

## Reading Shakespeare Aloud

Actor Richard Burton once said he loved the sound of Shakespeare's words because they made "such a beautiful noise." When he said this, he was referring to the way in which Shakespeare's words seem to come alive musically when they are spoken aloud.

All Shakespeare's plays and poetry were written to be said aloud, and it is sometimes difficult for a newcomer to his works to get a sense of how truly rich and lovely they are without learning first how his words sound. The Elizabethans loved the spoken word. When they went to a play, they went to listen, much as you would listen to a play on the radio, and not just to see it. This is one reason Shakespeare's plays are full of puns and *double entendres*—words with two meanings, with one meaning often being improper or indelicate.

Learning to read Shakespeare aloud is not as difficult as it might seem with all its unfamiliar words. The reason they are unfamiliar to us is that they are no longer used much or at all. Some hints on how to read Shakespeare aloud might help.

1. If possible, watch a film version of a Shakespearean play first. Listen to what is said and how it is said. This will help you get a feel for the rhythm of the play. Rhythm is very important when reading Shakespeare. Some words should be said quickly, others slowly. Try to understand the meaning of what is being said, and let yourself into the flow of the rhythm. You will probably understand more than you first thought you would.
2. You will certainly want to learn the meanings of some of the words with which you are unfamiliar. With many you can figure out the general intent without having to spend so much time in the dictionary that you forget what has happened in the story. When you cannot figure them out, look in the footnotes or glossary for help.
3. When in doubt as to how to say a line, remember that the greatest stress of a line usually comes at the end of the sentence. An example of this is a line in *Romeo and Juliet* which may be misunderstood if it is spoken incorrectly.

"Wherefore art thou Romeo?" is sometimes said with an accent on the word *where*, although the accent should be placed on the name *Romeo*. Accenting the first word of this sentence suggests that Juliet is asking where Romeo is, when in fact she is asking, "Why are you named Romeo? Why are you the son of my family's enemy?"

4. Pay close attention to punctuation. When a line ends with a period, stop. If it ends with a comma, pause but do not completely stop. If the line does not end with punctuation, continue reading without stopping or pausing. You will be amazed at how much better you understand what is said.

# Reading Shakespeare Aloud (cont.)

5. When an "ed" at the end of a word has an accent mark over it, pronounce the "ed" as a separate syllable. This will not change the meaning of the word, but it will continue the rhythm of the passage.
6. One last word on the meaning of Shakespeare's words. The words which you have the most trouble with will probably be the ones which we use today but give meanings different from those they had in Elizabethan times. For example these words and the definitions as used in *Romeo and Juliet* follow:

"marry"—was an oath meaning "by the Virgin Mary"

"soft"—meant "hold," "enough," or "wait a minute"

"heavy"—meant "sorrowful"

"envious"—meant "malicious"

"sadly"—meant "seriously"

"happy"—meant "fortunate"

"still"—meant "always"

"anon"—meant "soon"

## Activities

Choose one of the following activities to do in appropriate-sized groups.

1. Do a Reader's Theater activity. In groups of three or four, choose a passage from *Romeo and Juliet*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Richard III*, or one of Shakespeare's sonnets to read aloud. Decide which person will do which part, practice reading the selection until you know it well, and perform it for the class.
2. In groups of three or four, one person takes the part of the "narrator" and reads a selection while the others act it out.
3. Choose a passage to render into modern English; then act it out.