

Shakespeare and his Theatrical English

For many years there has been an ongoing controversy over the question of, “Did Shakespeare really write Shakespeare?” Many scholars agree that the actor from Stratford-on-Avon called William Shakespeare would have had neither the education nor the background to write the range of works attributed to him. From that point they break into three camps, supporting three leading candidates for the title of “the *real* author of Shakespeare:” Francis Bacon, Christopher Marlowe, or Edward De Vere, the Earl of Oxford. Still, there are others who insist that to find the author of Shakespeare’s works, we need look no further than Shakespeare.

This question may never be settled to everyone’s satisfaction, and we will not begin to address it here; acknowledging its existence is enough for our purposes. For convenience and simplicity, we will continue to call the author Shakespeare, whoever he truly was. More important to us is the question of how Shakespeare used the language, what he gave it, and how you, as a re-enactor, should try to use it.

A great deal of theatrical writing at the time was done in a form called *iambic pentameter* -- not just by Shakespeare, but Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and many others. Often called “blank verse,” iambic pentameter is a construction of lines with accented syllables alternating neatly with unaccented ones, five pairs -- called *iamb*s -- per line.

Below is a famous couplet from Marlowe’s *Faust*, a classic example of iambic pentameter:

Was this the face that launched a thousand ships
And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?

In each line, the accents fall in a regular cadence, on syllables 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10. (Note how “towers” is squeezed into one syllable, creating a diphthong, to shoehorn it into the meter. This was quite common in theatrical writing.) This gives dramatic-sounding lines which flow smoothly and “trippingly on the tongue,” to use Shakespeare’s own phrase. It has another theatrical benefit: the meter makes the lines easier for actors to remember.

Rhyming in iambic pentameter is commonly ignored, but Shakespeare and some others would sometimes use it to theatrical effect: shifting to rhyme might indicate a change of mood in the character, and often a rhyming couplet would signal the end of a scene. A typical example of this is found toward the end of Act I of *Henry V*, when the King dismisses the French ambassador with these lines:

Tell you the Dolphin I am coming on
To venge me as I may, and to put forth
My rightful hand in a well-hallow’d cause
So get you hence in peace, and tell the Dolphin
His jest will savor but of shallow wit
When thousands weep more than did laugh at it.