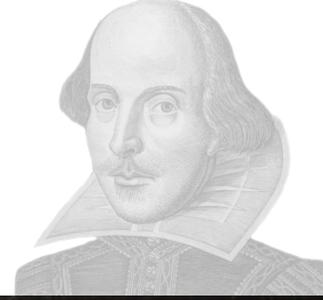


# 10 Strategies for Understanding Shakespeare



  
Prestwick House



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## Introduction

**T**HE VERY THING THAT MAKES SHAKESPEARE such an important figure in English literature is that which makes him so difficult for students: his use of language.

Many students dread the annual Shakespeare unit simply because they've never been taught the basic tools to understand the structure and form of Shakespearean language. If you share with your students these ten simple strategies for understanding the most common issues, many of them will be able to go beyond simple comprehension and may even come to love the Bard.

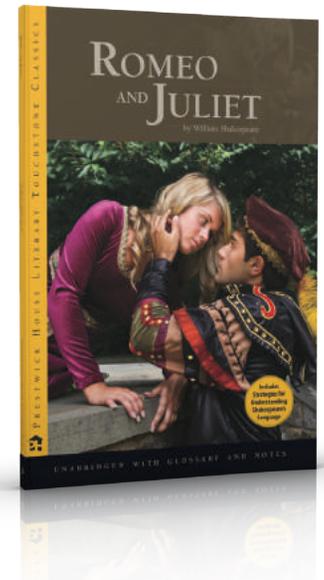
If you have any additional tips or tricks that you'd like to share, e-mail us at [info@prestwickhouse.com](mailto:info@prestwickhouse.com) and we'll be sure to include them in future editions of this e-book or on our blog!

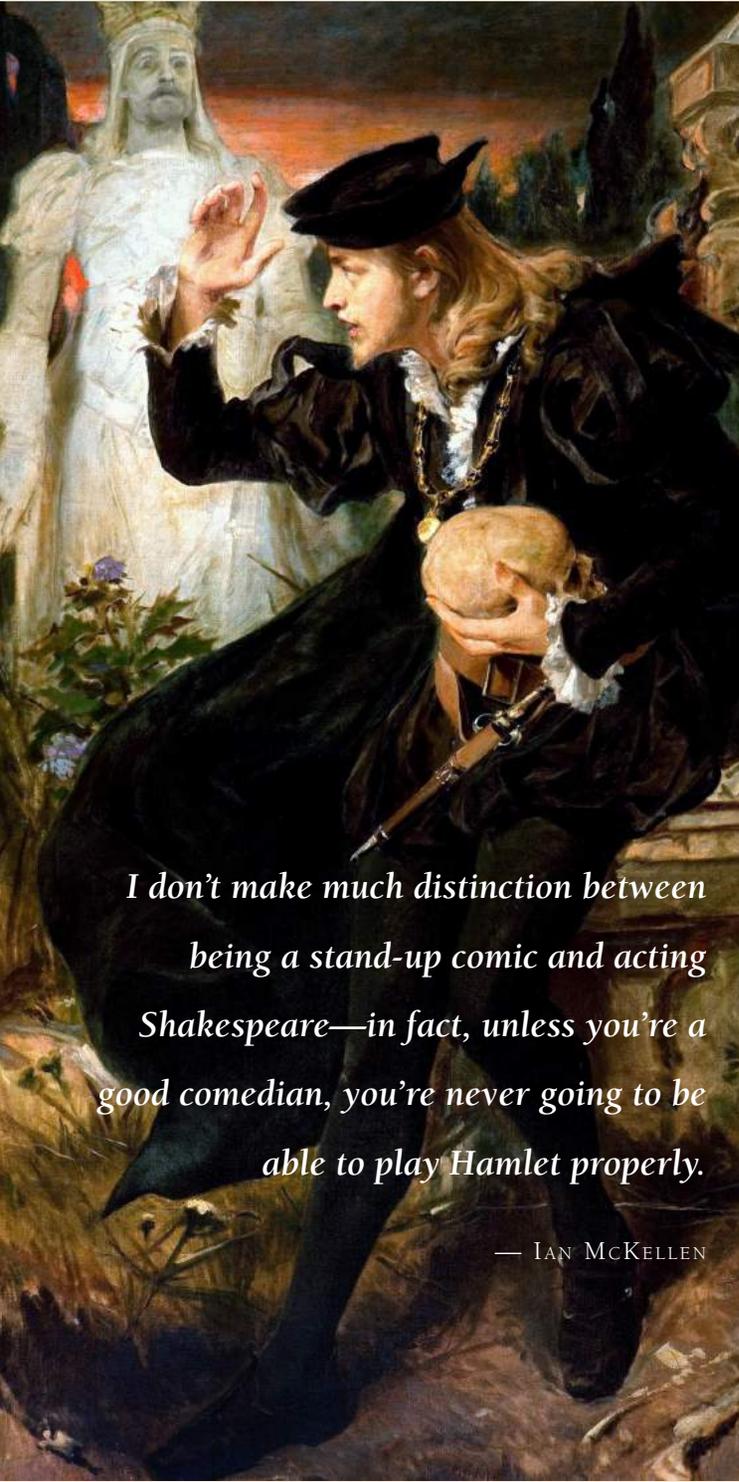
Best of luck with your Shakespeare unit.

