Daily Bard

TOOLKIT

Shakespeare's language: a cheat sheet

Shakespeare wrote in early modern English, which is closer to ours than it first looks. Most of the difficulty comes from a few pronouns, a few verb endings, and some familiar words that meant something else.

USE IT FOR	WORKS WITH	KEEP IT
First reading of any play, annotation, revision	Every play and the Sonnets	Inside the front cover of your text

Thou and you

Shakespeare's English had two words for "you", and the choice carries meaning. **Thou** is singular and close: used to friends, lovers, children, servants, God, and in anger or contempt. **You** is plural, or polite and distant. When a character switches from one to the other in the middle of a scene, something in the relationship has changed. It is always worth a comment.

	SUBJECT	OBJECT	POSSESSIVE
Close or singular	thou	thee	thy, thine
Polite or plural	you (ye)	you	your, yours

Juliet, alone, asks *"wherefore art thou Romeo?"* The intimate "thou" belongs to someone she has already let close.

Verb endings and little verbs

YOU WILL SEE	IT MEANS
thou art, thou hast, thou dost, thou wilt, thou shalt	you are, you have, you do, you will, you shall
thou knowest, thou speak'st	you know, you speak
he hath, she doth, it goeth	he has, she does, it goes
'tis, 'twas, 'twere, 'twill	it is, it was, it were, it will
o'er, e'er, ne'er, e'en, i' th'	over, ever, never, even, in the
methinks, prithee	it seems to me, please (I pray thee)

Many contractions are there to keep the line to ten syllables. If a word looks clipped, the metre is usually the reason.

Word order

Shakespeare often moves the verb or the object for rhythm or emphasis. When a sentence will not make sense, find the subject and the verb, then put them back in modern order.

- Read to the full stop, not to the end of the line.
- Find who is doing what. Put it in the order subject, verb, object.
- Skip an unknown word the first time. The sentence often explains it.
- Read it aloud. Actors' sense of where to breathe is usually right.

False friends: words that have changed

These are the ones that cause mistakes, because they look familiar.

WORD	USUALLY MEANS IN SHAKESPEARE
wherefore	why (not "where")
soft	wait, hold on
anon	soon, in a moment
presently	at once
still	always, continually
marry	indeed (a mild oath)
an	if
but	often "only" or "except"
ere	before
hence, hither, thither, whence	from here, to here, to there, from where

WORD	USUALLY MEANS IN SHAKESPEARE
fond	foolish
brave	fine, splendid
honest	truthful, and of women often “chaste”
want	lack
owe	own, possess
humour	mood or temperament
conceit	an idea, or the imagination
doubt	often “fear” or “suspect”
sad	serious
happy	fortunate
cousin	any relative, or a close friend
fell	cruel, deadly

THE FAMOUS EXAMPLE

Juliet is not asking where Romeo is. She is asking why he has to be Romeo, a Montague. The essay on **What’s in a name?** follows her argument through.

Verse and prose

Look at the shape on the page. Lines that start with a capital and stop short of the margin are **verse**, usually blank verse. Text that runs to the margin is **prose**. As a rule of thumb, verse carries formal, public or heightened speech, and prose carries comedy, letters, madness and everyday talk. The rule is loose, which is why a change from one to the other is worth noticing: Lady Macbeth, who commands the verse early in the play, sleepwalks in prose.

Try it

Put each line into modern English. Answers are in the essays linked beside them.

1. *"O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?"* (What's in a name?)
2. *"The quality of mercy is not strained."* (The quality of mercy)
3. *"Thou art more lovely and more temperate."* (Sonnet 18)

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