

AN INTRODUCTION TO SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

Because Shakespeare wrote nearly four hundred years ago, some of the conventions that he uses in his plays present problems for modern readers. Most of Shakespeare's lines are written in poetry. Although these lines don't usually rhyme, they do have a set rhythm, called *meter*. To achieve the meter, Shakespeare arranges words so that the syllables which are stressed or said more loudly than others fall in a regular pattern: dah DUM dah DUM dah DUM dah DUM dah DUM. For example, read the following lines from *Macbeth* aloud:

*True worthy Banquo - he is full so valiant
And in his commendation I am fed.*

Because you are familiar with the words that Shakespeare uses here, you naturally stressed every second syllable:

*True WORthy BANquo - HE is FULL so VALiant
And IN his COMmenDAtion I am FED.*

The pattern of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed one, dah DUM, is called an *iamb*. Each pattern is referred to as a *foot*. Because Shakespeare uses five iambic feet to a line, this pattern is known as *iambic pentameter*.

In order for Shakespeare to maintain the set meter of most lines, he often structures the lines differently than normal English speech. He may change the normal order of words so that the stressed syllables fall in the appropriate place. For example, the following sentence has no set meter:

I'll FIGHT 'til my FLESH be HACKED from my BONES.

However, Shakespeare turns these words around a bit to maintain the meter in *Macbeth*:

I'll FIGHT till FROM my BONES my FLESH be HACKED.

He may shorten words by omitting letters so that a two-syllable word is one syllable. As a result, *over* often appears as *o'er* and; *'tis* in place of *it is*.

Shakespeare also uses forms of words that we rarely used today, four hundred years later. Among these are the personal pronouns *thou* (you), *thine* (your, yours), *thee* (you as in “to you”), and *thyself* (yourself). Often Shakespeare also uses verb endings that we no longer use. For example, *hath* is an old form of *has*, and *art* an older form of *are*. You’re also likely to encounter several words or phrases that we no longer use at all: *anon* instead of *soon* or *shortly*, or *prithee* meaning *I pray to thee* (you).