

Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is the English language's greatest poet and playwright, perhaps the world's greatest. Ivor Brown calls his writing "The Hand of Glory," unlike anything else of that or any other time.

Orson Welles: "Shakespeare said everything. Brain to belly; every mood and minute of a man's season. His language is starlight and fireflies and the sun and the moon. He wrote it with tears and blood and beer, and his words march like heartbeats. He speaks to everyone and we all claim him, but it's wise to remember, if we would really appreciate him, that he doesn't properly belong to us but to another world that smelled assertively of columbine and gun powder and printer's ink and was vigorously dominated by Elizabeth."

Thornton Wilder said of this paragraph that it was "the greatest thumbnail summation of Shakespeare's greatness ever written."



Pictures of William Shakespeare are surprisingly scarce. Remarkably for a man whose work has enlightened millions, there are very few Shakespeare pictures and depictions of the Great Bard with us today. Here is the Droeshout Portrait in the First Folio and a verse accompanying it.

This Figure, that thou here seeft put,
It was for gentle Shakeſpeare cut;
Wherein the Grauer had a ſtrife
with Nature, to out-doo the life:
O, could he but haue drawne his wit
As well in braffe, as he hath hit
His face; the Print would then furpaffe
All, that vvas vvrit in braffe.
But, ſince he cannot, Reader, looke
Not on his Picture, but his Booke.

Shakespeare's Language

As a playwright Shakespeare wrote the majority of lines in iambic pentameter verse with frequent rhyming of the last two lines of a speech. Iambic pentameter is da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM, five "feet" to a line. For variation he would also use choriambic feet, DUM da da DUM, taking the place of two iambic feet, and anapestic feet, da da DUM, but there were almost always five DUMs (stressed syllables) in a line. Sometimes the line would end with an extra da (unstressed syllable), which constitutes a weak, or feminine, ending.

As a sonneteer, Shakespeare used the rhyme scheme abab cdcd efef gg. His plays actually include some sonnets, as with the prologue to Romeo and Juliet:

*Two households, both alike in dignity,
(In fair Verona, where we lay our scene),
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny* (break to new mu.. is a choriamb)
*Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life;* (not suicide, read as “got their life”)
*Whose misadventured piteous overthrows
Doth with their death bury their parents’ strife.* (starts with two choriamb, I believe)
*The fearful passage of their death-marked love
And the continuance of their parents rage,* (two choriamb at the start?)
Which, but their children’s end, naught could remove (starts with a choriamb, I believe)
*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.*

Reading choriamb as two iambic feet often means emphasizing words like “to,” “with,” “the,” “but,” and the like, which usually doesn’t sound as good. This is poetry, and poetry is for the ear, it must be heard to be appreciated. Reading a Shakespeare play silently is like reading music silently, you really don’t get the feel of it.

Richard Eyre, distinguished English director:

“The life of the plays is in the language, not alongside it, or underneath it. Feelings and thoughts are released at the moment of speech. An Elizabethan audience would have responded to the pulse, the rhythms, the shapes, sounds, and above all meanings, within the consistent ten-syllable, five-stress lines of blank verse. They were an audience who *listened*.” They would speak of going to *hear* a play, not to see one.

Now, here’s the rub: The sounds Elizabethans heard from actors are not the sounds we hear today. Sound is an important ingredient of the poetry. Are the sounds heavy, foreboding, bright, or soothing? To get the right “flavor” of a line, its words must be pronounced somewhat as Elizabethans would. This is not so difficult as it might seem, as early American speech is not far from that. And then, the Elizabethan actors themselves did not all have the same accent, so there is no “standard” to follow. Unfortunately, there have been few attempts to produce plays that employ Elizabethan accents. For more on this subject, go to www.renfaire.com and the book *Pronouncing Shakespeare* described below under Suggested Reading.

