The poetry of WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

BY JUSTIN EICK

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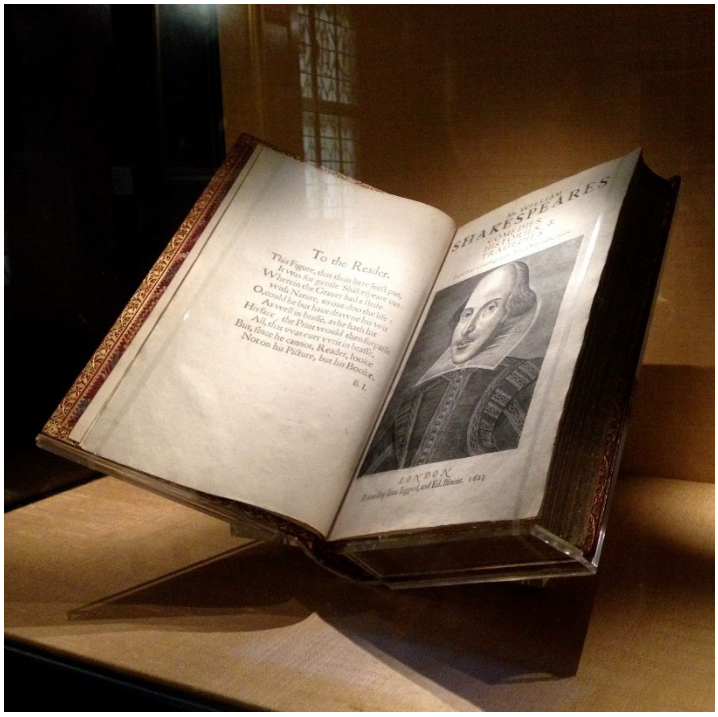


Figure 1: The First Folio (1623)

> He was the man who of all modern, and perhaps ancient poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul.
>
> - John Dryden

AN INTRODUCTION TO
SHAKESPEARE'S POETRY

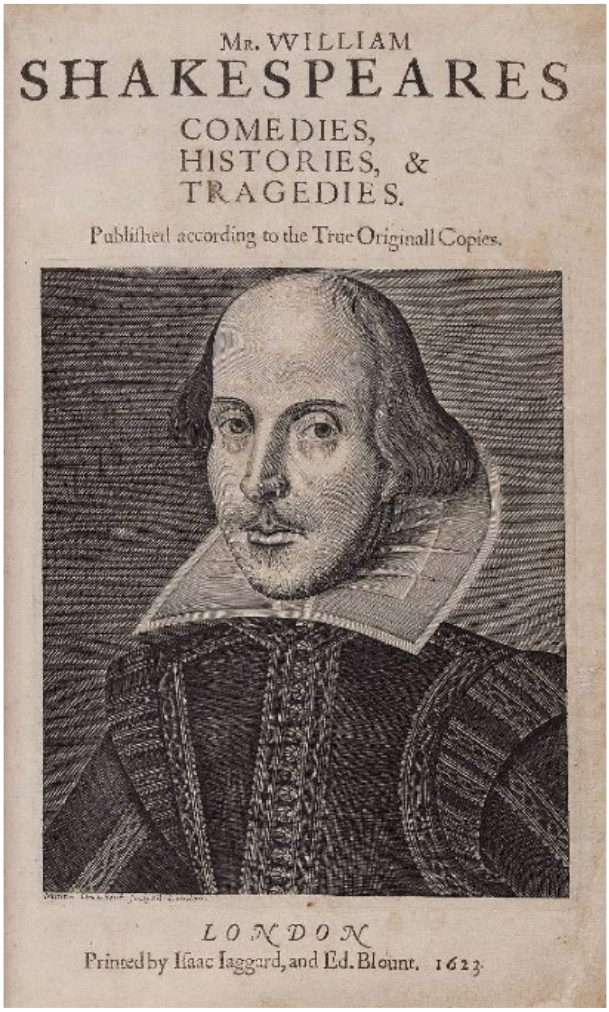

Mr. WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARES
COMEDIES,
HISTORIES, &
TRAGEDIES.
Published according to the True Originall Copies.
LONDON
Printed by Isaac Iaggard, and Ed. Blount. 1623.

