Reading Shakespeare? This Will Help.

What's so hard about Shakespeare's language? Many students come to Shakespeare's language assuming that the language of his time period is substantially different from ours. In fact 98% of the words in Shakespeare are current-usage English words. So why does it sometimes seem hard to read Shakespeare?

There are three big reasons:

1. Originally, Shakespeare wrote the words for an actor to illustrate them as he spoke. In short, the play you have in hand was meant for the stage, not for the page.

2. Shakespeare had a love of re-forming and re-arranging words; it's not that different from what's found in the lyrics of modern music and the parlance of internet subcultures. His plays reflect an excitement about language and an inventiveness that becomes enjoyable once the reader gets into the experimental spirit of it.

3. Since Shakespeare puts all types of people on stage, those characters will include some who are pompous, some who are devious, some who are boring, and some who are crazy; and all of these people will speak in ways that are sometimes difficult. Modern playwrights and screenwriters creating similar characters have them speak in similarly challenging ways.

In class, you'll read some of the play out loud, and you'll be reading and re-reading at home while preparing for quizzes and journaling. I've prepared twelve tips for reading Shakespeare's early-modern English because it is considerably different from reading almost anything else. That said, once you get used to it, it'll be much more comfortable. Your ability to read raw, unfiltered Shakespeare is an essential skill for this class, so study over this handout before spending time alone with Shakespeare's play, and refer back to it periodically.

1. **When reading verse, note the appropriate phrasing and intonation.**

   DO NOT PAUSE AT THE END OF A LINE unless there is a mark of punctuation.
   Shakespearean verse has a rhythm of its own, and once a reader gets used to it, the rhythm becomes very natural to speak in and read. Beginning readers often find it helpful to read a short pause at a comma and a long pause for a period, colon, semicolon, dash, or question mark.
   Here's an example from *The Merchant of Venice* (IV.i):

   The quality of mercy is not strain'd, (*short pause*)
   It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
   Upon the place beneath: (*long pause*) it is twice blest; (*long pause*)
   It blesseth him that gives, (*short pause*) and him that takes; (*long pause*)
   'tis mightiest in the mighties; (*long pause*) it becomes
   The throned monarch better than his crown; (*long pause*)

2. **Reading from punctuation mark to punctuation mark for meaning.**
In addition to helping you read aloud, punctuation marks define units of thought. Try to understand each unit as you read, keeping in mind that periods, semicolons, question marks, exclamation points, and (usually) colons all signal the end of a thought. Here's an example from the first scene of the comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*:

LUCENTIO: Tranio, I saw her coral lips to move,
And with her breath she did perfume the air;
Sacred, and sweet, was all I saw in her.

TRANIO: Nay, then, 't is time to stir him from his trance.
I pray, awake, sir: if you love the maid,
Bend thoughts and wits to achieve her.

The first complete unit of thought is from "Tranio" to "air":
He saw her lips move, and her breath perfumed the air.
The second thought ("Sacred, and sweet...") re-emphasizes the first.

Tranio replies that Lucentio needs to awaken from his trance and try to win "the maid."
These two sentences can be considered one unit of thought because of the joining function of the semicolon.

3. In an **inverted sentence**, the verb comes before the subject. Some lines will be easier to understand if you put the subject first and reword the sentence.

For an example, look at the line below:

"Never was seen so black a day as this:"
(*Romeo and Juliet,* IV.v)

You can change its inverted pattern so it is more easily understood:

"A day as black as this was never seen:"

If you are having trouble understanding Shakespeare, the first rule is to read it out loud, just as an actor rehearsing would have to do. That will always help you understand how one thought is connected to another.

4. An ellipsis (*this is a separate definition than the three dots used to signify word removal*) occurs when a word or phrase is left out. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio asks Romeo's father and mother if they know the problem that is bothering their son. Romeo's father answers:

> *"I neither know it nor can learn of him"* (*Romeo and Juliet*, I,i).

This sentence can be understood to mean,

> *"I neither know [the cause of] it,*
> *Nor can [I] learn [about it from] him."*

5. As you read longer speeches, keep track of the subject, verb, and object – *who* did *what* to *whom*. In the clauses below, note the subject, verbs, and objects.

ROSS: The king hath happily received, Macbeth,
The news of thy success: and when he reads
Thy personal venture in the rebel's fight ... (*Macbeth*, I.iii)

1st clause: *The king hath happily received, Macbeth,/The news of thy success:*

SUBJECT – The king / VERB – has received / OBJECT – the news [of Macbeth's success]

2nd clause: *and when he reads/thy personal venture in the rebel's fight,*

SUBJECT – he [the king] / VERB – reads / OBJECT – [about] your venture

In addition to following the subject, verb, and object of a clause, you also need to track pronoun references. In the following soliloquy, Romeo secretly observes Juliet as she steps out on her balcony. To help you keep track of the pronoun references, I've made some notes. (Note that the feminine pronoun sometimes refers to Juliet, but sometimes does not.)

