
> That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
> Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
> To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come

There are contrasting thoughts right from the first line of the speech: The thesis question Hamlet is asking is "To be, or not to be"—whether to live or to die. It's hard to imagine a greater contrast than that! Then, the contrasting images continue in the next two lines.

Hamlet is asking whether it's nobler to keep suffering or to end his life—to make the suffering stop. A skillful actor uses those opposing images as signposts to help the audience understand the question, and the decision Hamlet is trying to make, in the speech.

Then, Hamlet asks what the sleep of death would be like. Would it be silent, ending the heartache, or would there be dreams? He figures it would be one or the other. Perhaps he's asking the audience to weigh in and tell him what to do or which they think is true. This technique—

putting contrasting images next to each other—can be found throughout Shakespeare's verses. And an experienced actor uses these verbal contrasts to help the audience understand the character's thoughts.

Missing Beats in Shakespeare

In Romeo's speech from act 2, scene 2, known as the "balcony scene," Romeo has climbed the orchard wall into a courtyard at Juliet's house in the dark, hoping to see her. At the beginning of the scene, she doesn't know he's there. The first part of this speech also has opposing thoughts and images.

> But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?
> It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.
> Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,
> Who is already sick and pale with grief,
> That thou her maid art far more fair than she:
> Be not her maid, since she is envious;
> Her vestal livery is but sick and green
> And none but fools do wear it; cast it off.
> It is my lady, O, it is my love!
> O, that she knew she were!
>
> She speaks yet she says nothing: what of that?
> Her eye discourses; I will answer it.

There are contrasting images of the sun and moon. But there is also a hitch in the rhythm of one line near the end of the verse. It's unfinished. Four beats are missing at the end of the line.

> It is my lady, O, it is my love!
> O, that she knew she were!

It's supposed to be 10 beats per line, which is what makes it pentameter. This doesn't fit—it's only got 6 beats.

Marking the Script

Actors mark (or score) the verse in their scripts. Diagonal slash marks delineate each foot—two syllabic beats—in the verse. Actors also mark their script with empty slash marks to remind them that those empty feet exist, even though there are no words in them.

Each regular iambic verse line has five feet—10 beats—per line. After the actor marks their script for the number of feet, they also mark it for the beats—stressed and unstressed syllables.

Shakespearean actors often mark their scripts this way, emphasizing both the feet and the beats, to help themselves recognize and use the verse effectively. Those are the basics of how actors mark verse—what is called scansion.

But a question remains: Why doesn't Shakespeare finish the line that has the empty feet? To answer a question like this, you have to look at the lines before and after the unfinished line.

The Clues in the Rhythm

Traditionally, the scene is played with Juliet apart from Romeo, who is hiding where she can't see him. Perhaps she's on a balcony, looking out at the stars. He's describing what he sees while he looks at her. At the end of the part of this speech, he observes of Juliet: "She speaks yet she says nothing: what of that?" Right before he sees her do something that resembles speaking without saying anything, he has a verse line that Shakespeare doesn't finish.

Imagine the actors in the scene. Juliet is daydreaming about Romeo, not knowing he is there. Romeo is talking to the audience, sharing his observations. Romeo has those empty beats at the end of his line because Juliet is doing something there—she is speaking to herself without letting the audience hear what she's saying. The empty beats are giving Juliet time to do something that makes Romeo respond and describe what he

saw: "She speaks yet she says nothing." Thus, you can use the verse to decode what Shakespeare wants the actors to do. He gives them time right there in the language to physically accomplish what Romeo says is happening.

Embedded Stage Directions

Shakespeare plays don't include many stage directions. In a modern play, a playwright might have written in parentheses: "Juliet shifts her position on the balcony." Shakespeare, on the other hand, embeds the stage directions right in his language, making space for it in the verse itself. The actors have to know how to identify it when it happens.

Next, you can focus on what Shakespeare has Romeo doing in that speech. At the top of the speech, he's hiding in the dark of the courtyard. Juliet doesn't know he's there—so who is he talking to? Although he's hiding in the dark, out of sight of Juliet, the stage was fully lit in original Elizabethan performances. If the groundlings were right there, and all the upper galleries were in view of the actors, it's likely that the actors talked directly to the audience.

The next part of this scene shows another example of how the actors can use clues given to them. Romeo continues:

> She speaks yet she says nothing: what of that?
> Her eye discourses; I will answer it.
> I am too bold, 'tis not to me she speaks:
> Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,
> Having some business, do entreat her eyes
> To twinkle in their spheres till they return.
> What if her eyes were there, they in her head?
> The brightness of her cheek would shame those stars,
> As daylight doth a lamp; her eyes in heaven
> Would through the airy region stream so bright
> That birds would sing and think it were not night.

See, how she leans her cheek upon her hand!
O, that I were a glove upon that hand,
That I might touch that cheek!

Juliet speaks: "Ay me!"

Romeo continues: "She speaks."

The two characters are sharing the 10 beats of that verse line between them! Shakespeare has them share a verse line, in perfect sync, before Juliet even knows Romeo is there. That is romance.

And an actor understands that to honor that intention, they have to speak through the whole verse line without a pause. The actor playing Juliet knows she has to interject her words right into the verse line on cue. And Romeo has to finish the line in the same fashion.

Shakespeare is telling the actors something about the pace at which the cues must be picked up if there are shared verse lines written into the text. And by following Shakespeare's lead, the actors can capture the sense of urgency the characters feel—teenagers in Juliet's courtyard alone together at night, from families who hate each other, trying to express their feelings to each other and not be found out by Juliet's nurse or family.

This lesson has explored how blank (or iambic) verse works and how antithesis helps the actors make thoughts clear. You've learned how to make use of shared lines and lines with missing feet to layer in pacing, characterization, and clues to the high stakes of the scenes. You've also begun to examine and understand how skillfully all this information is provided by the playwright for the actor who knows how to use it.

The next lesson will continue to explore how actors use these and other clues in Shakespeare's language to make specific decisions about character and action, and how being keyed into these clues can enrich the experience for actors and the audience.

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4

Discovering Shakespeare's Characters

Shakespeare captured the human soul on the page in his plays. His characters are fascinating and readily able to express themselves. They feel powerfully lit from within, and his animated, heightened language sounds the way the world feels—large, exciting, and full of beauty and possibility.

When talking about how actors approach a Shakespearean character, it's helpful to begin by acknowledging modern acting traditions and then work backward, since a modern style is what most actors are first exposed to in their training.

The History of the Modern Acting Style

Modern 20th- and 21st-century acting style has its roots in stage realism—a kind of playwriting that generated a new style of acting generally credited to the Russian actor, director, and teacher Konstantin Stanislavski. Stanislavski's acting methodology was developed in response to a time of great social change in Russia—and in Western society. The Industrial Revolution was in full swing, which brought about a rise in upward mobility for the lower classes and the creation of a new, robust middle class that had not existed before. Social sciences and the work of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud had started to change the way we thought about human nature and psychology.

These societal changes necessitated a new, subtler, and more natural style of acting onstage. Rather than writing only about royalty and servants, plays were suddenly being written about the middle class—average people striving to improve their circumstances.

The Modern Style

When Prince Hal in *Henry V* is rallying the troops to battle in front of audiences of hundreds of people, perhaps an Elizabethan style of acting makes sense. But for a modern play in which a young woman and her acquaintance are talking quietly on their back porch in modern-day Chicago, the robust, presentational style used by an actor playing Hal on the battlefield might ring a bit heavy and false.

Actors speaking a modern text that is well-written and easy to say may use their regular speaking voices in a way that's modern and casual. This would feel right in a space that feels intimate and natural, as if the audience is simply eavesdropping on a conversation.

Modern actors are used to watching television and film acting—and many act on camera in addition to performing in theaters. This practice teaches the actor to keep their acting small, subtle, and natural because the camera is so close that it can pick up the quietest whisper or the slightest flick of an eyelid.

Shakespearean Acting

But how does an actor who's used to this understated style of acting and writing start to approach the heightened language and poetic verse employed by Shakespeare in a way that still feels authentic to them? Actors need to use the core of the acting training they use for modern plays and then let that core understanding radiate through their whole physical instrument to serve up the heightened language and extreme plots that Shakespeare often gives his characters.

In a similar fashion, a stage musical works best when its characters encounter a need so great that they cannot merely talk about it—they must break into song to fully express their desires. Shakespearean verse is similar—the characters need something so much that regular prose isn't enough.