Figure 2: Title page of The First Folio (1623)

Because the works of William Shakespeare are widely considered the pinnacle of English literature, his plays remain a perennial favorite among English teachers and have become required reading in classrooms around the world.

Unfortunately, sitting at a desk and reading Shakespeare's plays out of a book is not easy. The use of unfamiliar words and phrases in conjunction with unorthodox word syntax, layered poetic devices and arcane references to distant history and/or mythology make reading Shakespeare an absolutely daunting challenge for even the most enthusiastic literary lover.

In a way, it's no different than asking a music student to sit down and silently analyze a piano concerto by Mozart or Beethoven. While there is clear value in the exercise, the task is a difficult one and generally unpleasant to put it mildly.

Fortunately, analyzing Shakespeare's text is made much easier once you understand that his plays were meant to be seen, not read.

Indeed, he didn't incorporate poetry simply because he loved the rhythmic and aesthetic qualities of language – rather, he used poetic devices to enhance the performance value of the plays. After all, he was a business man first and foremost which meant his plays needed to appeal to as a wide an audience as possible.

As such, any analysis of Shakespeare's writing must begin with an examination of how he used poetic devices in his writing to enrich the dramatic value of his productions.

PERFORMING POETRY

As previously mentioned, Shakespeare didn't embed layer upon layer of literary devices into his plays so that students hundreds of years later could study iambic pentameter, poetic devices, and complex rhyme schemes.

In fact, he had no intention of his plays ever being read … ever. He died without publishing them and to this day, no copies of Shakespeare's "foul papers" (that is, his working drafts) have ever been found. Not a single page (or a single line for that matter) from one of his plays in his own hand has ever been positively identified.

The motivation behind Shakespeare's refusal to publish his plays was purely economic: he needed them to make his living. As a shareholder in his theatre company, Shakespeare received a portion of the profits every time one of his plays was performed at his theatre.

Publishing his scripts would have made it much easier for other playhouses to mount "knock-off" productions of Shakespeare's plays, thereby cutting into his profits.

Hence, his plays were closely guarded to prevent other theatre companies from stealing his plays.

Even the actors in Shakespeare's theatre company rarely received a full copy of the script - instead, the performers would be handed partial scripts (or "rolls") which contained only their specific lines along with their cues.

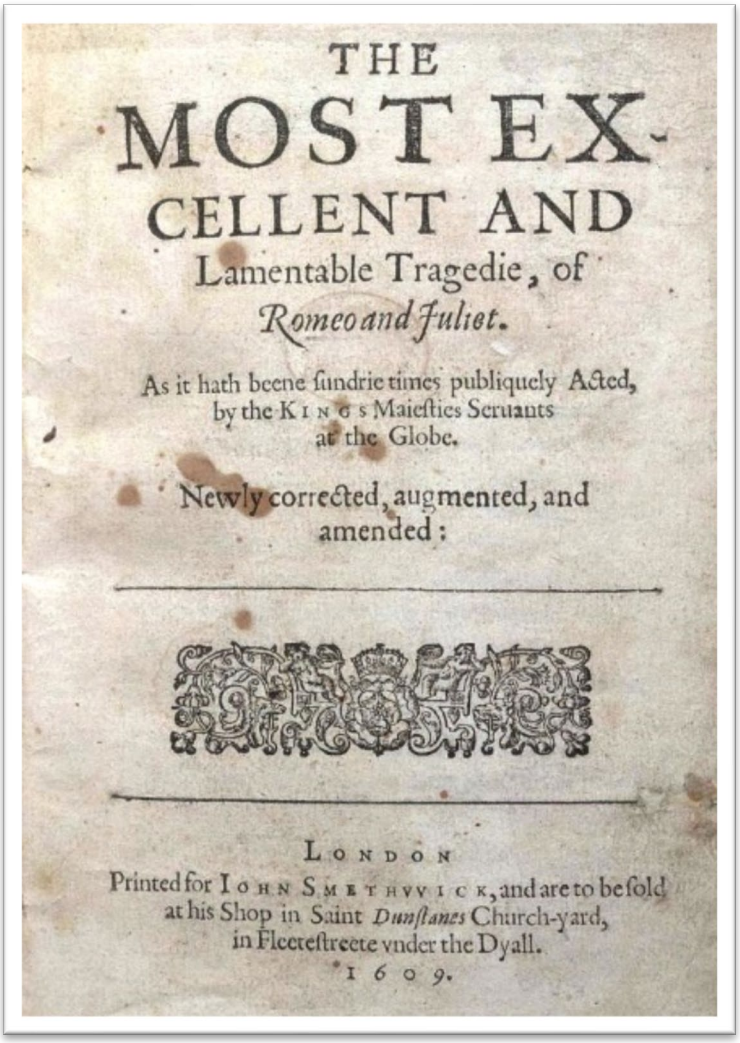
It should be noted that although Shakespeare didn't publish his plays, pirated copies of his productions (known as "quartos") did appear during his lifetime.