Sincerely,

James Scott, Ed.D

Founder of Prestwick House





*I don't make much distinction between being a stand-up comic and acting Shakespeare—in fact, unless you're a good comedian, you're never going to be able to play Hamlet properly.*

— IAN MCKELLEN

## Tip 1 – Read it out loud

SHAKESPEARE'S PLAYS WERE DESIGNED FOR THE STAGE, for real people to be speaking the words out loud at the pace of conversation. While we sometimes spend a couple of weeks studying or reading Shakespeare in the classroom, it was written to be spoken out loud over the course of a couple hours.

When you're reading out loud, remember to focus on punctuation to help with rhythm and intonation; unless there is a mark of punctuation, such as a comma or period, don't stop at the end of a line. Shakespearean verse has a rhythm of its own, and once a reader gets used to it, the rhythm becomes very natural to speak in and read.

If this is one of your first encounters with Shakespeare, you may find it helpful to include a short pause in your reading when you come to a comma and a long pause for a period, colon, semicolon, dash, or question mark.



Here's an example from *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene i:

The quality of mercy is not strain'd, (*short pause*)

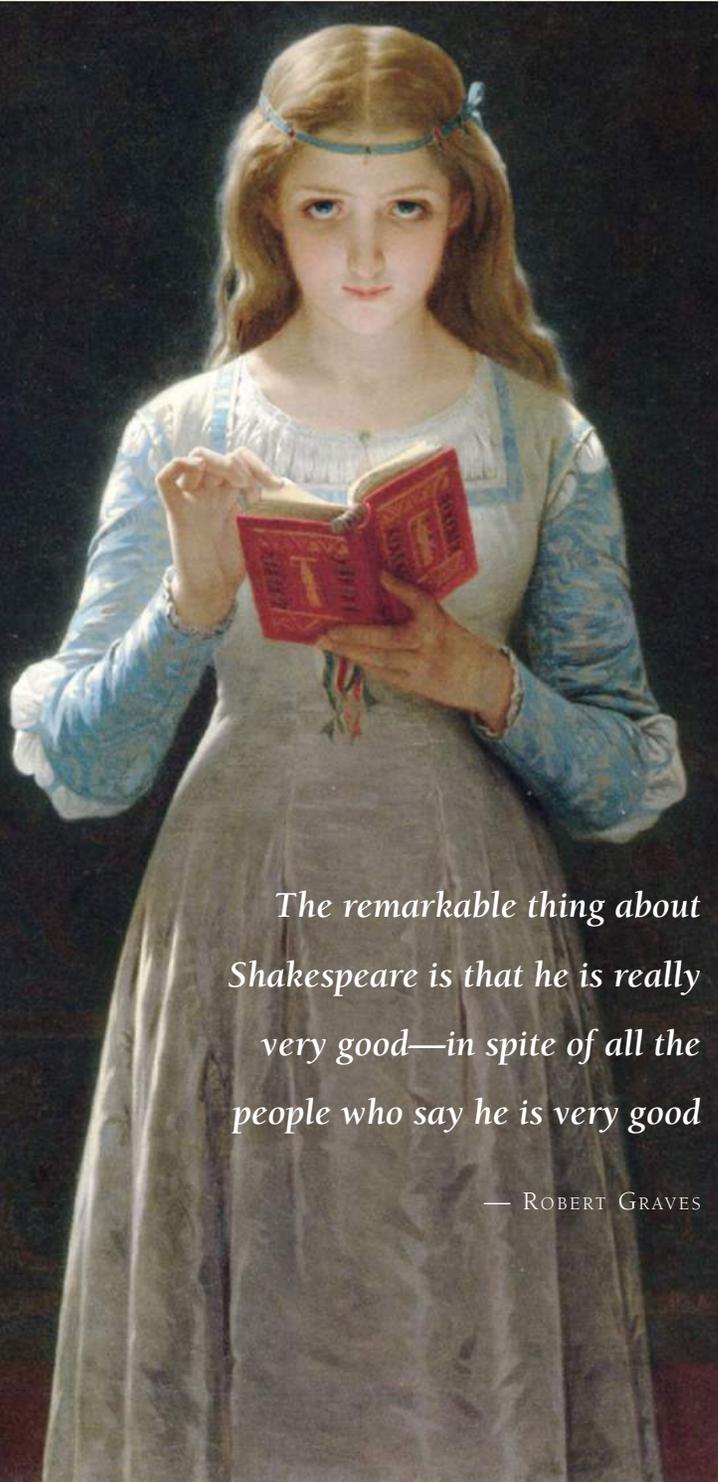
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven

Upon the place beneath: (*long pause*) it is twice blest; (*long pause*)

It blesseth him that gives, (*short pause*) and him that takes; (*long pause*)

'Tis mightiest in the mighties; (*long pause*) it becomes

The thronèd monarch better than his crown; (*long pause*)



*The remarkable thing about Shakespeare is that he is really very good—in spite of all the people who say he is very good*

— ROBERT GRAVES

## Tip 2 – Focus on punctuation to understand sentences

**I**N ADDITION TO HELPING YOU READ ALOUD, punctuation marks define units of thought. Try to understand each unit as you read, keeping in mind that periods, colons, semicolons, and question marks signal the end of a thought.