Elizabethans didn't have Darwin or Freud to inform their understanding of human behavior, and their social class system worked somewhat differently than the current Western model. But they experienced human desires and troubles similar to ours.

Contrasting Acting Styles

Modern actors are usually taught to explore a character from the inside out. If the actor understands a character's motivation and inner needs, the physicality will follow. Modern actors explore their characters' objectives first. Then, they examine the tactics their character might use to get what they want and identify the obstacles to the character getting what they want.

This can be tricky because characters often don't say exactly what they want. The actor has to read between the lines to infer what the character is after.

In Shakespeare's plays, however, characters often say exactly what they want, so analyzing the language they use is the key to an actor's understanding and decision-making regarding physical movement.

Helena and Demetrius

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, there is a scene in which Helena is chasing Demetrius through the woods. She's in love with him—but he's in love with her friend Hermia, who has also stolen into the woods with her love, Lysander.

From the first lines in the scene, you know that Demetrius wants Helena to stop following him, and she doesn't want to let him out of her sight. The way these characters name their objectives guides actors as they try to discover how to effectively stage the scene. Shakespeare's characters tell you who they are and teach actors how to physicalize them. Both Helena and Demetrius try various tactics to get what they want, and the actors and director must analyze the script, recognize and name these tactics, and then use them to dictate movement and clarify the arc of the scene. This is another way that Shakespeare teaches the actors how to act in his plays.

In this scene, actors make such bold, full-bodied choices to express their predicament that the audience understands that they are allowed to laugh at their distress. The characters take their problem seriously, but their absurdly robust reactions let the audience know they're hearing and watching a comedy.

Although Shakespeare provides a lot of information, actors still have many choices to make about how to play a scene. Each set of actors will decide what works best for their particular production. This is part of what makes live theater so compelling. No matter how well an audience member knows a play on the page, it will be interpreted and performed a little differently by each company that produces it.

Modern Techniques in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

When rehearsing Shakespeare, actors will identify the needs (or objectives) of each character and use a variety of physical and emotional tactics to accomplish their goals. This familiar process can be helpful, and these ideas are virtually impossible for modern actors to avoid. But actors shouldn't dwell on the psychology of the characters for too long before getting to their feet and moving through space to make bold physical choices that suit the comic extreme of the situation Shakespeare presents in the scene.

That's probably in keeping with the way Elizabethan actors might have approached rehearsal since they had much less rehearsal time than modern actors. Elizabethan actors may not have used the words "What is my character's objective?" to decide what to do. This lingo, borrowed from Stanislavski's method, may be a relatively modern invention, but Elizabethan actors undoubtedly did try to fully embody Shakespeare's characters and bring them to life as truthfully as possible in their playhouses.

Because Shakespeare's characters' objectives are front and center in the language, and the stage directions are often embedded in the text and spoken aloud by the characters, the best way to work these scenes is often to physically move through the scene's action. The scene mentioned

above requires plenty of physical movement. And it invites physical touch between the actors. These bold choices would read well onstage—to the people closest to stage as well as the ones in the farthest galleries.

This lesson explored some ways that Shakespeare's characters' words define who they are and what they want, as well as the ways this language can lead actors directly to exciting physical staging possibilities. Each lesson gathers and sharpens tools for the actors' toolbox, all of which were provided by Shakespeare himself and have been handed down by the many generations of actors who have been tasked with bringing his plays to life.

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5

Shakespearean Rhetoric and Wordplay

This lesson will explore the staying power Shakespeare's words have in people's minds—and in Western culture—by examining numerous elements that contribute to it. *Rhetoric* is the skillful use of language to persuade or convince. Thus, to be effective, actors need to understand how Shakespeare sculpts his characters' arguments. The rhetoric directly informs the way actors approach the roles.

Actors are used to thinking about a character's objectives. They then decide how to pursue what the character wants by examining the character's tactics. And since Shakespeare's characters are defined by their language, each actor must take a deep dive into the way their character uses words to get what they want.

Rhetoric in Funeral Orations

This lesson will start by examining two famous funeral orations from *Julius Caesar* given by Brutus and Marc Antony. It's act 3, scene 2, and Caesar has been assassinated by a group of senators. Brutus—the protagonist and one of the assassins—steps forward at Caesar's funeral to explain to the citizens of Rome what they have done, and why they had to do it.

> 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. Had you rather Caesar were living and
> die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live
> all free men? As Caesar loved me, I weep for him;
> as he was fortunate, I rejoice at it; as he was
> valiant, I honour him: but, as he was ambitious, I
> slew him. There is tears for his love; joy for his
> fortune; honour for his valour; and death for his
> ambition. Who is here so base that would be a
> bondman? If any, speak; for him have I offended.
> Who is here so rude that would not be a Roman? If
> any, speak; for him have I offended. Who is here so
> vile that will not love his country? If any, speak;
> for him have I offended. I pause for a reply.

The main argument is that while he loved Caesar, he feared that Caesar would abuse his power. Thus, he killed Caesar to serve the greater good. In the rhetorical argument he uses to convince the people that this was okay, Brutus starts by saying he is here in an honorable capacity, and the people should be silent and listen before they judge.

He says that he loved Caesar as much as any other Roman, but he put his love of country ahead of his love of his friend. He then asks whether the citizens would have had him keep Caesar alive but turn them all into slaves. He says it's possible to honor Caesar's good traits but still slay him for his dangerous traits. And at the end of Brutus's speech, which was measured and calm, he seems to have convinced his audience that he is on the side of righteousness.

In the next scene, Mark Antony takes Brutus's own words and turns them against him.

> Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears;
> I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.
> The evil that men do lives after them;
> The good is oft interred with their bones;
> So let it be with Caesar. The noble Brutus
> Hath told you Caesar was ambitious:
> If it were so, it was a grievous fault,
> And grievously hath Caesar answer'd it.
> Here, under leave of Brutus and the rest—
> For Brutus is an honourable man;
> So are they all, all honourable men—
> Come I to speak in Caesar's funeral.
> He was my friend, faithful and just to me:
> But Brutus says he was ambitious;
> And Brutus is an honourable man.
> He hath brought many captives home to Rome
> Whose ransoms did the general coffers fill:
> Did this in Caesar seem ambitious?
> When that the poor have cried, Caesar hath wept:
> Ambition should be made of sterner stuff:
> Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
> And Brutus is an honourable man.
> You all did see that on the Lupercal
> I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
> Which he did thrice refuse: was this ambition?
> Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;

And, sure, he is an honourable man.
I speak not to disprove what Brutus spoke,
But here I am to speak what I do know.
You all did love him once, not without cause:
What cause withholds you then, to mourn for him?

Comparing the Funeral Orations

The words of the speeches are similar. However, Antony uses language and a speaking style that subtly appeal to the audience's emotions, while Brutus is plain-spoken and logical. Antony gives a sermon-like speech, and the repetition is designed to make them feel. He reminds the crowd that they all loved Caesar and asks why they should not mourn for him. He repeatedly says that Brutus is honorable—so many times that the audience eventually starts to question and doubt it.

The actor playing Antony would let the words come out in an emotional, fiery way, using them to sway their audience the way a fiery preacher might in church.

Brutus uses prose in his oration—a casual and plain-spoken form of speech—while Antony uses verse, formal and sophisticated. The differences in their speech styles might let the audience know that while Antony pretends he is not trying to change their minds, he is using complex verbal techniques to win them over.

Prose can be thought of as normal speech, while verse, particularly iambic pentameter, falls into a rhythm—a certain number of feet and beats per line. The impact of verse on the audience's ears and the systematic, rhythmic repetition of words are part of the way Antony sways the Roman crowd.

Julius Caesar provides an obvious and excellent example of characters who use rhetoric to persuade others to do or think what they want them to. Almost every character Shakespeare scripted uses rhetoric to try to get what they want.

Tactics Used by Portia

Another example from *Julius Caesar* is Portia, Brutus's wife, in act 2, scene 1, trying to find out what is bothering Brutus. He has stolen from their bed to plot Caesar's assassination, and Portia comes to find him. She uses verse to persuade Brutus to let her in on what he is planning.

> I grant I am a woman, but withal
> A woman that Lord Brutus took to wife.
> I grant I am a woman, but withal
> A woman well reputed, Cato's daughter.
> Think you I am no stronger than my sex,
> Being so father'd and so husbanded?