One thing actors must do is get the meter right. There are two sides to this, one saying that the meter should be mostly ignored in favor of what they call “natural speech,” the other saying that this is poetry and the meter must be respected. As usual, a middle road is probably best and is no doubt the road that Elizabethan actors took.

One acting crime is to over-emphasize a weak syllable. Another is to give insufficient stress to a strong syllable. Actors do these things because they like their meter better than Shakespeare’s, a position that is not justified by the results. Richard Burton was a marvelous actor, so he got away with these crimes. John Gielgud was usually faultless. Lawrence Olivier was pretty good at paying attention to the meter, but not always.

Another problem is that many words had different meanings, or multiple meanings, that are unknown today. Shakespeare loved puns and double entendres, but these are easily missed by modern readers who are unaware of Elizabethan homonyms that no longer sound alike, or who don’t know the slang words used for body parts in Shakespeare’s time.

Suggested reading:

The New Folger Library Shakespeare

All 37 plays attributed to Shakespeare, and his sonnets, published by the Folger Shakespeare Library in individual volumes, most of which are available from Barnes and Noble for around \$7. Explanatory notes are on the left side, text on the right, much handier than having notes at the end of a play or as footnotes. I doubt there is anything better for reading, understanding, and appreciating Shakespeare's plays.

Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare, Isaac Asimov

A thoughtful and knowledgeable analysis of all 37 plays traditionally ascribed to Shakespeare, and his epic poems, *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*. Not the sonnets, however.

Shakespeare the Biography, Peter Ackroyd

This must be the definitive biography, that's all I can say. Great reading.

A Year in the Life of Shakespeare, James Shapiro

The year was 1599. An in-depth account of this year in Shakespeare's life, not only in regard to his plays and London theaters but also political events that had an effect on his plays and the Elizabethan culture that was reflected in them.

Shakespeare, Ivor Brown

An excellent biography featuring thoughtful speculation about the "dark lady" of the sonnets and Shakespeare's possible "shotgun wedding" to the pregnant Anne Hathaway.

The Shakespeare Miscellany, David Crystal and Ben Crystal

A collection of little-known facts about Shakespeare, his works, his time, and his language. An example of the last:

"Wherefore art thou Romeo" does not mean "Where are you, Romeo?" The word "wherefore" in those times was an emphatic "why," so Juliet is saying "Why must you be named Romeo?" The lines following continue this theme:

*Deny thy father and refuse thy name,
Or if thou wilt not be but sworn my love
And I'll no longer be a Capulet*

Shakespeare's Sonnets, edited with analytic commentary by Stephen Booth.

Besides the authoritative and informative commentary by Booth, this volume features a facsimile of the 1609 Quarto edition printed in parallel with a modernized text for each sonnet. You can see exactly what Elizabethans saw when they read the sonnets, with the original font, spellings, and punctuation. Booth reveals a host of easily-missed meanings, multiple interpretations, and subtle puns. A sonnet that seems rather straightforward and understandable might have four pages of explanatory notes that enable a much fuller appreciation. Who would suspect that the words "nothing," "all," "thing," "naught," and "pen" were Elizabethans' slang terms for sexual parts (66 terms for women's were in the plays)? No doubt they would chuckle at the title of one Shakespeare play: "Much Ado About Nothing"

The Poems, edited by John Roe

This book comprises all of Shakespeare's poetry efforts other than the sonnets, which include *Venus and Adonis*, *The Rape of Lucrece*, *The Phoenix and the Turtle*, *The Passionate*

Pilgrim, and *A Lover's Complaint*. Roe's introduction to each poem or group of poems examines the Classical and Renaissance traditions behind the poetry and the conditions under which the poems were written.

Pronouncing Shakespeare, David Crystal

This is the story of three *Romeo and Juliet* productions at the Old Globe in London in which the actors were to use Elizabethan accents. Would the actors be able to cope with it? Would the audience understand it? Would there be any unexpected dramatic consequences? David Crystal tells the story, from initial concept to final production. He explains the historic linguistic background, paying special attention to the question everyone asks: "How do you know how they spoke in those days?" The answer is you don't know, but a lot of hard research gives you a pretty good idea.