Here’s an example from *The Taming of the Shrew*: Act I, Scene i:

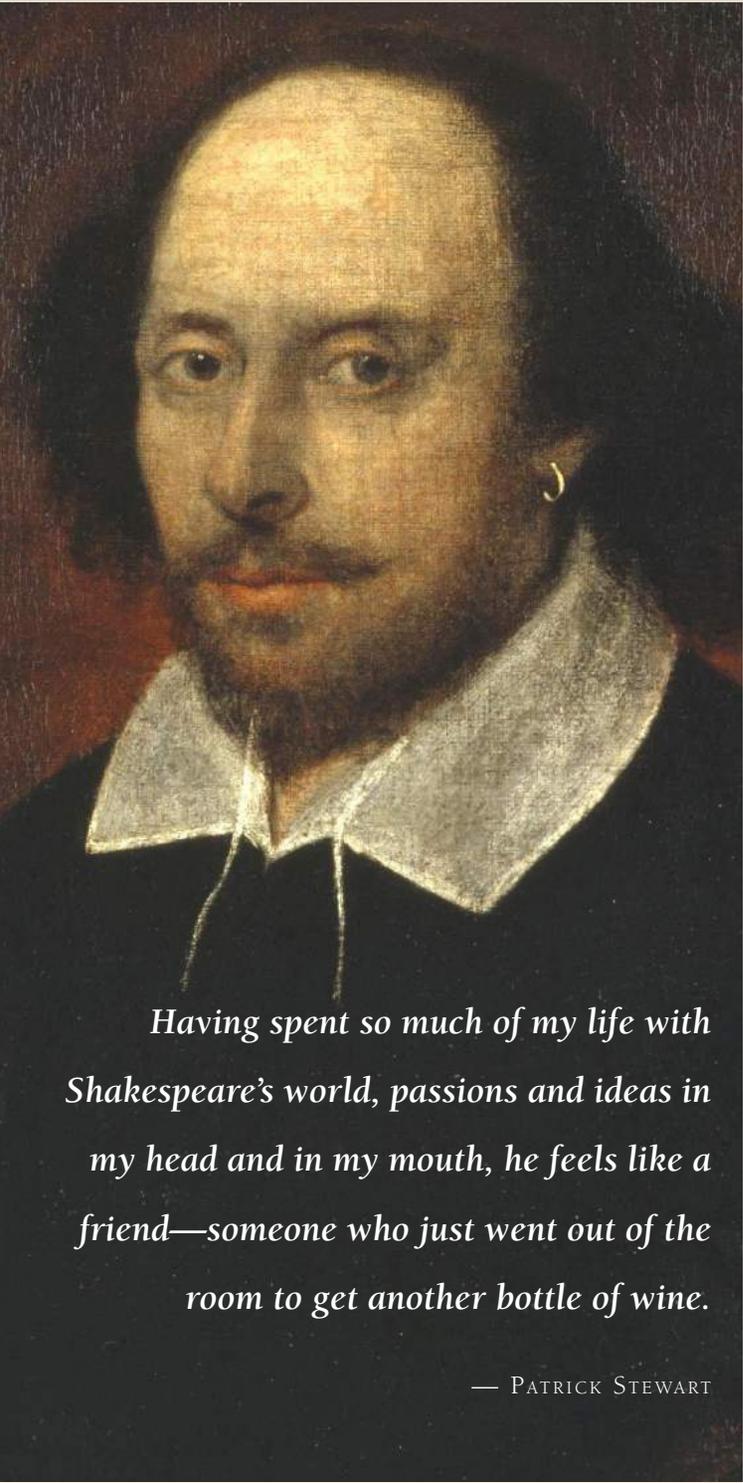
Tranio, I saw her coral lips to move,  
And with her breath she did perfume the air;  
Sacred, and sweet, was all I saw in her.

The first unit of thought is from “Tranio” to “air”:

He saw her lips move, and her breath perfumed the air.

The second thought (“Sacred, and sweet...”) re-emphasizes the first.





*Having spent so much of my life with Shakespeare's world, passions and ideas in my head and in my mouth, he feels like a friend—someone who just went out of the room to get another bottle of wine.*

— PATRICK STEWART

### Tip 3 – Reword inverted sentences

**I**N MODERN ENGLISH, most sentences begin with a noun or pronoun and end with a verbal phrase. The structure of the sentence is used as a marker to help the reader understand what's going on.

Students reading Elizabethan English often find the inverted sentence particularly confusing when they encounter it for the first time.

