

Inside the Text: Shakespeare's Clues: Rhythm and Wordplay*

Shakespeare's use of rhythm and wordplay work together in helping the actor and audience understand the play's plot, story, and character circumstance. When the actor pays attention to the rhythm and wordplay, they discover possibilities and make choices rooted in the text-which helps the audience understand what's going on. Audience members can likewise explore how the text works, allowing for a more personally nuanced enjoyment of the play.

Key Terms:

- **Rhythm**: the poetic structure (iambic pentameter, unstressed and stressed syllables), the meter.
- **Wordplay**: Rhetorically speaking, how Shakespeare uses words to elicit a specific thought or response. Shakespeare's use of rhetorical wordplay tells us about not only the play's plot and story, but also the characters and their circumstances.
(*All textual examples are from the 2016 Folger Edition).

Rhythm:

Scansion and Meter: What are they and how do they work?

Verse and Prose:

VERSE: Think of it as text's metrical rhythm. Shakespeare wrote most of the verse in his plays in **iambic pentameter**, meaning there are 10 syllables per line – 5 metrical feet, each foot containing **1 unstressed** and **1 stressed syllable**.

PROSE: Think of it as an **everyday speaking/reading rhythm**. In Shakespeare's plays, prose may be more **casual** than verse, and its rhythms are more likely to be specific to a particular character's way of speaking.

Terms

- Foot: the basic unit of blank verse, usually two syllables.
- Iamb: A heartbeat: a metrical foot containing an unstressed beat, then a stressed beat.

Examples (the bolded syllable is the stressed syllable):

expense, before, admit, compare, degree

- Trochee: A backwards heartbeat: a metrical foot containing a stressed beat, then an unstressed beat.

Examples (the bolded syllable is the stressed syllable):

beauty, error, vanish, double, trouble

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Examples:

- Regular lines: **10 syllables**, broken into a metrical foot of 2, each foot containing an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. The bolded syllables are the stressed syllables-i.e., where we put the emphasis when we say the word:

o “Four **days** | will **quick** | ly **steep** | themselves | in **night**;

Four **nights** | will **quick** | ly **dream** | away | the **time**;

(Hippolyta, *1.1*)

o “How **now**, | my **love**? | Why **is** | your **cheek** | so **pale**?

How **chance** | the **ro** | ses **there** | do **fade** | so **fast**?”

(Lysander, *1.1*)

o “I **am** | **amazed** | and **know** | not **what** | to **say**.”

(Hermia, *3.2*)

- A trochaic (backwards heartbeat) line: 10 syllables, broken into a metrical foot of 2, each foot containing a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable. The examples below feature an extra 11th syllable (Titania’s line) and shortened syllables (Oberon’s line). The variance from 10 syllables in each line helps delineate these spoken words from others.

o “**Not** for | thy **Fairy** | **kingdom**. | **Faeries** a | **way**.”

(Titania, *2.1*)

o “**Flower of** this **purple dye**,

Hit with **Cupid’s archery**,”

(Oberon, *3.2*)

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Wordplay:

Shakespeare's R.O.A.D.S to Rhetoric

What is rhetoric?

- The way in which words are structured to make a point or elicit a response.

The most common rhetorical devices broken down into five categories:

Repetition, Omission, Addition, Direction, and Substitution. Below are examples of each of the 5 categories. Upon further study and listening, notice how connected each device is to one or more others. This is no accident.

1. REPETITION

Repeated words, sounds, and sentence structure give speech a cadence, a rhythm, to follow and help set an aural mood. Our brains are tuned to appreciate harmony and naturally pick up on patterns. Why would a character repeat themselves, or their vocal tone/inflection? What can repetition of words and/or sounds and structure communicate about relationship, location, thought, and feeling?