The name "quarto" is derived from the fact that these pirated scripts were created by folding a piece of paper in half, and

DID YOU KNOW …

Although we have no copies of Shakespeare's plays in his own hand, several scholars have attempted to identify Shakespeare's handwriting in plays by other playwrights (most notably, *The Spanish Tragedy* by Thomas Kyd and *Sir Thomas More* by Anthony Munday) as it is believed that Shakespeare may have collaborated with those writers on their scripts.

However, no evidence has ever emerged linking the Bard definitively to those scripts and Shakespeare's involvement with those plays remains academic speculation at best.


THE
MOST EX-
CELLENT AND
Lamentable Tragedie, of
Romeo and Juliet.

As it hath beene ſundrie times publiquely Acted,
by the KINGS Maieſties Seruants
at the Globe.

Newly corrected, augmented, and
amended:

LONDON
Printed for IOHN SMETHVVICK, and are to be ſold
at his Shop in Saint *Dunſtanes* Church-yard,
in Fleeteſtreete vnder the Dyall.
1609.

Figure 3: 3rd Quarto – Romeo and Juliet (1609)

then in half again thus creating a little book.

Some of the quartos are filled with errors and are called the "bad" quartos while the more accurate versions are known as the "good" quartos.

Another reason why Shakespeare didn't publish his plays involved a lack of interest from the general public in reading plays.

Although his plays were immensely popular, most Elizabethans considered plays to be the lowest form of literature and not the kind of material that "should be vouchsafed a room in a library" as noted by one Sir Thomas Bodley (the rather pretentious founder of Oxford University's first library).

Additionally, while huge strides in literacy were made during Elizabeth's reign, nearly 70% of the population remained illiterate during Shakespeare's life. There is even evidence that Shakespeare's own parents were unable to read or write since they both used drawings for signatures.

Certainly, the average theatre attendee during Shakespeare's life was completely unaware of the poetry embedded throughout Shakespeare's dramatic works.

So that invites the obvious question: why bother inserting poetic devices into the plays at all? If his scripts weren't intended for publication and his audiences were only vaguely aware of the poetry, why go to all the trouble of infusing the dialogue with such extraordinarily heightened language?