In an **inverted sentence**, the subject, verb, or other parts are not in their usual order. Some lines will be easier to understand if you put the subject first and reword the sentence. For example, look at the line below:

“Never was seen so black a day as this:” (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act IV, Scene v)

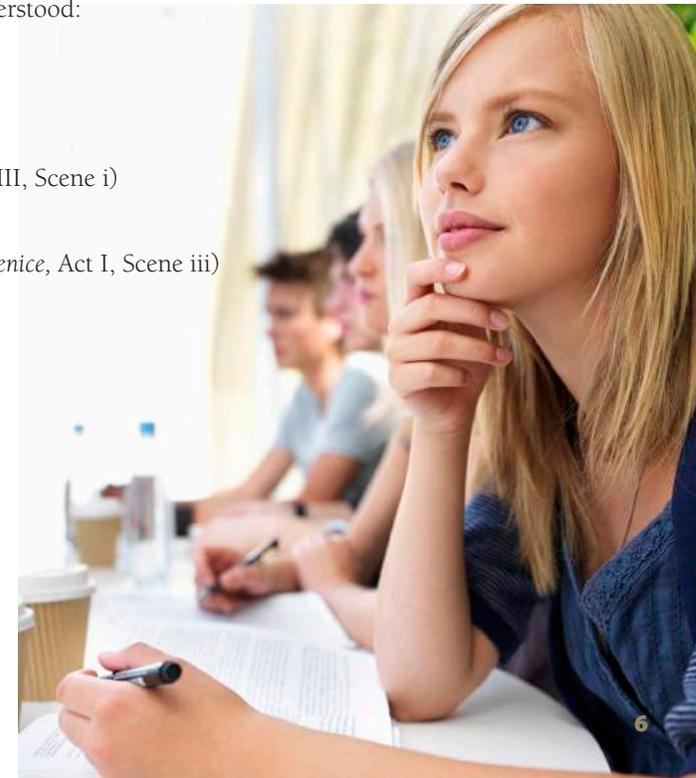
You can change its inverted pattern so it is more easily understood:

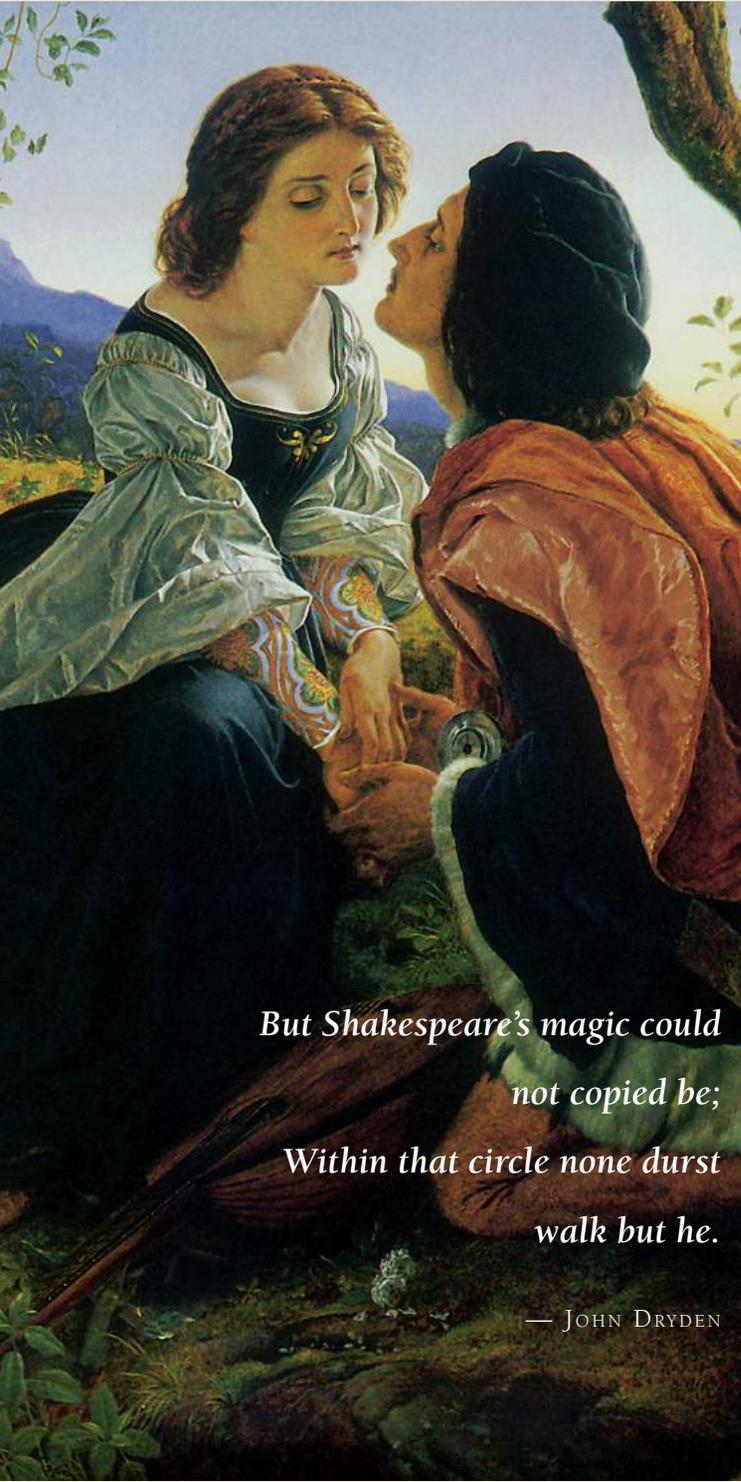
“A day as black as this was never seen.”