Portia begins by using logic as a tactic to persuade Brutus that she is strong enough to hear his secrets and that he should therefore open up to her. She also uses other tactics in the same scene, such as seduction.

> I charm you, by my once-commended beauty,
> By all your vows of love and that great vow
> Which did incorporate and make us one,
> That you unfold to me, yourself, your half,
> Why you are heavy, and what men to-night
> Have had to resort to you: for here have been
> Some six or seven, who did hide their faces
> Even from darkness.

Portia might also be using her words about their marriage vows to guilt him into telling her. She goes on to say:

> Within the bond of marriage, tell me, Brutus,
> Is it excepted I should know no secrets
> That appertain to you? Am I yourself
> But, as it were, in sort or limitation,
> To keep with you at meals, comfort your bed,
> And talk to you sometimes? Dwell I but in the suburbs
> Of your good pleasure? If it be no more,
> Portia is Brutus' harlot, not his wife.

Thus, the rhetoric a character uses impacts the way an actor approaches their spoken lines. It might also impact their physical choices. Once an actor understands the ways their character uses words as tactics to try to get what they want, they can use their whole instrument to accomplish it.

Shakespeare's Use of Wordplay

In *Richard III*, Lady Anne is grieving the death of her father-in-law, killed by Richard (who also killed her husband). Richard enters unexpectedly as Lady Anne is lamenting the king's dead body, and they have the following exchange.

> [RICHARD]: Lady, you know no rules of charity,
> Which renders good for bad, blessings for curses.
>
> [LADY ANNE]: Villain, thou know'st no law of God nor man:
> No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity.
>
> [RICHARD]: But I know none, and therefore am no beast.
>
> [LADY ANNE]: O wonderful, when devils tell the truth!
>
> [RICHARD]: More wonderful, when angels are so angry.
> Vouchsafe, divine perfection of a woman,
> Of these supposed-evils, to give me leave,
> By circumstance, but to acquit myself.
>
> [LADY ANNE]: Vouchsafe, defused infection of a man,
> For these known evils, but to give me leave,
> By circumstance, to curse thy cursed self.
>
> [RICHARD]: Fairer than tongue can name thee, let me have
> Some patient leisure to excuse myself.
>
> [LADY ANNE]: Fouler than heart can think thee, thou
> canst make
> No excuse current, but to hang thyself.
>
> [RICHARD]: By such despair, I should accuse myself.

[LADY ANNE]: And, by despairing, shouldst thou stand
excused;
For doing worthy vengeance on thyself,
Which didst unworthy slaughter upon others.

[RICHARD]: Say that I slew them not?

[LADY ANNE]: Why, then they are not dead:
But dead they are, and devilish slave, by thee.

[RICHARD]: I did not kill your husband.

[LADY ANNE]: Why, then he is alive.

[RICHARD]: Nay, he is dead; and slain by Edward's hand.

[LADY ANNE]: In thy foul throat thou liest: Queen
Margaret saw
Thy murderous falchion smoking in his blood;
The which thou once didst bend against her breast,
But that thy brothers beat aside the point.

[RICHARD]: I was provoked by her slanderous tongue,
which laid their guilt upon my guiltless shoulders.

[LADY ANNE]: Thou wast provoked by thy bloody mind.
Which never dreamt on aught but butcheries:
Didst thou not kill this king?

[RICHARD]: I grant ye.

[LADY ANNE]: Dost grant me, hedgehog? then, God
grant me too
Thou mayst be damned for that wicked deed!
O, he was gentle, mild, and virtuous!

[RICHARD]: The fitter for the King of heaven, that hath him.

[LADY ANNE]: He is in heaven, where thou shalt never come.

[RICHARD]: Let him thank me, that holp to send him thither;
For he was fitter for that place than earth.

[LADY ANNE]: And thou unfit for any place but hell.

[RICHARD]: Yes, one place else, if you will hear me name it.

[LADY ANNE]: Some dungeon.

[RICHARD]: Your bed-chamber.

[LADY ANNE]: Ill rest betide the chamber where thou liest!

[RICHARD]: So will it, madam till I lie with you.

[LADY ANNE]: I hope so.

[RICHARD]: I know so.

Look at the way these characters use wordplay—verbal fencing or sparring—to lift each other's words and twist them to suit their own objectives. When Lady Anne says, "No beast so fierce but knows some touch of pity," Richard responds by saying, "But I know none and therefore am no beast," twisting her meaning to exonerate himself. The borrowing of each other's words continues throughout the scene.

In addition to showing how clever both characters are, it shows that they are listening closely to each other's words and mirroring them—a form of connectivity that is somewhat akin to sharing a verse line. It lets the audience know there is "relationship potential" between them. In this case, that device makes sense because Richard and Anne go from being sworn enemies to possible husband and wife by the end of the scene.

Shakespeare's use of this language hints at this possibility for both the actors and the audience. The way Lady Anne and Richard verbally spar, using antithesis and witty wordplay, makes the air crackle between them. And they do this through a back-and-forth style that is much more interactive than the speeches in *Julius Caesar*.

This scene is about setting up the rhythm between the two characters—they are both witty and smart, and they are able to twist each other's words. The audience watches the scene in horror due to the circumstances—but also in admiration of the way Richard and Anne

use their language to spark a dynamic that creates suspense. When acted using the full spectrum of verbal tools Shakespeare provides, it feels as if the scene could end in death or redemption, depending on who wins the argument.

This lesson explored the ways characters use rhetoric to make their cases to other characters and ultimately achieve their objectives. Some characters choose prose, and others choose verse. Some use logical reasoning, and some use emotional arguments. These word choices and the forms they take inform and affect the way actors approach their roles.

The words and form chosen by Brutus show that he is methodical in his thinking, while Antony's use of heightened verse and repetition of Brutus's words show that he is a politician. These verbal characteristics inform the actors how to move as these characters and interact with other characters onstage and influences how the costume designers dress them.

Actors must learn to recognize these verbal techniques and add them to their toolbox of skills to bring these characters and stories from the page to the stage with exciting and effective specificity.

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6

What Soliloquies Reveal

Shakespeare's monologues and soliloquies yield some of his most famous passages. Monologues are usually spoken directly to other characters onstage, such as Brutus and Antony's funeral orations in *Julius Caesar*, while a soliloquy is a monologue spoken by a character who is alone onstage.

This lesson will focus on how Shakespeare's soliloquies work, what functions they can serve, and how actors approach them. Shakespeare's use of soliloquy gives the audience a unique kind of access to his main characters.

Modern and Elizabethan Soliloquies

In modern plays, the characters stay in their own zone and the audience stays in theirs, with characters almost never breaking the imaginary "fourth wall" of the set—between the actors and the audience. The audience relies on dialogue to inform them of the characters' intentions, needs, and fears. But Shakespeare often grants the audience access to the inner workings of a character's mind when they address the audience directly.

However, not every director has the actors talk directly to the audience. In some productions, the character appears to be talking to themselves, with the audience eavesdropping on a private onstage moment. But when a soliloquy is delivered directly to the audience, the audience becomes part of the character's actions and decisions and takes on a role in the play.

The typical modern audience member at a Shakespeare play likely has a slightly shorter attention span than an Elizabethan audience member due to a variety of technological and social factors. That contrast is heightened by the fact that many Elizabethan audience members were used to going to plays regularly, which is not the case for most modern audience members.

Considering these social changes, the soliloquy is a vital tool for audience engagement. It's difficult for a modern audience member to disengage if they know they might be called upon by a character who needs their help in resolving a dilemma or crisis!

We know that actors spoke directly to the audience in Shakespeare's lifetime because of written audience accounts and the fact that plays were performed in daylight, with some audience members leaning against the edge of the stage. Honoring that tradition—and Shakespeare's original intention—instinctively feels like a useful thing to do in most modern settings.

Soliloquies from Previous Lessons

A previous lesson highlighted Romeo talking about Juliet when she didn't know he was there. At the beginning of the speech, Romeo tests out what he wants to say to Juliet on the audience. Perhaps his objective is to gain the courage to speak to Juliet, but it also gives the audience direct access to Romeo. And giving Romeo someone to talk to helps the actor, who uses the audience as his silent scene partner instead of talking to himself.

In Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be" speech, he wonders aloud to the audience what happens after death and whether he should die and find out or take up arms and avenge his father's death. If Hamlet talks directly to the audience and uses them as a sounding board, they feel invested in his decision.

Ophelia's Soliloquy

In a lament spoken by brokenhearted Ophelia, she's commenting on what transpired between her and Hamlet in the previous scene. In that scene, Ophelia has been sent by her father to give back the love letters Hamlet had given her. Hamlet ends up saying that he never loved her, accuses her of dishonesty, and tells her that she would be better off spending her life in a nunnery than with him, to avoid being a "breeder of sinners." He exits, and Ophelia is left alone.

Although Ophelia is alone, one way for the actor to approach this speech is to treat the audience as her confidante as she works through her thoughts on what happened. The actor must uncover why the character is saying what they are saying—what motivates them to speak aloud, and what they gain by speaking. If the actor is speaking a soliloquy, the audience can become their scene partner and help motivate the need for the character to speak aloud.

One possible interpretation could be for Ophelia to give her speech from the floor, as if she is too exhausted to stay on her feet. The language of the soliloquy lends itself to this decision since Ophelia's verse is jagged and doesn't stay within the bounds of the iambic pentameter—almost as if she is gasping for breath or too distraught to stay within the expected verse form.

This choice is also useful because it helps the audience see how destroyed Ophelia has been by her encounter with Hamlet. The actor should make it feel natural and spontaneous as they sink to the floor to speak.

Proteus's Soliloquy

Proteus's soliloquy from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* has a different tone and style than Ophelia's lament. Proteus has a significant problem: He has fallen in love with his best friend's girl.

Proteus uses this speech—and the time alone onstage—to talk himself into justifying his current behavior, in spite of what his conscience says. He uses the audience to help him work through the question of whether he should go after his best friend's girl—even though Proteus himself is promised to another woman! He's torn about it and pokes fun at himself. But in the end, he permits himself to follow his heart. If he talks directly to the audience and asks them for help, they might feel responsible for seeing him through the rest of the play to its resolution.

Viola's Soliloquy

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola has disguised herself as a boy and employed herself to the duke, Orsino, with whom she is immediately smitten. Orsino sends her to woo Olivia in his name. After Viola (calling herself Cesario) visits Olivia, Olivia sends a ring after her—supposedly to return to Orsino. Viola turns to the audience for help discovering what's going on. And she has to talk to the audience because only they know she is a girl in disguise!

By watching actors explore these soliloquies, it becomes clear that these speeches are not meant to be spoken into the void. Actors can engage with these speeches in active ways that move the character's thinking forward—and involve the audience, drawing them further into the story unfolding in front of them.

All the soliloquies in this lesson are written in verse. However, it's worth noting that much of Shakespeare is written in prose. The next lesson will explore how actors approach Shakespearean language that is not written in verse. The change in writing form provides different ways for actors to approach both the character and the audience.

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How Shakespeare Uses Prose

Almost all the Shakespearean text in this course has been in verse, which looks like poetry on the page. But some passages from Shakespeare don't follow verse form. Instead, they appear in regular paragraph form, like most modern playwriting. Possibly as much as a third of Shakespeare is written in prose. In only three of his plays do the characters speak no prose at all: *Richard II*; *Henry VI, Parts I* and *III*; and *King John*. In contrast, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is almost all prose, with barely any verse!

In most Shakespearean plays, characters regularly switch between verse and prose. This lesson will focus on when and why Shakespeare switches from verse to prose and how actors navigate those switches.

Characters Speaking in Prose

In this scene from *Much Ado About Nothing*, a young woman, Hero, has been publicly disgraced at her wedding after being accused of infidelity. Once everyone leaves, her cousin Beatrice shares her frustration with Benedick.

[BENEDICK]: Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?

[BEATRICE]: Yea, and I will weep a while longer.

[BENEDICK]: I will not desire that.

[BEATRICE]: You have no reason; I do it freely.

[BENEDICK]: Surely I do believe your fair cousin is wronged.

[BEATRICE]: Ah, how much might the man deserve of me that would right her!

[BENEDICK]: Is there any way to show such friendship?

[BEATRICE]: A very even way, but no such friend.

[BENEDICK]: May a man do it?

[BEATRICE]: It is a man's office, but not yours.

[BENEDICK]: I do love nothing in the world so well as you: is not that strange?

[BEATRICE]: As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you: but believe me not; and yet I lie not; I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin.

[BENEDICK]: By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me.

[BEATRICE]: Do not swear, and eat it.

[BENEDICK]: I will swear by it that you love me; and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.

[BEATRICE]: Will you not eat your word?

[BENEDICK]: With no sauce that can be devised to it. I protest I love thee.

[BEATRICE]: Why, then, God forgive me!

[BENEDICK]: What offence, sweet Beatrice?

[BEATRICE]: You have stayed me in a happy hour: I was about to
protest I loved you.

[BENEDICK]: And do it with all thy heart.

[BEATRICE]: I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.

[BENEDICK]: Come, bid me do any thing for thee.

[BEATRICE]: Kill Claudio.

[BENEDICK]: Ha! not for the wide world.

[BEATRICE]: You kill me to deny it. Farewell.

[BENEDICK]: Tarry, sweet Beatrice.

[BEATRICE]: I am gone, though I am here: there is no love in you: nay, I pray you, let me go.

[BENEDICK]: Beatrice,—

[BEATRICE]: In faith, I will go.

[BENEDICK]: We'll be friends first.

[BEATRICE]: You dare easier be friends with me than fight with mine enemy.

[BENEDICK]: Is Claudio thine enemy?

[BEATRICE]: Is he not approved in the height a villain, that hath slandered, scorned, dishonoured my kinswoman? O that I were a man! What, bear her in hand until they come to take

> hands; and then, with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancour—O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market-place.

Beatrice and Benedick use prose as their language of choice. Their sentences in the first half of the exchange are relatively short, which might encourage a clipped rhythm as the characters struggle to decide what to say to each other. The clipped, shorter sentences allow for a fast, urgent pattern of dialogue.

Beatrice's longer rant is freewheeling, not bound by the usual verse structure. She's so furious that she would probably not be able to stay within the verse's tidy, 10-beat expectations. And by having Benedick respond to her command to kill Claudio with "Ha! not for the wide world," Shakespeare buys him space for thought and allows for a word like *ha*, which can be thought of as a word or even a gasp.

Upper-Class versus Lower-Class Characters

Actors are often taught that Shakespeare's upper-class characters speak more verse, while his lower-class characters use more prose. But that's an oversimplification.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, for instance, this isn't true at all. Most of the play is written in prose. This might be because Beatrice and Benedick aren't romantics—in fact, they are such reluctant lovers that they get to the aforementioned scene, in act 4, before they confess their feelings for each other.

Even while acknowledging their love, they remain plainspoken characters who can't believe they're saying these things, so they simply say exactly what they mean—no need for verse. While other sets of Shakespearean lovers—especially young ones—use soaring verse to express their feelings, neither Benedick nor Beatrice has much patience for poetry or formal pageantry.

The rules about when and why Shakespeare switches between verse and prose aren't always consistent, but a close exploration of the switches from verse to prose can almost always inform actors' character choices.

Notably, some of the only long passages of verse in *Much Ado* are spoken by the Friar at Hero's wedding—a public, formal occasion. A foolish character named Dogberry tries to use heightened, formal language when he's talking to upper-class characters—but he misuses the words to comic effect and fails to make his sentences come out in verse at all.

Tragedies versus Comedies

It's generally true that the tragedies employ more verse than the comedies. But that rule isn't completely consistent: The lovers and fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* both use dreamy verse. And one of Hamlet's most poignant queries is in prose, though he speaks mostly in verse for the rest of the play.

As with most artistic rules, they exist to set a standard—and, therefore, give an artist the opportunity to break them when they want to defy our expectations and catch our ears off guard. Here are Hamlet's words from act 2, scene 2.

> I have of late—but wherefore I know not—lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercise; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory. This most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire—why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.

In this speech, his usual verse is interrupted by prose. He's feeling melancholy and depressed, and life, the sky, and the whole world feel fleeting and meaningless. He's describing an emotional low point.

Perhaps he can't summon the verse he uses for other topics in the play. Or perhaps there's no need for poetry to describe such a dull, heavy feeling. But the imagery he uses to describe the way he should feel about the world is vivid, and this speech might be an example of heightened prose. It is not verse, but neither is it the prose of more conventional language.