- Repetition of **Words and Sounds**
 - o “For, ere Demetrius look’d on Hermia’s eyne,
He **hailed** down **oaths** that he was only mine;
And when this **hail** some heat from Hermia felt,
So he dissolved, and show’rs of **oaths** did melt.” (Helena 1.1)
 - o “**A calendar, a calendar!** Look in the almanac. **Find out moonshine, find out moonshine!**” (Bottom 3.1)
- Repetition of **Structure**
 - o “**Over** hill, **over** dale,
 Thorough bush, **thorough** brier,
Over park, **over** pale,
 Thorough flood, **thorough** fire;” (Fairy, 2.1)

2. OMISSION

Interrupts the normal flow of speech or ideas by leaving out a component of a sentence or a layer of meaning. Omission requires the listener to fill in the gap. Two common types of omission are **ellipsis** and **asyndeton**.

- **Ellipsis:** Omission of a word, sentence, or idea. Note in the textual example below Starveling’s omission of the word lion allows his line to function as a joke in that “it” could be referring to both a lion and to Snug’s performance of the lion.
 - o Snout: “Will not the ladies be afeard of the **lion**?”
Starveling: I fear **it**, I promise you.” (3.1)
- **Asyndeton:** Omission of conjunctions. Note in the textual example below Bottom’s omission of the word “and”.
 - o “Let me play the lion too. I will roar that I will do any man’s heart good to hear me. I will roar that I will make the Duke say ‘Let him roar again. Let him roar again!’” (Bottom 1.2)

3. ADDITION

Focuses on words that are extraneous or explanatory, hyperbole.

- o “I’ll follow you. I’ll lead you about a round,
**Through bog, through bush, through brake,
 through brier.**
Sometime a horse I’ll be, sometime a hound,
A hog, a headless bear, sometime a fire,
And neigh and bark and grunt and roar and burn,
Like horse, hound, hog, bear, fire, at every turn.” (Puck 3.1)

4. DIRECTION

Addresses the order in which the words come. Think about ascending/descending importance (lists), contrast (antithesis), and emphasis/vocal-tone.

- o Hermia: “O me! [To Helena] You **juggler**, you **cankerblossom**,
You thief of love! What, have you come by night
 And stol’n my love’s heart from him?”
 Helena: Fine, i’faith.
 Have you **no modesty, no maiden shame,**
No touch of bashfulness?” (3.2)
- o “As due to love as **thoughts** and **dreams** and **sighs**,
Wishes and tears, poor fancy’s followers.” (Hermia, 1.1)

5. SUBSTITUTION

One word or phrase stands in for something else. May be purely grammatical, or it may be more conceptual and abstract (literal and/or figurative ideas). Usually used as a form of observant and/or critical commentary. Note in the textual example below how Hippolyta substitutes further comment on Quince’s monologue with a comparison between it (his performance) and a child playing an instrument. Through such substitution we understand what she thinks of Quince’s performance.

- o “Indeed he hath played on this prologue like a child on a recorder-a sound, but not in government.” (Hippolyta 5.1)

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Versión Español: Las Personajes y Sinopsis de la Trama

Personajes

Las Enamorantes

HERMIA
LYSANDER
HELENA
DEMETRIUS

El Corte Real

TESEO, duque de Atenas
HIPÓLITA, reina de las Amazonas
EGEO, padre de Hermia
FILÓSTRATO, maestro de fiestas de Teseo

Las Mecánicas

NICK BOTTOM, tejedor
PETER QUINCE, carpintero
FRANCIS FLUTE, componedor de los fuelles
TOM SNOUT, calderero
SNUG, ensamblador
ROBIN STARVELING, sastre

Las Hadas

OBERÓN, rey de las hadas
TITANIA, reina de las hadas
PUCK, o ROBIN “BUEN CHICO”, hada principal de Oberón
UNA HADA, hada principal de Titania
OTRAS HADAS DE TITANIA:
PEASEBLOSSOM
COBWEB
MOTE
MUSTARDSEED

Sinopsis de la Trama

Cuatro Atenienses huyeron al bosque persiguiendo uno al otro mientras Puck ayuda al rey de las hadas engañar la reina. Al final, magia esta reversado, los enamorantes están reconciliados and se casan, y la compañía teátrica los Rude Mecánicas, en celebración, hacer una obra de teatro.

El sueño de una noche de verano