Here are a few more examples:

“For the gracious Duncan have I murdered.” (*Macbeth*, Act III, Scene i)

“How like a fawning publican he looks.” (*The Merchant of Venice*, Act I, Scene iii)





*But Shakespeare's magic could  
not copied be;  
Within that circle none durst  
walk but he.*

— JOHN DRYDEN

## Tip 4 – Don't get tripped up by missing words

FOR METRIC OR POETIC REASONS, Shakespeare would often omit easily inferred words using a technique called ellipsis.

An **ellipsis** occurs when a word or phrase is left out. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio asks Romeo's father and mother if they know the problem that is bothering their son. Romeo's father answers:

"I neither know **it** nor can learn of **him**" (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene i)

This sentence can easily be understood to mean:

"I neither know [*the cause of*] it,  
nor can [*I*] learn [*about it from*] him."



## Tip 5 – Keep track of the subject, verb, and object—*who did what to whom*

**E** SPECIALLY IN LONGER SPEECHES, it's occasionally difficult to keep track of the flow of the sentence, so it's helpful to step back and make sure you understand the very basic units of a sentence before you become distracted with parenthetical comments and long descriptions.

In the clauses below, note the subject, verbs, and objects:

The king hath happily received, Macbeth,

The news of thy success: and when he reads

Thy personal venture in the rebel's fight... (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene iii)

1st clause: The king hath happily received, Macbeth./The news of thy success:

SUBJECT – *The king*

VERB – *has received*

OBJECT – *the news [of Macbeth's success]*

2nd clause: and when he reads/thy personal venture in the rebel's fight,

SUBJECT – *he [the king]*

VERB – *reads*

OBJECT – *[about] your venture*

*When I read Shakespeare I am struck  
with wonder  
That such trivial people should muse  
and thunder  
In such lovely language.*

— D. H. LAWRENCE





*When Shakespeare is charged with debts to his authors, Landor replies, “Yet he was more original than his originals. He breathed upon dead bodies and brought them into life.”*

— RALPH WALDO EMERSON

## Tip 6 – Keep your eyes open for metaphors

SHAKESPEARE FREQUENTLY uses **metaphor** to illustrate an idea in a unique way. Pay careful attention to the two dissimilar objects or ideas being compared.

In *Macbeth*, Duncan, the king says:

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour  
To make thee full of growing. (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene v)

The king compares Macbeth to a tree he can plant and watch grow.

Other examples:

“The morn, in russet mantle clad, walks o’er the dew of some high eastern hill”  
(*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene i)

“Memory, the warder of the brain, shall be a fume.” (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene vii)

“Love is a smoke made with the fume of sighs.” (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene i)





*He was the man who of all modern,  
and perhaps ancient poets, had the  
largest and most comprehensive soul.*

— JOHN DRYDEN

## Tip 7 – Take a moment to understand allusions

**A**N **ALLUSION** IS A REFERENCE to some event, person, place, or artistic work not directly explained or discussed by the writer; it relies on the reader's familiarity with the item referred to. Allusion is a quick way of conveying information or presenting an image. In the following lines, Romeo alludes to Diana, goddess of the hunt and of chastity, and to Cupid's arrow (love).

Well, in that hit you miss: she'll not be hit  
with Cupid's arrow, she hath Dian's wit;  
and in strong proof of chastity well arm'd  
(*Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene i)

When you come across an unfamiliar allusion, take a moment to look it up online, in the footnotes, or in a reference book. You'll often find that just understanding a small amount of background material will add a lot of richness to your reading of the play.