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 more fair than she.***

* *"Who" refers to the moon.*
** *"thou her maid" refers to Juliet, the sun.*
*** *"she" and "her" refer to the moon.*

In tracking the line of action in a passage, it is useful to identify the main thoughts that are being expressed and paraphrase them. Note the following passage in which Hamlet expresses his feelings about the death of his father and the remarriage of his mother:

> O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason
> Would have mourn'd longer – married with my uncle,
> My father's brother, but no more like my father
> Than I to Hercules. (I.ii)

Paraphrasing the three main points, we find that Hamlet is saying:

a) An unreasonable beast would have mourned longer (than my mother did for my father's death).
b) Also, my mother is now married to my uncle, my father's brother.
c) Lastly, my uncle is no more like my father than I am like Hercules (that is, not at all).

6. Shakespeare frequently uses metaphor to illustrate an idea in a unique way. Pay careful attention to the two dissimilar objects or ideas being compared. In *Macbeth*, Duncan, the king says:

> I have begun to plant thee, and will labour
> To make thee full of growing. (I,v)

The king compares Macbeth to a tree that he can plant and watch grow.

7. An *allusion* is a reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work which is not directly explained or discussed by the writer; it relies on the reader's familiarity with the item referred to. Allusion is a quick way of conveying information or presenting an image. In the following lines, Romeo alludes to Diana, goddess of the hunt and of chastity, and to Cupid's arrow (love).

> ROMEO: Well, in that hit you miss: she'll not be hit
> with Cupid's arrow, she hath Dian's wit;
> and in strong proof of chastity well arm'd ... (I.i)

8. Contracted words are words in which a letter has been left out. They work the same way that modern contractions (like isn't, I'm, and shouldn't) do. Shakespeare often used them to capture a more natural way of speaking or to force iambic meter upon the script. Some that frequently appear are:

be't	on't	wi'
do't	t'	'sblood
'gainst	ta'en	i'
'tis	e'en	o'er
'bout	know'st	'twill
ne'er	o'	

9. Archaic, obsolete and familiar words with unfamiliar definitions may also cause problems.

   a. **Archaic Words** - Some archaic words, like *thee*, *thou*, *thy*, and *thine,* are instantly understandable, while others, like *betwixt,* may cause a momentary pause.
   b. **Obsolete Words** - If it were not for the notes in a Shakespeare text, obsolete words could be a problem; words like "beteem" are usually not found in high-school dictionaries. In these situations, however, a quick glance at the book's footnotes will usually solve the problem.
   c. **Familiar Words with Unfamiliar Definitions** - Another problem is those familiar words whose definitions have changed. Because readers think they know the word, they do not check the notes.

      For example, in this comment by Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing*, the word *an* means *if*:

      > "Scratching could not make it worse, *an* 'twere such a face as yours were." (I.i)

      For this kind of word, checking the marginal notes is essential. In this case, Beatrice is saying that scratching up someone's face couldn't make it any worse-looking if it were a face like Benedict's. (Dat boi ugly.)

   d. **Wordplay**: puns, double entendres, and malapropisms
      i. A *pun* is a literary device that achieves humor or emphasis by playing on ambiguities. Two distinct meanings are suggested either by the same word or by two similar-sounding words.
      ii. A *double entendre* is a kind of pun in which a word or phrase has a second, usually sexual, meaning.
      iii. A *malapropism* occurs when a character mistakenly uses a word that he or she has confused with another word. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Nurse tells Romeo that she needs to have a "confidence" with him, when she should have said "conference." Mockingly, Benvolio then says she probably will "indite" (rather than "invite") Romeo to dinner.

10. **Stage Directions**: Shakespeare's stagecraft went hand-in-hand with his wordcraft. For that reason, it's important for the reader to know which stage directions are modern and which derive from Shakespeare's earliest text. All stage directions appear in italics, but the brackets enclose modern additions to the stage directions. Readers may assume that the unbracketed stage directions appear in the oldest texts of the play's script.

11. **Scene Locations**: Shakespeare imagined his plays, first and foremost, on the stage of his theatre. The original printed versions of the plays do not give imaginary scene locations, except when they are occasionally mentioned in the dialogue. As an aid to the reader, most copies of Shakespeare's plays you can buy now do include scene locations at the beginning of each scene, but all such locations are usually placed in brackets to remind the reader that this is not necessarily what Shakespeare envisioned and only possibly what he imagined.