Background on Shakespeare and His Writing Style

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

In April 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon, England, William Shakespeare was born. The world celebrates his birth on April 23rd, three days prior to his recorded baptism, because this was the customary period between birth and the ceremony. John and Mary Shakespeare had six children—William was the oldest.

No records exist to verify that William Shakespeare had a formal education. However, as the son of a city official, he was eligible to attend petty school (like kindergarten), followed by King Edward IV’s New School for 7-14 year old boys.

The curriculum included Latin literature, Greek, grammar, arithmetic and possibly rhetoric. If William’s father’s finances had not taken a turn for the worse, the completion of this schooling would have made him eligible for Oxford or Cambridge.

Eighteen-year old William married Anne Hathaway, the 26 year-old daughter of a local farmer, and six months later their daughter Susana was born. In 1585, two years later, twins Judith and Hamnet were born. Shakespeare was 21 years old and had to support a wife and three children. It is possible that he was able to do this by performing with a troupe of traveling players. Shakespeare eventually left his wife and family behind in Stratford to go to London and earn a living writing and performing in the theatre. He continued to visit his family in the country and work in the city until his retirement in 1611.

After just 6 years in London, William Shakespeare had made a name for himself as both actor and playwright.

By 1594, he was a partner in one of the most prestigious theatre companies, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men—where he was both the star actor and poet. He wrote approximately two plays a year during his time in London—and is credited with a total of 38 plays, 2 extended poems and numerous sonnets. After a prolific career as a writer and years of critical acclaim as an actor, Shakespeare died in the city of his birth, Stratford, on April 23, 1616.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ELIZABETHAN ENGLAND

Elizabeth I ruled England from 1558 to 1603 during a period of relative peace and prosperity. The daughter of Henry VIII and his second wife, Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth was regarded by many Catholics as an illegitimate child and monarch. The politics of religion constantly threatened Elizabeth’s reign even though it was one of the most sure that England had known for hundreds of years. She had no heir, and the matter of succession was a disturbing threat to national security.

Elizabethan England was a smaller, more isolated country than it had been previously or would be later. The exploration of the New World was just beginning, and the nation’s economy was based in agriculture. The plague was ravishing England’s cities, killing 11,000 Londoners in 1593 alone.

James I of England, or James VI of Scotland, succeeded Elizabeth to the crown in 1603. The first monarch to rule over England, Scotland, and Ireland simultaneously, he was a respected intellectual, albeit, some would argue, a political failure: the conflicts of his rule became the seeds of the English Civil War during his son’s reign.

Shakespeare’s later plays were written during James’ reign. (In fact, one of James’ scholarly works, the Daemonologie of 1599, is sometimes considered one of Shakespeare’s minor sources for Macbeth.)
ELIZABETHAN THEATRE

James Burbage built the first commercial theatre in England in 1576, about 15 years before Shakespeare arrived on the London theatre scene. Burbage managed to skirt rigid rules governing entertainment in London by building his theatre just outside the city limit, in the less-than-glamorous community of “Shoreditch.” The name was a reflection of the theatre’s location, on the shore of the river Thames and just beyond the ditch created by the walls of London.

Many different kinds of people came to the Globe Theatre, where Shakespeare’s plays were performed. A full house would hold 3,000 audience members. (By comparison, the UWM Peck School of the Arts Mainstage Theatre, where the Milwaukee Shakespeare production takes place, has a maximum capacity of 486.) They arrived well before the play began to meet friends, drink ale and eat snacks sold at the theatre. It was more akin to a football game or rock concert than our understanding of going to the theatre today.

Wealthy theatergoers paid two or three pence for gallery seats (above the stage), while the “common folk” stood for a penny on the floor in front of the stage. They were a demanding audience, and Shakespeare had the challenge of appealing to every level of society when writing his plays. All performances took place during the day (electric lighting instruments wouldn’t exist for a few centuries) and sets and props were basic.

Most plays only rehearsed for a couple of days due to the large volume of productions. All actors were male; the female roles were played by young men. It was not until 1660 that women would be allowed to act on the English stage.

In 1642, the Puritans succeeded in closing the theatres altogether. They did not reopen until Charles II came to power 18 years later. The Globe Theatre (the second to be built after the first burned down during a production of Henry VIII) was later destroyed in the Great Fire of London in 1666.

“CODEBREAK” THE LANGUAGE

WHY THE POETRY?

Why do we admire a great writer or performer of lyrics, novels, screenplays, or even improvisational or stand-up comedy?

Picking the reasons apart, the most common responses are usually that 1) they know how to use language—vocabulary, punctuation, rhyme, etc.—in a way that tells a meaningful and entertaining story to an audience, and 2) they can deliver it with timing and intention that makes their story clear.

Shakespeare’s scripts are no different.

Like any other wordsmith, he uses vocabulary, rhyme, and rhythm to suggest emotions, relationships and motivations. Did people in Shakespeare’s day speak in rhymed verse? No, of course not—no more than we speak in rap. But then and now, people have enjoyed the rhythms and rhyme of verse—and sometimes the language and rhythm of verse tunes us in more immediately, more completely to the feelings and choices of characters. It’s why people listen to the blues; to hip-hop; to classical music—it’s simply another medium of language and sound which gives us an immediate emotional rhythm with which we can identify.

HOW FOREIGN IS ELIZABETHAN ENGLISH?