*Shakespeare - The nearest thing in incarnation to the eye of God.*

— LAURENCE OLIVIER



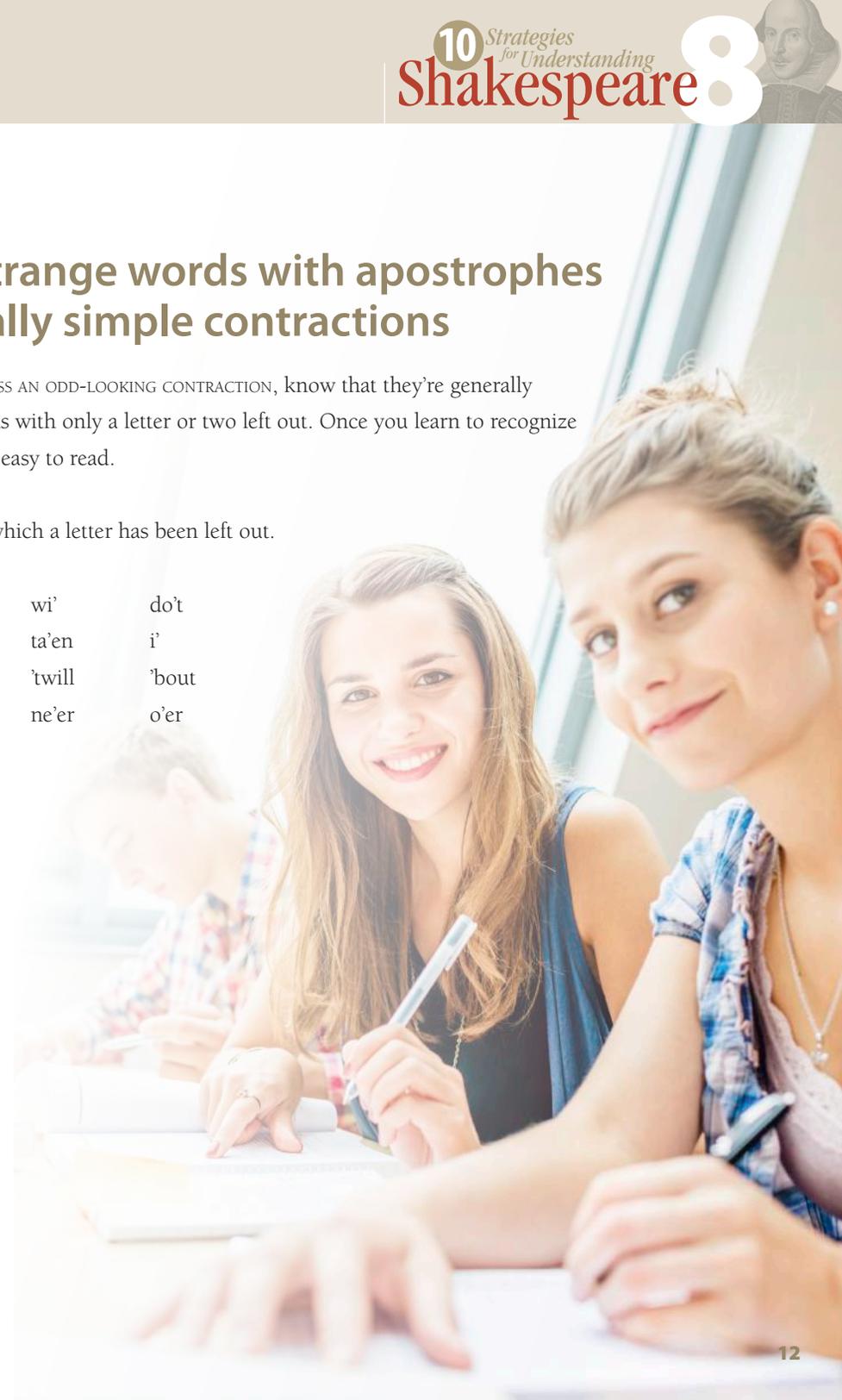
## Tip 8 – Those strange words with apostrophes are usually simple contractions

**W**HEN YOU COME ACROSS AN ODD-LOOKING CONTRACTION, know that they're generally simple contractions with only a letter or two left out. Once you learn to recognize them, they're very easy to read.

Contracted words are words in which a letter has been left out.

Some that frequently appear:

be't	on't	wi'	do't
t'	'gainst	ta'en	i'
'tis	e'en	'twill	'bout
know'st	o'	ne'er	o'er





## Tip 9 – Look up difficult words

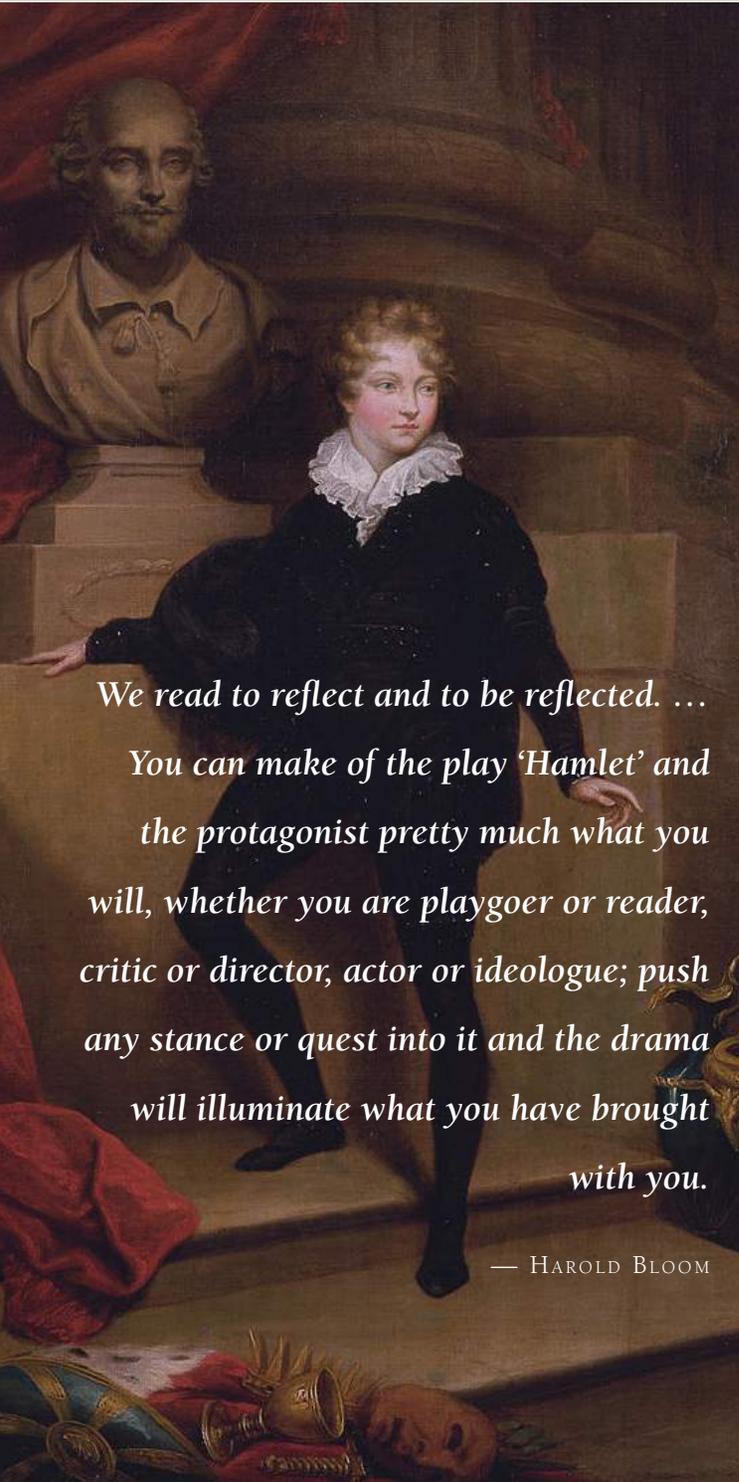
WHILE MANY WORDS CAN BE UNDERSTOOD in the context of what's being said, some words are just difficult to understand for the modern reader because they're no longer in common use, or the meaning has changed. In those cases, a quick look at a dictionary, or the sidebar notes in a well-annotated edition, such as *Literary Touchstone Classics* editions, will help reveal the meaning.