The answer is amazingly simple: the poetry is direction for his

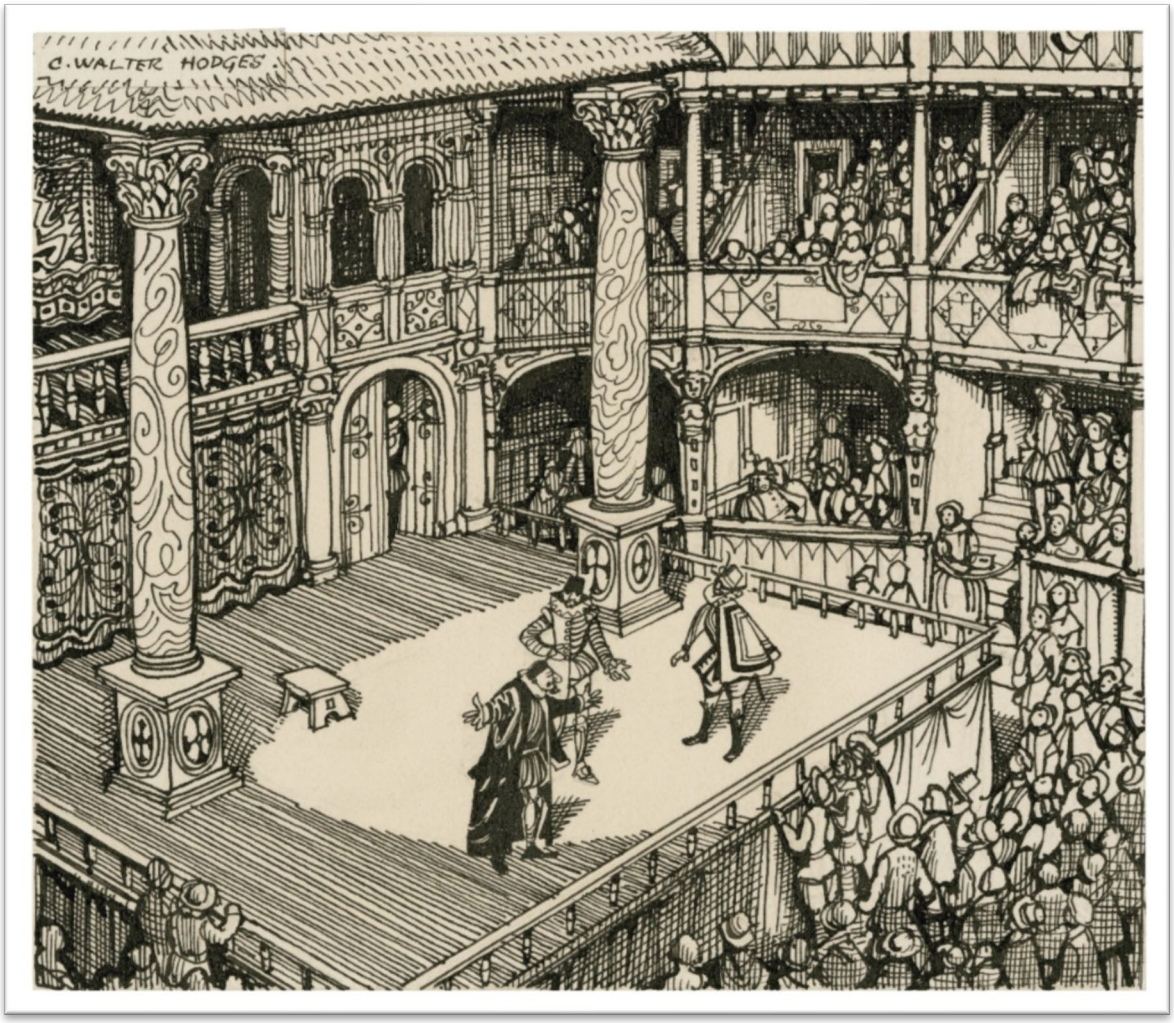


Figure 4: Drawing of Elizabethan actors performing

actors. While it's true that it was common practice among Elizabethan playwrights to use some poetry in their plays, analysis of Shakespeare's plays from a theatrical point of view yields widespread patterns of poetic devices directly tied to dramatic characterization. In other words, Shakespeare used the poetry to tell his actors how to perform their roles.

This was especially important since the concept of a director didn't exist during Shakespeare's time. The contemporary idea of having a single individual direct an actor's physical and emotional characterization was completely absent during Shakespeare's time.

Hence, Shakespeare himself provided the direction by embedding instructions in the text through the strategic use of meter, prose, and various poetic devices.

POETRY VS. PROSE

Figure 5: Lady Macbeth in The Tragedy of Macbeth

Nowhere is the use of poetic devices as a method for authorial direction more evident than in Shakespeare's decision to use either poetry or prose when writing dialogue.

Shakespeare uses poetry (that is, iambic pentameter) for characters that are highly intelligent and passionate; however, he switches to prose when the character is slow-witted (or at least pretending to be foolish). Here are a few examples:

CHARACTERS WHO SPEAK IN POETRY

Romeo (from *Romeo and Juliet*)
Lady Macbeth (from *Macbeth*)
Petruchio (from *The Taming of the Shrew)*)
Hermia (from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

CHARACTERS WHO SPEAK IN PROSE

Bottom (from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)
The Porter (from *Macbeth*)
Sir Toby Belch (from *12th Night*)
Mercutio (from *Romeo and Juliet*)

Actors approaching a part in one of Shakespeare's plays should begin their character development by first establishing whether their character speaks in poetry or prose since the form in which their dialogue is written will reveal Shakespeare's intentions for the role.