The most important thing to remember when preparing to read or hear Shakespeare is that it’s still English. As we might listen to a new song on an album or on the radio a few times before we pick up every word and layer of meaning, we might have to mull over a passage of a play a few times in order to glean meaning from the language tools Shakespeare employs. And that’s not just students of Shakespeare; that’s Shakespearean actors, directors, designers, scholars—anyone who might be considered, pardon the pun, well-versed in the language already!
A basic knowledge of the use of language and poetic form can enhance understanding and enjoyment of Shakespeare’s plays.

“Shakespeare’s vocabulary was immense; it is estimated that he used more than 20,000 root words in his plays, almost half of all the words then existing in English. No writer before or since has so mastered the lexicon of his or her own tongue.

His plays contain thousands of precise allusions: some 70 trees, 75 flowers, 90 nautical terms, 125 four-footed animals, 175 birds, and 250 mythological characters. He quoted or cited from 42 books of the Bible (he was ecumenical; his citations include references from 18 books of the Old Testament, 18 of the New, and 6 from the Apocrypha) as well as from over 100 literary and historical works. His plays contain phrases, lines, speeches, and sometimes whole scenes in French, Welsh, Latin, and Italian. No one in his original audience could have understood, certainly not at one hearing, all the words in his plays – and his plays were, consequently, written with that in mind.

Indeed, many of the obscure and difficult words in Shakespeare were meant to be obscure and difficult; they were obscure and difficult in Shakespeare’s day as well as ours.”

-from Robert Cohen’s *Acting in Shakespeare*

Below are several “tools for the toolbox”: language devices Shakespeare often employs and which you can use to get to know his style of playwriting.

**VERSE VS. PROSE**

Shakespeare employs several forms of language in his plays: prose, blank verse, and rhymed verse. **Prose** is what we think of as everyday speech, without specific rules of rhyme and rhythm. **Verse**, then, can be defined as giving order, or form, to the random stress pattern of prose. This repeating combination of stressed and unstressed syllables is known as a **foot**, which is the basic unit of verse. An **iamb**, or **iambic foot**, is a foot of poetry containing two syllables, with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable:

“**ta DUM.**”

**BLANK VERSE: UNRHYMED IAMBIC PENTAMETER**

**Blank Verse** is the standard poetic form Shakespeare uses in his plays. It can also be defined as **unrhymed iambic pentameter**. That is, a line of poetry containing five (“penta” meaning five) iambic feet, not rhyming with any adjacent line. That's ten syllables all together. The pattern flows easily for speakers of English, and the stresses match the human heart beat - "**ta DUM, ta DUM, ta DUM, ta DUM,** ta DUM.” If you say "I went downtown to buy a card today" with normal inflection, you will have spoken a line of iambic pentameter:

**i WENT | down TOWN | to BUY | a CARD | to DAY**

Now say a line from *The Taming of the Shrew*—part of Kate’s determination to go to her bridal dinner: I see a woman may be made a fool or:

**i SEE | a WO | man MAY | be MADE | a FOOL**

Shakespeare does not slavishly follow the rhythm in every line. He occasionally varies the stresses or uses a period in the middle of a line, which causes us to pause longer. Nor does every line contain exactly ten syllables. Some lines may contain an added syllable, others may drop a syllable. Shakespeare’s most common variation in iambic pentameter is the use of the **feminine ending** – lines of text which add an unstressed eleventh syllable.
For example, read Kate’s speech to her father, paying close attention to the first two lines of verse:

What, will you not suffer me? Nay, now I see
She is your treasure, she must have a husband,
I must dance barefoot on her wedding-day,
And for your love to her lead apes in hell.
or (looking at the second line)

she IS | your TREA | sure, SHE | must HAVE | a HUS | band

Interesting in this line is also the fact that the pronoun “she” falls in a stressed syllable position; usually pronouns are not stressed, but in this position “she” focuses the split between Katherina’s and Bianca’s prospects.

**SHARED LINES & SPLIT LINES**
Shakespeare sometimes splits a line of verse, so that two characters share the ten syllables. This is called a shared line or split line, and helps show quick thinking or strong emotion, as well as creating a sense of accelerated action.

Thus we have both the effect of poetry AND of natural speech. Examine L.ii.194-195 from *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which Petruchio’s servant Grumio asks him the following:

Grumio: But will you woo this wildcat?
Petruchio: Will I live?

**RHYMED VERSE**
*Rhymed Verse* consists of lines which rhyme at the end, usually in either an ABAB rhyme scheme or in *couplets* or pairs. Shakespeare sometimes uses rhymed verse to signal a character's heightened emotional state and couplets are common at the conclusion of an act or scene. Many rhymed couplets all together give a lighter tone to a speech. Note the rhymed verse of several characters near the end of the play (V.ii.181-186):

Petruchio: Why, there’s a wench! Come on, and kiss me, Kate.
Lucentio: Well, go thy ways, old lad, for thou shalt ha’t.
Vincentio: ‘Tis a good hearing, when children are toward.
Lucentio: But a harsh hearing, when women are forward.
Petruchio: Come, Kate, we’ll to bed.
We three are married, but you two are sped.

**SOLILOQUIES & ASIDES**
A passage such as Petruchio’s plan of IV.i.175-198 is called a *soloquy*, which is a speech in which a character is not speaking to any other character in the play, but is thinking out loud and thus speaking truth as far as he or she understands it. An *aside* is a passage of text, where the lines are delivered directly to the audience. Look at III.i.45-48, in which Hortensio shares his suspicion that Lucentio is wooing Bianca for himself:

Hortensio: Madam, ‘tis now in tune.
Lucentio: All but the bass.
Hortensio: The bass is right, ‘tis the base knave that jars.
[Aside.] How fiery and forward our pedant is.
Now, for my life, the knave doth court my love.
Pedascule, I’ll watch you better yet.