**Archaic Words:** Some archaic words, like *thee*, *thou*, *thy*, and *thine*, are instantly understandable, while others, like *betwixt*, cause a momentary pause.

**Obsolete Words:** If it were not for the notes in a Shakespeare text, obsolete words could be a problem; words like *beteem* are usually not found in student dictionaries. In these situations, however, a quick glance at the book's notes will solve the problem.

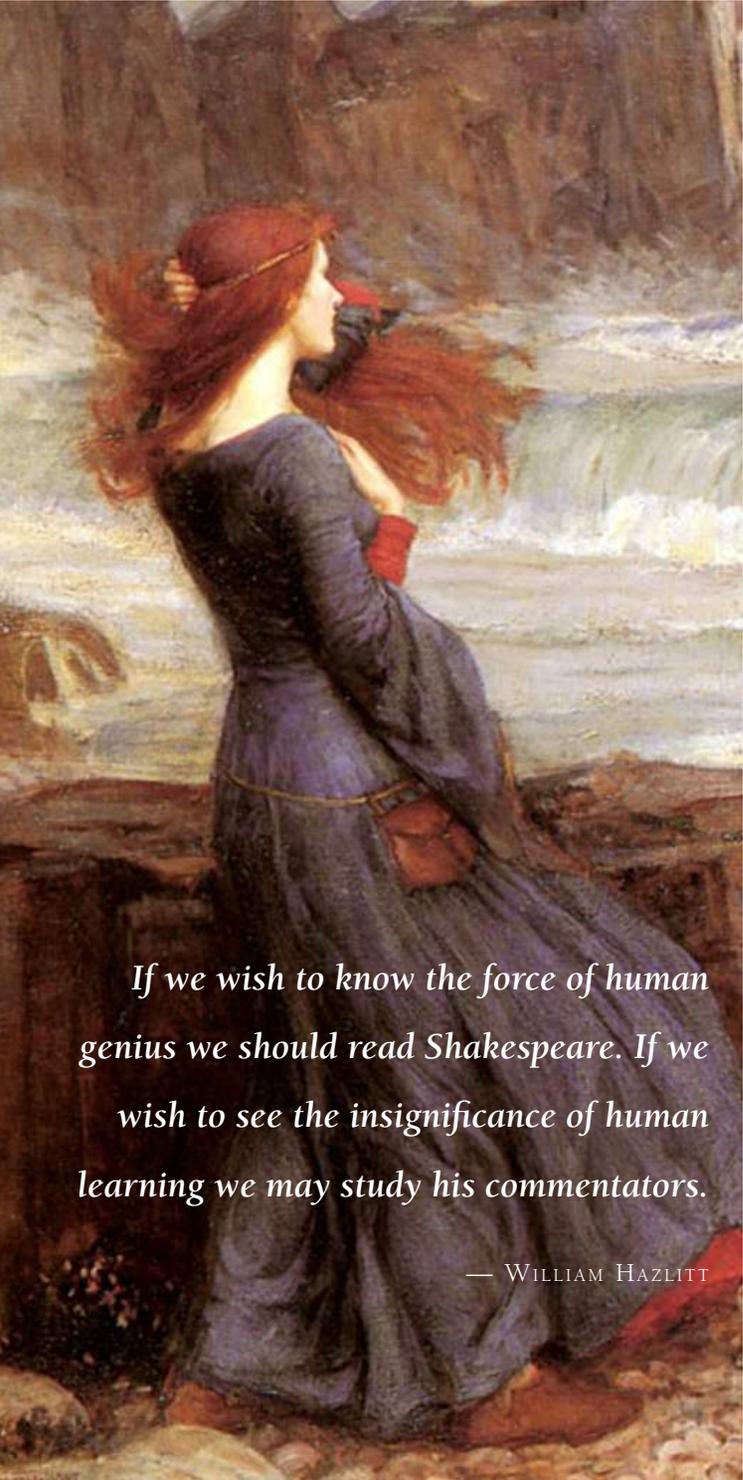
**Familiar Words with Unfamiliar Definitions:** Another problem is those familiar words whose definitions have changed. Because readers think they know the word, they do not check the notes. For example, in this comment from *Much Ado About Nothing*, Act I, Scene i, the word *an* means “if”:

Scratching could not make it worse, *an* 'twere such a face as yours were.