> *"Shakespeare uses poetry for characters that are highly intelligent and passionate.*
>
> *However, he switches to prose when the character is slow-witted (or at least pretending to be foolish).*

Figure 6: Benvolio, Mercutio and Balthasar banter with each other in Romeo and Juliet

It should be mentioned that some characters (such as Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet*) will alternate between poetry and prose as their character changes "moods". Again, this is specific direction by Shakespeare to the actors as to how to play the role.

For instance, when the character of Mercutio in *Romeo and Juliet* is clowning around with Romeo and Benvolio, he speaks in prose – however, in the final moments before his death following a fatal duel, his mood becomes very serious and he switches to poetry.

Figure 7: Tybalt and Mercutio duel in Romeo and Juliet

SO HOW CAN YOU TELL WHETHER THE TEXT IS POETRY OR PROSE?

Determining whether Shakespeare is using poetry or prose in his dialogue is actually very simple since he uses capitalization and formatting to distinguish between the two:

POETRY

The first letter of the first word of each new line is capitalized regardless of the punctuation.

JULIET
O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?
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.

PROSE

Dialogue is written with no special capitalization and the paragraph is typically full-justified.

MERCUTIO
Thou art like one of those fellows that, when he enters the confines of a tavern, claps me his sword upon the table and says "God send me no need of thee!

UNDERSTANDING IAMBIC PENTAMETER

To understand what iambic pentameter is, we must first understand what prose is. Prose is everyday language – it is characterized by the lack of any formal rhythm or meter to the text.

Thus, iambic pentameter and similar rhythmic patterns are completely absent in prose. However, prose can contain poetic devices such as metaphors and alliteration.

Shakespeare's poetry, on the other hand, is typically written in iambic meters. The word "iambic" describes a rhythmic pattern, or "foot", which contains 2 syllables.

The first syllable is lightly stressed (signified by an "x") and is immediately followed by a second, more heavily stressed syllable (marked by a "/"). For instance, the word "away" is inherently iambic since the first syllable of the word is lightly stressed while the second syllable is heavily stressed.

The word "pentameter" indicates that there are 5 ("penta" = 5) metrical feet in each line of poetry. Thus, a full line of iambic pentameter (also known as "blank verse") would contain a total of 10 syllables made up of 5 iambs.

In order to determine where the stresses fall in a line of iambic pentameter, the actor needs to perform "scansion" on the line. This involves marking the text as follows:

	x /	x /	x /	x /	x /
ROMEO:	But soft! |	What light |	through yon |	der win |	dow breaks?
	1 2	3 4	5 6	7 8	9 10
	1ST IAMB	2ND IAMB	3RD IAMB	4TH IAMB	5TH IAMB

While the placement of stresses within the line might seem arbitrary or accidental, Shakespeare was in fact very careful when constructing his dialogue.

Just as a modern day director would tell an actor which word is important in a line, so Shakespeare would indicate to his actors the important words in his dialogue by arranging them to fall on a stressed beat.

This does not mean that an actor should emphasize every word which is heavily stressed in the blank verse since the dialogue would end up with an unnatural, "sing song" quality.

Rather, when deciding where the emotional emphasis of the line should fall, an actor should try to pick a word which Shakespeare heavily stressed in the meter. The iambic pentameter is simply a guideline, not a hard fast rule.

METER VARIANTS

Not every line of poetry in Shakespeare's plays is written in iambic pentameter. As might be expected, Shakespeare would alter or modify the rhythmic meter to suit the dramatic needs of the play.