It probably hits the audience's ear differently to hear Hamlet speak so plainly, especially when he gets to the end of the thought and says the world seems foul and pestilent to him.

Tonal Shifts

Thus, sometimes Shakespeare uses a switch from verse to prose to create a subtle tonal shift in a character's mood that the audience might or might not consciously note. When taking Shakespeare from the page to the stage, these are the things that actors must be aware of so they can convey this to an audience.

Another couple speaking in prose is Kate and Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*.

> [KATE]: Husband, let's follow, to see the end of this ado.
>
> [PETRUCHIO]: First kiss me, Kate, and we will.
>
> [KATE]: What, in the midst of the street?
>
> [PETRUCHIO]: What, art thou ashamed of me?
>
> [KATE]: No, sir, God forbid, but asham'd to kiss.
>
> [PETRUCHIO]: Why then let's home again. Come, sirrah, let's away.
>
> [KATE]: Nay, I will give thee a kiss; now pray thee, love, stay.

Kate and Petruchio have spoken verse to each other throughout the play, but once they are married and finally not fighting with each other, they switch to prose. This might indicate a new softness and informality between them. Kate is using prose to awkwardly explore the language of love and affection.

Noting this change in form could be important and instructive to actors—that shift could even be seen as a piece of instruction to the actors from the playwright about how the characters are feeling about each other and how they might behave with each other at that moment in the play. Even their final lines to each other—which sound like a rhyming couplet—aren't in pentameter. They rhyme with each other—a sign that they are emotionally in sync—but their words remain free from the stricture of the formal verse form.

Shakespeare's Commentary

Audrey and Touchstone from *As You Like It* give one more example of prose, in which some rural characters note and discuss their speaking style.

> [TOUCHSTONE]: When a man's verses cannot be understood, nor a
> man's good wit seconded with the forward child Understanding, it strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little room. Truly, I would the gods had made thee poetical.
>
> [AUDREY]: I do not know what 'poetical' is: is it honest in deed and word? is it a true thing?
>
> [TOUCHSTONE]: No, truly; for the truest poetry is the most feigning; and lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear in poetry may be said as lovers they do feign.
>
> [AUDREY]: Do you wish then that the gods had made me poetical?

[TOUCHSTONE]: I do, truly; for thou swearest to me thou art honest: now, if thou wert a poet, I might have some hope thou didst feign.

[AUDREY]: Would you not have me honest?

[TOUCHSTONE]: No, truly, unless thou wert hard-favoured; for
honesty coupled to beauty is to have honey a sauce to sugar.

[AUDREY]: Well, I am not fair; and therefore I pray the gods make me honest."

[TOUCHSTONE]: Truly, and to cast away honesty upon a foul slut
were to put good meat into an unclean dish.

[AUDREY]: I am not a slut, though I thank the gods I am foul.

[TOUCHSTONE]: Well, praised be the gods for thy foulness!

Here, Shakespeare is commenting on the difference between those who speak prose and those who speak verse! Touchstone wishes Audrey had been speaking in verse because verse is the language of deception, implying that if she speaks prose, she may be speaking the truth. The rural characters' mistrust of verse is humorous.

There are also many antithetical images in the Audrey-Touchstone exchange—and the words each character borrows from the other to further the dialogue, and each character's argument, using witty wordplay. Words like *poetical*, *honest*, and *slut* are repeated so often that the actors must give them special weight.

Analyzing the Script

Most actors find that working on Shakespeare helps them notice the repetition of words and sounds in modern texts. While most modern texts have no verse form to analyze, it's still true that modern playwrights are choosing each word with care, and the repetition of word or sound highlights something about the importance of the word.

As mentioned, the reasons why Shakespeare switches from verse to prose are varied. No one clear rule can be applied in all cases. However, each time it happens, the actor must be a script detective to discover what is gained by that switch since it's clearly an intentional choice. Actors can use these verse-prose switches to make the most of the language their characters use and give the audience a richer experience of the play.

This lesson showed that Shakespeare's choice to use verse or prose for certain characters and scenes is another layer that actors can use to create and communicate character. The use of either form further illuminates the relationships that characters have with each other that might not always be noticeable when reading one of his plays on the page.

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Shakespeare's Creative Imagery

Shakespeare used 17,677 different words over the course of his plays, narrative poems, and sonnets. When he was writing his plays, the English language was still young, pliable, and rapidly evolving. Most experts believe that Shakespeare can be credited with the first written usage of up to 10% of the words he wrote—about 1,700 words.

He probably didn't truly make them up; some of them were likely being used in casual conversation. He may have simply been the playwright who wrote the words down in the first documents that survived to the modern day. But some of them he seems to have completely invented, and others he seems to have used differently than any other writer—such as turning a noun into a verb.

Shakespearean Words

In 1608, Shakespeare wrote in *King Lear*: "A sovereign shame so elbows him." The word *elbow*, according to expert knowledge, had not been used as a verb until Shakespeare repurposed it.

In *Richard II*, he writes: "Within my mouth you have my tongue enjailed." Note how much less impact the line might have if he'd written "within my mouth you have my tongue put in jail." This illustrates one of the ways that Shakespeare uses language in unexpected ways that catch the audience members' ears—as well as their minds.

Like *enjailed*, some of the other words he invented aren't used in common speech today, but many have survived and become integrated into modern English. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the list includes these words:

- bandit (*Henry VI, Part II* in 1594)
- critic (*Love's Labours Lost* in 1598)
- dauntless (*Henry VI, Part III* in 1616)
- lonely (*Coriolanus* in 1616)
- lackluster (*As You Like It* in 1616)
- dwindle (*Henry IV, Part I* in 1598)
- swagger (*Midsummer* in 1600)
- uncomfortable (*Romeo and Juliet* in 1599)

The Power of Imagery

The human ear seems to instinctively respond to imagery that soars above the way we ordinarily use and hear language—whether we hear the elevated language in a play or we hear a loved one say something beautiful and romantic to us in real life. Words can make us feel various emotions—and when words are well used, they can make us feel emotions in a heightened way.

Shakespeare's language makes our brains fire in unusual ways. Research at the University of Liverpool in 2006 found that Shakespearean language excites a specific kind of brain activity. Because he uses unusual sentence structure—such as using a noun as a verb or arranging the subject and predicate of his sentences in an unexpected order—our brains have to process his language differently than we process usual, expected sentence structure.

According to Professor Neil Roberts, instead of confusing our brains, the linguistic gymnastics required to understand Shakespeare create a different kind of brain activity—which might help explain why Shakespeare plays have such a dramatic impact on their readers and audiences. Our brains have to constantly rework the information coming in and establish different connections to understand Shakespeare.

Thus, our hearts respond to his poetic imagery, and our brains respond to his surprising sentence structure. And some people argue that reading Shakespeare or experiencing one of his plays onstage is good for us. His poetic form makes us feel heightened emotion, and his sentence structure elicits unusual brain activity, which keeps us nimble.

Imagery in *Measure for Measure*

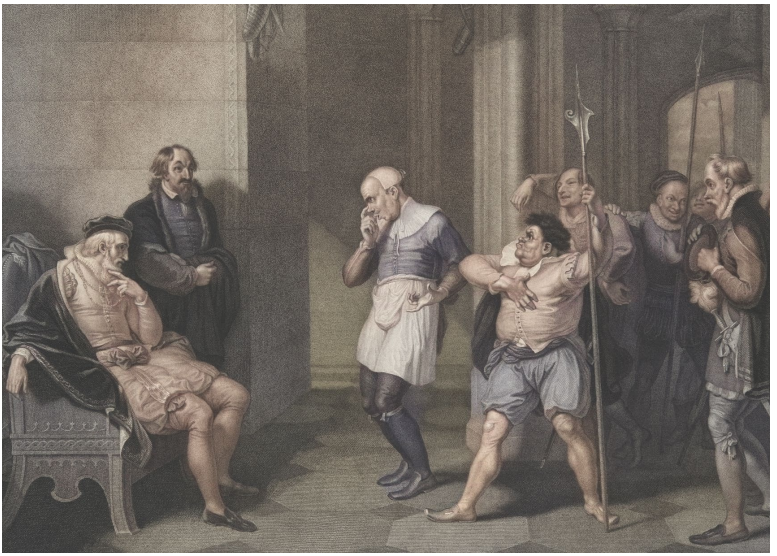
In Claudio's speech, he is contemplating his death sentence.