*We read to reflect and to be reflected. ...  
You can make of the play 'Hamlet' and  
the protagonist pretty much what you  
will, whether you are playgoer or reader,  
critic or director, actor or ideologue; push  
any stance or quest into it and the drama  
will illuminate what you have brought  
with you.*

— HAROLD BLOOM



*If we wish to know the force of human genius we should read Shakespeare. If we wish to see the insignificance of human learning we may study his commentators.*

— WILLIAM HAZLITT

## Tip 10 – Remember that Shakespeare was having fun with the language

SHAKESPEARE WASN'T WRITING in order to confuse students 400 years in the future—he was writing to entertain—to make the audience laugh and cry. Once you're used to the language, you'll often find that many scenes are hilarious. Keep your eyes out for the following types of verbal jokes:



A **pun** is a literary device that achieves humor or emphasis by playing on ambiguities. Two distinct meanings are suggested either by the same word or by two similar-sounding words.

“Now is the winter of our discontent  
Made glorious summer by this sun of York” (*Richard III*, Act I, Scene i)

In this quote, Shakespeare is punning the “sun” which drives away winter with “son”— the descendent of the house of York.

A **double entendre** is a kind of pun in which a word or phrase has a second, usually sexual, meaning.

Lady Capulet: So shall you share all that he doth possess  
By having him, making yourself no less.

Nurse: No less? Nay, bigger. Women grow by men.  
(*Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene iii)

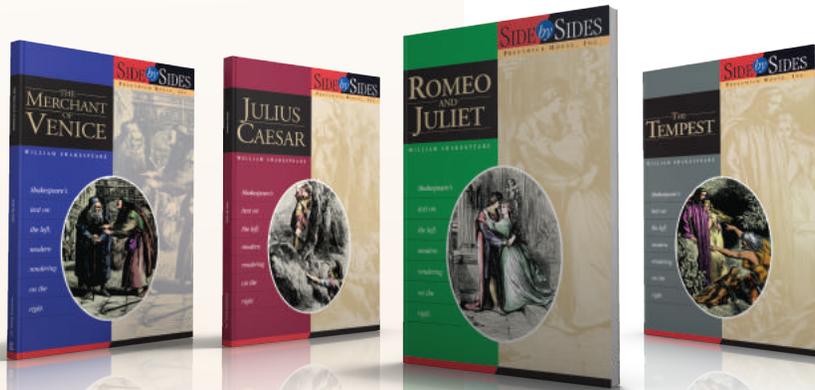
In this scene, the Nurse is joking that women become pregnant by men.

A **malapropism** occurs when a character mistakenly uses a word that he or she has confused with another word. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Nurse tells Romeo that she needs to have a “confidence” with him, when she should have said “conference.” Mockingly, Benvolio then says she probably will “indite” (rather than “invite”) Romeo to dinner.

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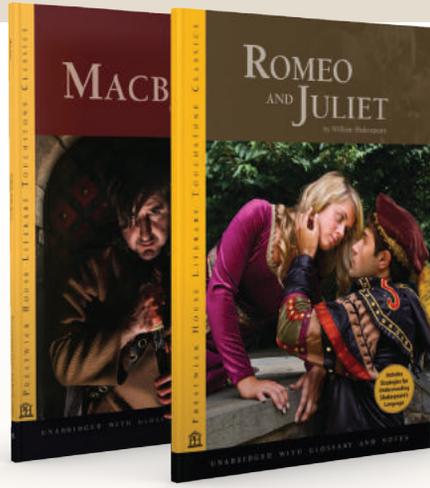
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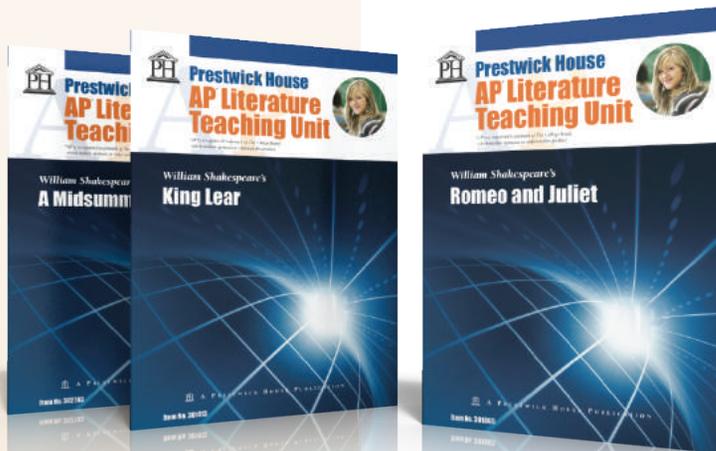
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