

Decoding Shakespeare

Students need to understand that Shakespeare's language differs from their own partly (chiefly?) because of the limitations of their English, partly because of some changes, most of them superficial, in the language since 1600, partly because Shakespeare wrote poetry. Faced with Shakespeare, kids are trying to deal with at least six discrete sets of problems, three of them primarily language problems:

1. THE MYSTIQUE

1. No one understands everything about the play. *No one*.
2. No one reads Shakespeare easily the first few times through a play.
3. The "missing" stage directions are an invitation, not a hindrance.

2. Reading: Print problems:

1. Read sentences, not lines.
2. Insert pauses and 'beat changes'.
3. Find the "right" word to stress.
4. Use voice inflection to communicate subtext.

3. CONVENTIONS: Shakespeare writes for the theater.

1. Impenetrability of disguises
2. Boy actors
3. The soliloquy and the aside
4. Royal address and reference

4. WORDS: Shakespeare wields an unmatched vocabulary.

1. modern words kids don't know
2. words now obsolete (*anon, beseech, ere, forsooth, liege, withal, *unplausible*)
3. words whose meanings have shifted (*fair, proper, attend, nice, silly*)
4. lost idioms (*needs must...*)

5. Inflections: Shakespeare writes in *Early Modern English*.

1. Familiar pronouns & verb inflections (-st)
2. Obsolete third person inflections (-th)
3. Some rare obsolete plural forms (as *eyen* for *eyes*)
4. Omitted words (*go; do* in commands '*Ask me not*' and in questions)
5. Inversion for questions (*'How looked he?'*)

6. POETIC LANGUAGE: Shakespeare writes poetry.

1. meter [inverted word order • elided syllables • omitted words • stressed syllables]
2. figurative language [metaphor • simile • personification]
3. sound patterns [rhyme • alliteration • assonance/consonance]
4. shifts in parts of speech (*'He words me, girls, he words me.'* '*Pride me no prides.'*)
5. rhetorical devices [antithesis • apostrophe • oxymoron]
6. playfulness with language [puns • irony]
7. images and imagery patterns