> Ay, but to die, and go we know not where;
> To lie in cold obstruction and to rot;
> This sensible warm motion to become
> A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
> To bathe in fiery floods, or to reside
> In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice;
> To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
> And blown with restless violence round about
> The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
> Of those that lawless and incertain thought
> Imagine howling: 'tis too horrible!
> The weariest and most loathed worldly life

That age, ache, penury and imprisonment
Can lay on nature is a paradise
To what we fear of death.

Notice that there's not a full punctuation stop—like a period or exclamation point—until pretty late in the speech. But in the first full thought, "Ay, but to die … In thrilling region of thick-ribbed ice," he's contemplating his death and wondering what it would be like. He is even asking where people go after death, which is similar to Hamlet's famous "To be, or not to be" speech, but Claudio seems frightened. He's using nightmarish imagery, like "To lie in cold obstruction and to rot"—which is pretty vivid and disturbing.

After the initial thought, the speech gets extremely active—with verbs that create evocative images, like "imprison'd," "blown with restless violence," and "howling." Actors may want to make the most of the sounds in the words: the vowel sounds in HOWLing, for example, can sound like an actual howl of anguish or frustration!



Claudio also uses some alliterative language, like the "w" sounds in *world*, *worse*, and *worst*—those repetitious consonant sounds are an opportunity for the actor and can help make the most of the images in the speech. Alliteration refers to repetitive consonant sounds at the fronts of words—usually three or more in a row. Similarly, assonance is the repetition of vowel sounds in multiple words close together. Shakespeare regularly uses both to create evocative sound and mood.

Then, at the end of the speech, Claudio sums it up by suggesting that whatever challenges we face in life—age, penury, or imprisonment—it's all nothing compared to our horror and fear of death.

Imagery in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

In this speech, Titania, the fairy queen, is talking about the fight that she and Oberon—the king of the fairies—have gotten into, and all the ways it's ruining the earth. Apparently, fairy fights are more powerful than mortal fights!

> These are the forgeries of jealousy:
> And never, since the middle summer's spring,
> Met we on hill, in dale, forest or mead,
> By paved fountain or by rushy brook,
> Or in the beached margent of the sea,
> To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,
> But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport.
> Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain,
> As in revenge, have suck'd up from the sea
> Contagious fogs; which falling in the land
> Have every pelting river made so proud
> That they have overborne their continents.

The beginning describes where the fairies usually hang out, and she does it by using fabulous imagery to make the audience feel what those places might be like. A few words—and specific sounds in those words—stand out as opportunities for the actor to use the sounds to paint the imagery for the audience.

For example, the "sh" sound in *rushy brook* sounds like what it means since a brook can make a rushing sound. And "to dance our ringlets to the whistling wind" can also have a whistling sound to it!

The next section starts with, "Therefore the winds, piping to us in vain." After describing the places, the imagery becomes more active and uses strong verbs to affect the audience. The words *piping*, *sucking*, and *falling* make the actor want to really use the consonant sounds. And actors can make sure to hit the alliterative sounds and rainy rhythm of "Have every pelting river made so proud." Shakespeare uses sounds that help the actor tell the story.

Linguistic Devices in Shakespeare's Work

Shakespeare heightens his imagery by making effective use of linguistic devices like metaphors and similes. Metaphors compare one thing to another where the comparison is not literally applicable, like Romeo saying that the light coming from the window is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

In *Hamlet*, for example, Shakespeare writes:

> But look, the morn, in russet mantle clad,
> walks o'er the dew of yon high eastern hill.

Comparing the break of day to a person clad in a russet-colored coat, walking across the dew, helps the audience see the image more vividly. And he does something similar in *Romeo and Juliet*:

> Look, love, what envious streaks
> Do lace the severing clouds in yonder East;
> Night's candles are burnt out, and jocund day
> Stands tiptoe on the misty mountain tops.

Imagining the daybreak as a person on tiptoe on the mountain tops likewise gives the audience a familiar way to visualize what he's talking about.

A simile uses the words *like* or *as* to make its comparison. Romeo also does that in the balcony scene:

> Oh speak again, bright angel, for thou art
> As Glorious to this night, being o'er my head
> As is a winged messenger of heav'n.

Picturing Juliet as a winged messenger gives a vivid idea of how Romeo envisions her. And Juliet, waiting for Romeo to come back to her later in the play, says:

> So tedious is this day
> As is the night before some festival
> To an impatient child that hath new robes
> And may not wear them.

In her case, the audience is invited to imagine—or even remember—what it feels like to be an impatient child, waiting for something exciting to happen. The actor must conjure these images in their imagination to fully share them with the audience.

In addition to understanding the circumstances of the play and digging into the character's objectives and motivations, actors spend much time in rehearsal thinking about the sounds of Shakespeare's words, which can teach them how to say the words and even what the pace of certain lines should sound like.

Actors rehearsing Shakespeare's works routinely spend time examining metaphors, similes, and other verbal devices he uses to create imagery for his audience. And once actors get used to looking for these clues, they start to notice them in modern texts, too. Thus, learning to act out Shakespeare's works makes actors more attuned to the language used by playwrights in other genres.

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Rehearsing the Role: Shakespeare's Tragedies

The next two lessons will present the rehearsal process. There are many important choices to make before the actors can take to the stage and capture the audience's attention with a truly spectacular performance that feels completely spontaneous.

But first, this lesson will examine casting issues in modern Shakespeare plays, including table work, the warm-up, the blocking of the scenes, and, finally, repetition.

Gender and Race in Casting

In modern productions of Shakespeare plays, women are often cast in traditionally male roles to create performance opportunities for female actors—and to acknowledge societal changes that have occurred since Shakespeare's time. When doing this, actors replace the pronoun *he* with *she* in reference to the character—which doesn't impact the rhythm of the verse.

In addition, for the first three centuries of Shakespeare in performance, heroic male roles were played almost exclusively by white actors. In fact, for a long time, all Shakespearean roles—including the role of Othello—were played by white actors.

Intentional departures from old traditions are part of a movement being navigated across the professional theatrical world, as actors and directors recognize that for Shakespeare's work to stay relevant, it must speak to an ever-diversifying world of theatergoers and theater professionals.

Table Work

At the first rehearsal of a Shakespeare play, the actors and director usually sit together to read through the script and talk through the opportunities and challenges of the play or scene. This phase of rehearsal is called table work, and it might last a few days, or even a week for a full production.

During table work, they discuss things like what has happened immediately before the characters enter, what the characters want from each other in the scene, and the arc of the scene. They also identify the climactic moment (or point of highest tension) and start breaking down the language to make sure they understand the words and thoughts in the text.

The Warm-Up

Once table work is complete, the actors get up and begin moving through the scene. In this phase, each rehearsal usually begins with a thorough physical and vocal warm-up. This warm-up is particularly important when performing heightened text because of the physical and vocal demands of the language and the high stakes of the characters' wants and needs. The actors need to be well heard and understood by the audience and able to use the full range of their voices to fully express their characters.

When thinking about the physical demands of acting onstage, it's apparent that, to some degree, becoming a professional actor is a lifestyle choice, as well as a career choice. The actor's physical body is the instrument of their work—it's the only one they have, and it can't be replaced. Thus, Shakespeare actors need to eat well, stay hydrated, exercise, and ensure they have the physical, mental, and emotional stamina to perform a two- to three-hour play without stopping—sometimes up to eight times a week for months.

Blocking the Scenes

After the actors are warmed up, they walk through the scene and begin to determine the physical action—including where any necessary furniture might be placed and how it might be used, as well as what the movements of the actors will be like. This process usually involves some trial and error—and plenty of repetition—as they try various options and work toward those that will tell the story of the scene in the clearest, most interesting way.

The actors work through the scene in a fairly organic way, stopping and starting, asking each other questions or making suggestions along the way. They are collaborating to create the version of the scene that feels dramatically interesting and effective. When actors become comfortable working this way because they know each other well and have worked together before, they trust each other and share a common language and aesthetic about the work that makes the process fun and easy.

Some directors act as a guide and an outside eye for the actors but also let them lead in some ways. But other directors provide a more structured approach to blocking, expecting the actors to fulfill a particular vision that the director already has. But most actors respond well to being given a voice in how their onstage movement evolves, and the results tend to end up looking more authentic and natural. After all, they are the ones who will execute the movements.