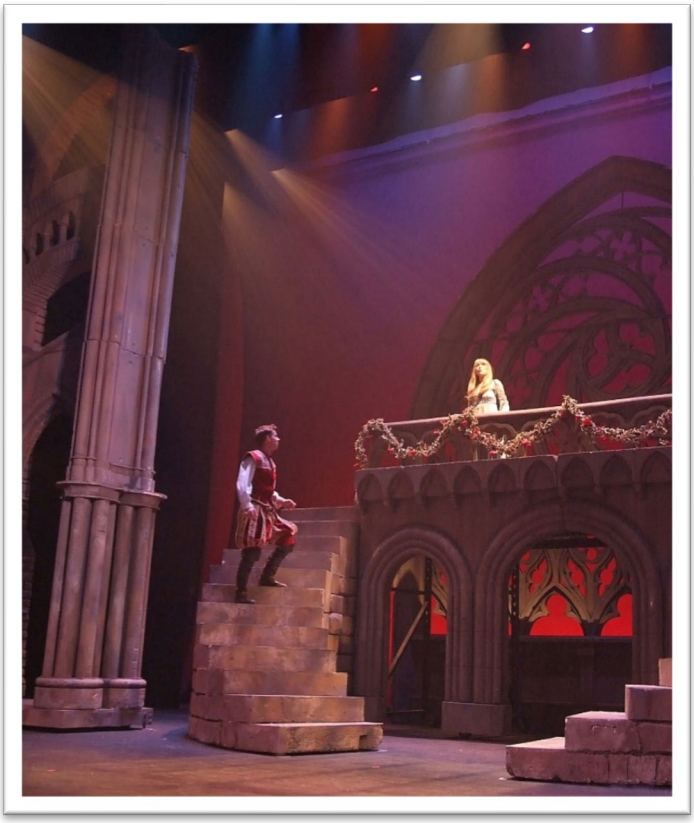


Figure 8: Romeo and Juliet in Romeo and Juliet

SHARED OR JOINED LINES

One of the most common meter variants involved "shared" lines. Shakespeare would frequently use shared lines when writing his dialogue. Such lines occur when two consecutive lines of dialogue by different characters have a total of ten syllables (thus creating a "pentameter" of iambs between the 2 lines of dialogue).

Shared (also known as joined) lines are in fact direction from Shakespeare that there should be no pause between the different lines – essentially, the actors must "pick up" their cues.

From a dramatic point of view, this type of pacing intensifies the emotional arc of a scene, creating a moving energy that drives the action. It is precisely the type of direction routinely given by modern directors – how many times have we heard a director yell from the back of the theatre "Pick up your cues!" Here is an example from *Romeo and Juliet*:

x / x / x /
ROMEO: I would I were thy bird.
x / x /
JULIET: Sweet, so would I.

MISSING METER

Alternately, a character will sometimes have "missing" meters – that is, less than the requisite 10 syllables. Close analysis of his plays reveals that Shakespeare often desired some physical, unspoken action to "fill" the missing beats.

For example, in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, there are multiple instances in which the lead characters of Petruchio and Katherine have lines with only 2 or 3 feet of iambs – lines in which they literally describe "striking" and "cuffing" each other.

x / x / x / x / x /
PET: I swear I'll cuff you if you strike again.

x / x / x /
KATH: So may you lose your arms.

The missing meter in Katherine's response to Petruchio's warning not to hit him again provides an obvious opportunity for physical action to fill the "empty beats" of the dialogue which is why you so often see this scene from *The Taming of the Shrew* staged with great physicality.

Figure 9: Katherine and Petruchio in The Taming of the Shrew

IAMBIC PENTAMETER VS. TROCHAIC TETRAMETER

In addition to shared lines and missing meter, Shakespeare would sometimes employ different rhythmic patterns. One of the more common rhythmic variants in his plays is known as "trochaic tetrameter".

Like an iamb, a "trochee" also describes a rhythmic pattern which contains 2 syllables. However, in this instance, the first syllable of a trochee is heavily stressed while the second syllable is lightly stressed.

Additionally, tetrameter only contains 4 feet ("tetra" + meter = 4 meters) which means that a full line of trochaic tetrameter would include a total of 8 syllables (instead of the customary 10 found in iambic pentameter).

Dramatic analysis of this rhythmic pattern in Shakespeare's plays reveals that he almost always reserved trochaic tetrameter for "magical" characters such as Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or the witches in *Macbeth*:

/ x / x / x / x
PUCK: If we shadows have offended,

/ x / x / x / x
Think but this, and all is mended.

