

# SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE, RHYTHM AND CONVENTIONS OF HIS STAGE

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# SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

- Shakespeare did NOT write in “Old English.”

- Old English is the language of *Beowulf*:

Hwaet! We Gardena in geardagum

Ʒeodcyninga Ʒrym gefrunon

Hu ða æƷelingas ellen fremedon!

(Hey! We have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes in the old days, the kings of tribes, how noble princes showed great courage!)



- Shakespeare did not write in “Middle English.”
- Middle English is the language of Chaucer, the *Gawain*-poet, and Malory:

We redeth oft and findeth y-write—

And this clerkes wele it wite—

Layes that ben in harping

Ben y-founde of ferli thing... (*Sir Orfeo*)



- **Shakespeare wrote in “Early Modern English.”**
- **EME was not very different from “Modern English,”**



# SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

- A mix of old and very new
- Rural and urban words/images
- Understandable by the lowest peasant and the highest noble

How many words did he use?

30,000

How many words do we use today?

6,000-15,000



# IAMBIC PENTAMETER

- Is a sound pattern
- **IAMB: one unaccented (or unstressed) syllable with one accented syllable**
- **It's like a heartbeat: ba-bum, ba-bum, ba-bum**
- **Five “ba-bum”s in a row make one line of iambic pentameter (10-syllable lines)**
- **Example: he WENT to TOWN toDAY to BUY a CAR**
- **OR: In SOOTH / I KNOW / not WHY / I AM / so SAD**

# WHY GO TO ALL THE TROUBLE???

- Using iambic pentameter kept things moving in the play (like a drum beat)
- It made the words & play more interesting
- It helped the actors remember their lines (like a song)



**When Shakespeare set  
his words to iambic  
pentameter it is  
compared to the birth  
of  
rock-n-roll:  
a mixing of old styles  
and new sounds.**





- IN SHAKESPEARE'S TIME, YOU ONLY HAD ONE COPY OF A PLAY, AND AFTER YOU WROTE IT FOR THE ACTING COMPANY, YOU NO LONGER OWNED IT!
- SCRIPTS WERE THROWN OUT WHEN THEY WERE NO LONGER WANTED OR NEEDED.

- NO COPIES OF SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS IN HIS OWN HANDWRITING HAVE SURVIVED. THE ONLY KNOWN EVIDENCE OF ANYTHING IN HIS HANDWRITING IS HIS SIGNATURE (SHOWN ABOVE) ON THE PLAY *SIR THOMAS MORE* THAT SHAKESPEARE MIGHT HAVE WRITTEN.

# “QUARTOS”



- Small books of published plays were called “quartos.”
- The first published works of Shakespeare’s vary considerably
- Scholars believe these are faulty versions, calling them “bad quartos.”

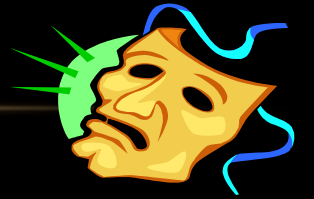
The Workes of William Shakespeare,  
containing all his Comedies, Histories, and  
Tragedies: Truely set forth, according to their first  
*ORIGINALL.*



- The first full collection of Shakespeare's work was published in 1623, seven years after his death.
- It was called "First Folio"
- It contained 36 plays (compiled by John Heminge and Henry Condell-- friends and fellow actors of Shakespeare's)



*Elizabethan  
Theatrical  
Conventions*



# ACTING



- The actors were all men; young boys (age 12-14) played the female parts
- They were considered “shareholders” and owned stock or shares in the play texts, costumes, and props
- Their pay depended on admission sales
- Actors only had about 3 weeks to practice a new play
- In one week, the troupes may perform 6 different plays (as many as 4,000 lines!)

# Theatrical Conventions of Shakespeare's Theatre

A theatrical convention is a suspension of reality.



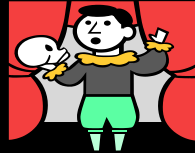
- ❖ No electricity →
- ❖ Women forbidden to act on stage →
- ❖ Minimal, contemporary costumes →
- ❖ Minimal scenery →

**These control the dialogue.**

# Theatrical Conventions of Shakespeare's Theatre

❖ Soliloquy →

❖ Aside →



❖ Blood →

❖ Use of supernatural →



**Types of  
speech**

**Audience  
loves to be  
scared.**

# Theatrical Conventions of Shakespeare's Theatre

- ❖ Use of disguises/  
mistaken identity
- ❖ Last speaker—highest in  
rank (in tragedies)
- ❖ Multiple murders  
(in tragedies)
- ❖ Multiple marriages  
(in comedies)