It is helpful for a director to come into blocking rehearsals with a couple of strong visual images in their mind and a deep understanding of the text, and then trust that they will discover the rest together with the actors.

Once there is a rough outline of the movement in the scene, the director and actors start to work the scene in a moment-to-moment way, identifying what motivates each line and movement and working on the connection between the characters and actors. In a full production, this process takes several weeks of rehearsal time to refine onstage actions and choices.

Many scenes call for a piece of weaponry, and it's important to make sure the actors are comfortable with their movements around those weapons. In a full modern production of a Shakespeare play, a theater would hire a fight choreographer to manage the blocking and execution of all movement around the weapons. This person is trained in stage combat and the safe handling of weapons of all kinds, and they would design the movement the actors use when holding a weapon to make sure the choreography is always executed safely and consistently.

Repetition

The next phase of rehearsal will involve more repetition of the scene—at some point, the actors will put down their scripts and begin to work from memory. This is when the real magic starts to happen—when actors can give their entire focus to each other instead of the page and move and gesture freely without the script in hand. This is usually when the sense of fun and spontaneity begins to appear in the work. Then, the costumes will be added.

The illusion of spontaneity that audiences see and hear when they experience the best onstage performances is a result of hours, often weeks, of practice. An actor has to know the script inside out, repeating the scene over and over again until they achieve muscle memory of the words and actions they will perform. At that point, they don't have to consciously think about the words and actions in the scene. They can begin to authentically listen and respond to their scene partner as if they were having the scripted conversation for the first time.

Reading

Daniell, David, ed. *Julius Caesar*. The Arden Shakespeare: Third Series. Bloomsbury, 1998.

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Rehearsing the Role: Shakespeare's Comedies

This lesson will center around rehearsing a scene for a Shakespearean comedy—act 2, scene 4 of *Twelfth Night*. Viola has disguised herself as a boy and is working as a page for the duke Orsino, who doesn't know her real identity. He also doesn't know that she has fallen in love with him.

This lesson will explore some of the devices Shakespeare employs in his comedies and will examine how actors work together to bring these comedies to life, to the delight of their audiences.

Shakespeare's "Pants" Roles

Viola dresses as a boy to travel alone after she survives a shipwreck on the coast of a fictionalized version of a land called Illyria, populated with a merry band of clownish characters. At the time, it was not acceptable—or considered safe—for a young lady to travel without a chaperone. Thus, Viola, alone and without fortune, decides to dress as a boy until she feels that she can reveal her true gender. This plot setup leads to many romantic misadventures.

Twelfth Night is believed to have been written around 1601 and was probably first performed as part of the festivities that closed out the Christmas season at court. Today, it's one of Shakespeare's most popular comedies.

It was not the first play—or the last—in which Shakespeare had female characters dress up as boys, but it's among his most skillful. Shakespeare uses "pants" roles—or "breeches" roles—in a number of plays, including *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and *Cymbeline*. He does this to accomplish a variety of goals.

For one thing, dressing a female protagonist as a male shares a secret with the audience. It's also a way to give a female character more social agency than she would otherwise have had in Elizabethan society. Disguising female characters as males also allows them to take the lead, make autonomous decisions, and flaunt their intelligence in ways that might not have been socially acceptable at the time.

In modern productions, a female actor playing a role like Viola spends time discovering how the "boy" physicality might work—and how her character's mannerisms might change when she's costumed as the girl Viola, as opposed to the boy Cesario.

It's interesting that in Shakespeare's "breeches" plays, he often gives the female protagonist more lines than any of the men onstage—and makes it clear that these women can think circles around every other character they engage with. Thus, although Shakespeare's plays contain many more men than women, some of his female characters are drawn with a depth and complexity that was quite unusual in playwriting at the time.

That said, it's important to remember that in Shakespeare's day the role of Viola would have been played by a young boy actor dressed as Viola who then dresses as a boy. This practice led to extra layers of comic merriment.

Viola—when dressed as a boy—gains access to intimate conversations with Orsino and a relaxed companionship that she would not have had if he knew he was talking to a girl. Part of the rehearsal process

involves making sure those elements are staged and acted in a way that tells a clear story to the audience and makes the best use of the comic misunderstandings in the plot.

Comic Devices

Shakespearean comedy relies on several well-known comedic devices that he uses in numerous plays. One is mistaken identity. In numerous Shakespeare plays, there are sets of twins who are mistaken for each other at crucial moments in the plot, causing misunderstandings that often revolve around romantic mix-ups.

In terms of casting and staging the twin device, most modern companies cast actors who look at least somewhat alike in terms of height and form—and then let the actors' costumes and physical movements accomplish the rest of the work of creating their "identical" look. If the characters onstage act as though that's all the disguise they require to believe the ruse, then the audience buys into the device and willingly suspends their disbelief.

In *Twelfth Night*, Orsino experiences confusion about his feelings for Viola when she's dressed as a boy. But Orsino's confusion is explained away when she is eventually revealed to be a girl. And Olivia falls in love with Viola dressed as a boy—but at the end of the play, she realizes she's been talking with both Viola and Viola's missing twin brother, Sebastian, so Olivia happily ends up with Sebastian when Viola reveals herself to be female. By using this device, Shakespeare gives all the characters the happy ending expected of a comedy. He also seems to suggest that human affections are fickle and easily fooled and that we might almost as easily end up with one person as another.

Intimacy in Theater

Theater is a group activity, a collaboration, and the actors and director must build trust as they work through the rehearsal process. This trust allows the artists to feel that they can play and invent and take creative risks with each other. This was as true in Shakespeare's day as it is now.

Obvious affection and a sense of play between actors are typical of actors' working relationships when they know each other well and are part of what allows them to thrive in a creative setting. But often, actors are thrown into a cast with actors they don't know or haven't worked with before.

If actors don't know each other, the first few days of rehearsal will be spent consciously establishing a baseline trust and code of conduct in the rehearsal room. Acting often requires some physical and emotional intimacy—for example, the actors sit close to each other, make plenty of eye contact, and even touch or kiss each other. Therefore, some professional theaters hire theatrical intimacy choreographers who help stage the physical touch and other intimate moments required in a play and help the actors accomplish whatever is required to make their character relationships believable for the audience.

Other Comic Devices

Part of the humor of the scene comes from the fact that both Viola and the audience have more information than Orsino. The audience knows that Cesario is Viola in disguise, and audiences generally love to know more than the characters onstage. Viola might even acknowledge to the audience—with an aside, a look, or a nod—that they are in on a secret with her, which further engages the audience in the plot of the play.

Another comic device employed by Shakespeare is the use of unusual or fantastical pastoral settings that comic characters can explore—away from the expectations and rules of court. These places provide characters with the freedom to dress differently, converse with their love interests, and reinvent themselves to accomplish their objectives. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the lovers leave the Athenian court and run off into a forest that turns out to be populated by—among others—fairies who cast spells on them. In *As You Like It*, Rosalind is banished from her uncle's court, dresses as a boy, and escapes with her cousin Celia into the Forest of Arden. And in *Twelfth Night*, Viola finds herself shipwrecked in a whimsical version of the land of Illyria.

Of course, at the end of most Shakespearean comedies, the "merry misrule of the forest" concludes in act 5, and all the characters return to court to marry and resume their more traditional lives—though often with romantic resolutions they could only have secured by running away from the strict, traditional expectations of Elizabethan society.

In performance, these settings also allow for the inventive imagining of physical space and set pieces.

Reading

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Designing and Directing Shakespeare's Plays

Successfully taking Shakespeare's words from the page and bringing them to life on the stage involves many more people than the audience sees. Behind the scenes, there are producers, directors, designers, stage managers, prop managers, set builders, painters, and many other craftspeople—all pouring their expertise into each production.

This lesson will go backstage to the shop and explore some of these important contributions. It will also contrast some of these elements in modern productions with Elizabethan productions.

Producing a Modern Shakespeare Play

Producing any play for an audience is an intense and time-consuming experience for everyone involved. At the professional level, it first involves months of preproduction planning—including directorial research, design meetings, building set elements, hanging theatrical lights, and hiring staff and actors. The next phase is four to six weeks of intensive actor rehearsal. The final phase is called tech week, when the lights, sound, and costumes are added to the rehearsal process—this phase can last more than one week, depending on the budget and technical requirements of the production. Only after this work is complete can a play finally open.