/ x / x / x / x
WITCH: Double, double toil and trouble,

/ x / x / x / x
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

Figure 10: Puck in A Midsummer Night's Dream

Figure 11: The witches in Macbeth

FEMININE ENDING

The "feminine" ending – or eleven syllable line – is one of the most important ways in which Shakespeare would use poetry to inform the actor as to how to portray a character.

Essentially, Shakespeare reserved the feminine ending for times in which the character was under great emotional or physical strain. Indeed, perhaps Shakespeare's most famous line of dialogue has a feminine ending:

x / x / x / / x x / x
HAMLET: To be, or not to be? That is the question –

Figure 12: Ophelia and Hamlet in The Tragedy of Hamlet

This line of dialogue contains 11 syllables and is without question, one of the most emotionally charged moments in all of Shakespeare's plays.

Faced with the knowledge that his father was murdered by his uncle, Hamlet seriously considers suicide in this line and Shakespeare makes sure that the actor playing Hamlet knows the emotional gravity of the situation by structuring the line to have 11 syllables.

It's also interesting to note that this particular line of dialogue contains an "inversion" (or reversal of stressed and unstressed syllables) in the fourth foot – not an uncommon practice following a caesura (or line-end) within a line of iambic pentameter.

POETIC DEVICES

In addition to his use of rhythmic meter, Shakespeare utilized a vast array of poetic devices to help direct the actor.

Sometimes known as "heightened language", the literary devices were interwoven throughout the dialogue to help add dramatic tension to the plot.

Some of the main poetic devices or "conceits" used in Shakespeare's plays bear mentioning:

Alliteration: Repetition of two or more consonant sounds.

Personification: The attribution of human characteristics to something nonhuman.

Metaphor: A statement in which one object or idea is said to be another.

Onomatopoeia: A word that sounds like what it describes.

Simile: A comparison between two objects or ideas using "like" or "as".

Figure 13: Demetrius, Helena, Lysander and Hermia in A Midsummer Night's Dream

The insertion of multiple levels of poetic devices into the dialogue serve as textual cues for vocal characterization. Just as a director might instruct an actor to emphasize a particular word or phrase within a sentence in a certain way, so Shakespeare provided direction through his specific use of poetic devices.

This is certainly the case in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* when four young lovers use a wide variety of poetic devices to hurl insults at each other while under the influence of a magic spell.

For a better understanding of how important it is to incorporate the poetry when playing Shakespeare, consider this exchange from *The Taming of the Shrew*:

PETRUCHIO
Good morrow Kate – for that's your name I hear.

KATHERINE
Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing.
They call me Katherine that do talk of me.

PETRUCHIO
You lie, in faith, for you are called plain Kate,
And bonny Kate, and sometimes Kate the curst,
But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom,
Kate of Kate hall, my super-dainty Kate –
For dainties are all Kates – and therefore, Kate,
Take this of me, Kate of consolation:
Hearing thy mildness praised in every town,
Thy virtues spoke of, and thy beauty sounded –
Yet not so deeply as to thee belongs –
Myself am moved to woo thee for my wife.

In this scene between Petruchio and Katherine, there are multiple poetic devices at play with the most obvious being alliteration.

From a dramatic standpoint, Katherine has made it clear she doesn't like the name "Kate" and it might be tempting for the actor playing Petruchio to ignore the alliteration and speed through the monologue.

However, if Petruchio plays up the alliteration by hitting the hard "k" sounds when saying the lines, it helps set the stage for the coming argument and adds humor to the scene by making it clear that Petruchio has no problems pushing Katherine's buttons.

Figure 14: Katherine and Petruchio in The Taming of the Shrew

As such, it is clear that Shakespeare brilliantly used poetry to direct his actors in the performance of their roles.

Unlike his contemporaries, he didn't include poetry because it was fashionable – rather, he used poetic devices to enrich the dramatic value of his productions.

It was a stroke of genius and greatly contributed to the enduring popularity of his work with audiences around the world.

> *Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue.*
>
> Hamlet – Act 3, scene 2

Figure 15: Actors perform an Elizabethan dance as a curtain call

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

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