While the result was highly successful, the audiences loving it, actors were not solidly behind a continuance of the experiment, perhaps because it took a lot of work on their part, and it is unlikely to be repeated. That is a shame, because the Elizabethan accents gave more power and beauty to Shakespeare's lines, while shortening the playing time considerably.

A video was made of the first performance, but it is viewable only in-house at the Old Globe by appointment. A video of a modern-pronunciation version by the same cast is also available for comparison.

Suggested viewing:

All 37 plays produced for television by BBC and Time-Life films 1978-1984, available on DVDs digitally remastered with enhanced picture and sound. The DVDs are available from Ambrose Video (ambrosevideo.com) but are much too expensive there (\$1500 for all 37, \$50 for separate plays). The place to get them is www.documentary-video.com, who offers all 37 for \$1000, which comes to \$28 each, and \$37 each for separate plays. These are actually Ambrose Video products, with both sources shown on the jackets, and I don't understand the connection.

Fifteen of the plays are available in three five-play "gift box" sets (histories, comedies, tragedies) available from multiple sources. One such is Amazon, who wants \$135 for each box set, which comes to a reasonable \$27 per play, but only the tragedies and comedies are available at this time. "Used" box sets are also available for about \$100. I bought the three boxes, but had to shell out \$37 to [documentary-video](http://www.documentary-video.com) for some other plays that I had to have. For some reason only the boxed sets have subtitle capability, helpful for Shakespeare plays spoken by English actors.

The casts comprise a collection of all-stars: John Gielgud; Wendy Hiller; Derek Jacobi (a better Hamlet than Olivier); Claire Bloom (Hamlet's mother); Anthony Quayle (a fine Falstaff); Celia Johnson (of *Brief Encounter*), playing Juliet's wonderful nurse; Charles Gray (Julius Caesar); Tim Pigott-Smith (Hotspur); Ben Kingsley; Michael Hordern (King Lear); Anthony Hopkins/Bob Hoskins as Othello/Iago; Helen Mirren (Rosalind); John Cheese; Jon Finch (Henry IV); and David Gwillim (a good Prince Hal and Henry V). There were other fine actors too, but I am not familiar enough with English actors to have known them previously.

Among other good films (all available on DVD) are *Henry V*, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Richard III*, and *Othello*, all starring Olivier, *Macbeth* with Ian McKellan and Dame Judi Dench, and *Othello* with Orson Welles. I treasure a tape I made off AMC television recently of the 1935 film *Midsummer Night's Dream*, with James Cagney, Dick Powell, Mickey Rooney, Joe E. Brown, Victor Jory, and Ian Hunter. Another treasure taped off television is *The Tempest* with Maurice Evans, Richard Burton, Lee Remick, Tom Poston, and Roddy McDowell, (1960 Hallmark Hall of Fame series). It's

bowdlerized to make it suitable for youngsters, but nevertheless wonderful because of the acting and the sets.

A special treat for Claire Bloom admirers, as I am, is a 1999 TV production available on DVD, entitled *Shakespeare's Women and Claire Bloom*, in which she gives readings of Shakespeare's Juliet, Lady Anne, Portia, Rosalind, Gertrude, Imogen, Volumnia, Lady Constance, Katherine of Aragon, and Emilia. Included are a number of clips from her films, and some good commentary by her on the art of acting such parts. Clips from Shakespeare films of the silent era are fun to see.

Sorry, but I don't care for the recent efforts of Kenneth Branagh. Actually I've seen just a couple, but that was enough to turn me off. He's a very good actor but chops up the plays too much in order to accommodate the masses. Can't blame him for that, I guess, but how can you like someone who didn't stay married to Emma Thompson?