When preparing to produce a Shakespeare play, directors must consider the time and place in which the play was written. When Shakespeare was writing, playhouses were the main source of entertainment. Elizabethan playhouses were the main public gathering place for exchanging ideas and were considered so powerful that they were routinely shut down in times of political unrest.

Taking the Modern Setting into Account

Producers, directors, and other artists preparing to bring a Shakespeare play to the stage today must take into consideration the fact that they are doing so in a different setting. They must think about the theater's geographical location, audience demographics, and the traditions that influence and guide that particular setting.

They can ask the questions: Who will watch the performance? What experiences, perspectives, and biases might the audience bring into the theater? How are those different than the perspectives that Elizabethan audiences might have brought into their playhouses? Why are we performing this particular play for this particular group of people? What do we hope to give the audience?

Asking these questions helps artists decide what theme, message, or visual style they might want to highlight in the performance. A play script is not a finished product but a template for action—it's a starting place for an onstage experience. The many people involved in the production of a Shakespeare play can find different ways to present a play while still staying true to the playwright's intention.

The director will take many factors into account, including the time and place in which Shakespeare was writing and the history of productions of that particular play that might inform their perceptions about the play and the audience's expectations.

The Directorial Vision

Because the directorial vision is meant to unify all elements of the production—from design elements to acting choices—the director needs to know the play better than anyone else. This includes the structure of the play; each character and their function in the story; the setting and timeline of the play's action; the arc of the plot; and the repetition of words, because a playwright's repetition is usually intentional, might be significant, and could provide clues in terms of the production's tone, mood, or even visual elements.

The Prolific Production of Plays

In today's theaters, directors collaborate with costume, scene, sound, and lighting designers, who are all invaluable in shaping the audience's experience of a play. However, when Shakespeare was producing his plays, there were no directors or designers. Actors were largely in charge of their performances and were expected to be able to sing, dance, and stage their sword fights.

They were also expected to memorize their parts quickly since the Globe Theatre was known to produce up to 11 different plays every two weeks! Elizabethan companies performed their plays "in rep," which meant that the same play was never performed two days in a row.

A company of actors—such as Shakespeare's own company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men—might have had 20 to 40 plays in their repertoire at any given time, covering the gamut of comedies, tragedies, and histories. This number of plays (and words) would be unheard of for a modern acting company. Because these companies produced plays so prolifically, their performances might have been a bit more spontaneous and "loose" than most professional actors' performances are today.

Actors were expected to have their lines at least loosely memorized, though written reports indicate that there may have been some paraphrasing and cueing from backstage, giving an improvisatory feel to each performance. To understand how quick on their feet these performers must have been, imagine improvising in iambic pentameter!

To further complicate actor preparation, the actors were also not given full copies of the scripts they were rehearsing and performing. Because mass printing was not easily available, actors were given a long parchment for each play, called their role, with only their lines on them and perhaps the cue line that meant it was their turn to talk. They had to listen closely in rehearsal and in performance to make sure they knew when to enter and when to speak.

The Design Elements

The heightened speed at which plays were staged might be one reason for the pared-down design elements used at the time. In the 16th century, playhouses had a balcony at the back of the stage and trapdoors in the floor from which actors could emerge or disappear.

Because there were few ways to mechanize or speed up large scene changes, and since Shakespeare plays flow quickly from locale to locale, the stage elements were kept to a minimum. Actors needed to compensate, using the imagery in the language to supply the theatrical "spectacle." If the dialogue mentioned a forest, the audience was expected to imagine it. If it mentioned a candle lighting a dark room, the audience had to imagine a dimly lit room.

The Costumes

These 16th-century actors had one pair of acting clothes appropriate to the types of characters they usually played. Though they might have added and subtracted pieces from that basic outfit as needed during a performance, most written accounts of productions from that period do not reference elaborate costumes or costume changes. In large part, acting was still considered a lower-class activity. Some accounts of productions from the Elizabethan era note that actors bought or received donations of extra clothing from lords and ladies who were theatrical patrons, to convincingly play royal and higher-class characters.

Things are quite different for modern productions of Shakespeare. Once the play has been cast, the costume designer takes measurements of each actor and creates costumes that will suit the period and aesthetic of the world being created onstage—in an effort to visually bring the characters to life.

Costumes can dramatically impact an actor's work, and a costume designer's work on any show begins well before the start of rehearsals and involves plenty of time behind the scenes.

Set Design

Directors work closely with set designers. The director will have a vision of the environment they want to create. As they talk about their ideas with the set designer in a series of design meetings, the designer can create a design based on that vision. As the design is taken from the page to the stage, many practical issues need to be considered to realize the vision.

Early preparations for a production are often conducted in a rehearsal hall while the scenic elements are being built onstage. This process can take days or weeks. If actors are working in a rehearsal hall, the production stage manager might tape the floor to indicate where doors, steps, or platforms of different levels can be expected onstage. This helps the actors and director plan the blocking that will work once they transfer rehearsals to the stage.

Once the set is ready for actors, part of the tech process for any production involves exploration of the physical space that has been constructed. Actors must become familiar with the stage to make sure they know how to navigate it safely and use it to best tell the story they are entrusted with sharing.

The Stage Manager

During rehearsals and performances for a modern production of a Shakespeare play—or any play—the contributions of a stage manager cannot be overstated. The stage manager is not only the person responsible for the physical space used in rehearsal and performance, but they are also the center of communication between all arms of the production team.

They write rehearsal and performance reports every night to make sure everyone has the practical information they need to collaborate. They open and close the theater for rehearsals and performances, facilitate communication between actors and designers, and make sure everyone stays on time and on task throughout the process.

During performances, the stage manager calls the light and sound cues used during the show and helps manage the technicians who run the backstage part of the production process. Successful stage management requires equal parts organizational and people skills, making stage management among the most challenging jobs in the theater.

In Shakespeare's day, there were no stage managers, but many of these tasks might have been accomplished by the "actor-managers" who ran the theaters, produced the plays, and often also performed roles onstage.

The bulk of the work for these theatrical jobs happens offstage, in the hands of often unsung heroes who make it possible for the production to happen. If it's done well, when an audience comes into the theater to watch the play, they'll have no idea how many people—or how many hours—it takes to get to the moment the curtain rises and the stage lights come up.

Now that you have firsthand knowledge of all the choices that go into taking Shakespeare from the page to the stage, the next time you attend a performance of his work, your experience will be enhanced—if not transformed.

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To the Stage!

This course has explained how actors and other theatrical artists take Shakespeare's words and, through a lengthy process of study and collaboration, create a dynamic performance experience.

Most of the rehearsal process involves exploration and repetition of the material, using the tools and clues provided by the playwright. Eventually, however, the actors must put their scripts down and commit to—or "set"—particular character choices and physical movements through moment-to-moment rehearsals of the scene. Once they have done that—and accomplished tech week to add scenic, lighting, sound, and costume elements—they are ready for opening night.

Opening Night

Opening night is the most magical moment for a director—the moment their job is finished and they give the words, the play, and the moment over to the actors, who make it their own.

There is a giant leap made when the actors put down their scripts and begin to fully act their roles. For the first time, after months of careful studying, the actors can finally embody their characters and speak the characters' spontaneous thoughts.

Shakespeare's Lasting Effects

Actors can find the process of creating and performing a character educational, even transformative—particularly when they perform Shakespeare because he wrote plays with such vast and varying insight into the human condition.

Even more than 400 years after his death, Shakespeare's exploration of human experiences like love, friendship, treachery, and longing still resonates with us today. His words continue to be performed because audiences want to watch and listen to them. For them, too, Shakespeare's work can be transformative, as they come to the theater to have a communal and sometimes cathartic experience.

Seeing and hearing any play is an exercise in empathy. You, as the audience, agree to come into the world of that play to imagine what it would feel like to be particular characters going through their experiences and to accept their disguises, wants and needs, heroic deeds, and human imperfections.

We turn to art to see ourselves reflected in it and, hopefully, grow in the process. We can all relate to the human need for love, belonging, and answers to existential questions like those so richly explored in *Hamlet*.

Thank you for exploring this Shakespearean material. Hopefully you will come away from this course with a new level of appreciation for the process that makes this experience possible.

Reading

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