Shakespeare’s Language

Iambic Pentameter

Iambic pentameter is the main rhythmic structure of Shakespeare’s verse, meaning the majority of Shakespeare’s verse is written in this rhythm. One line of iambic pentameter has 10 syllables, which we divide up into five units of meter called feet. Each foot of the verse contains two syllables. Illustrate this on the board:

A foot = 2 syllables

Pentameter = a line with 10 syllables which we divide into 5 feet

But soft! **/** What light **/** through yon **/** der win **/** dow breaks?

Iambic refers to the rhythm of the line. When the first syllable is unstressed and the second syllable is stressed, as in the word Hello, it is called an iamb. *Iambic* means push, persistency or determination. The prefix *penta* means five, as in pentagon, a five sided shape. Therefore, *iambic pentameter is one line of poetry consisting of five forward-moving feet.*

Iambic = unstressed stressed rhythm

Identifying the rhythm of a line is called **scansion.** Actors **scan** their lines so we know how Shakespeare wanted us to say them. We mark unstressed syllables with this symbol ⌣ and stressed syllables with a slash **/**

⌣ / ⌣ / ⌣ / ⌣ / ⌣ /
But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?

When learning iambic pentameter, many students make the mistake of unstressing & stressing every other word instead of every other syllable. To address this, you need to get the students saying all of the lines out loud, with energy and feeling the rhythm. You can explore having them say their names out loud and figure out what syllable is stressed. You can also explore saying the lines giving every syllable the same stress so they discover how slow & robotic it feels or have them say it with the opposite rhythm to see how unnatural it feels. Have students say this rhythm out loud several times. They should clap lightly on da and clap harder on DUM.

Clap the rhythm of iambic pentameter. Without specific words, the rhythm of iambic pentameter is:

da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM

The rhythm of Iambic pentameter is similar to the human heartbeat, a horse gallop, or the beat underneath a piece of music. Iambic pentameter drives and supports Shakespeare’s verse, moving the language along in a forward flow that imitates natural speech patterns.

SCANSION

Actors scan the verse for a few different reasons. First, we want to see if it’s a regular line of iambic pentameter. (Sometimes, Shakespeare writes in different rhythms.) Second, we want to make sure we are pronouncing the words correctly. Third, we want to determine which words Shakespeare wants emphasize. To **scan** a piece of text mark the unstressed syllables with a ⌣ symbol and the stressed syllables with a **/** symbol. Here are examples of regular iambic pentameter from *Othello* that you can do together as a class.

Thou told'st me thou didst hold him in thy hate.
–Roderigo 1.1

She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,
And I loved her that she did pity them.
–Othello 1.3

It is the cause. Yet I’ll not shed her blood,
–Othello 5.2

I’ll pour this pestilence into his ear.
–Iago 2.3

Wouldst thou do such a deed for all the world?
–Desdemona 4.3

Shakespeare's Language

OPERATIVE WORDS

Operative words are the words the audience needs to hear to understand the story. They are the words that communicate images and emotions. Usually they are the classic who-what-where-when-why-how words—nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. Actors give extra emphasis to operative words when they perform.

TEXT ANALYSIS ACTIVITY

Step 1: Select one of the speeches below and read it out loud for meaning.
Step 2: Look up unknown words.
Step 3: **Paraphras**e each line of text. (*put it into your own words*)
Step 4: Underline the **operative words** in each line. (*nouns, verbs & adjectives/adverbs*)

Othello (Act 4, Scene 2)

Was this fair paper, this most goodly book,
Made to write 'whore' upon? What committed!
Committed! O thou public commoner!
I should make very forges of my cheeks,
That would to cinders burn up modesty,
Did I but speak thy deeds. What committed!
Heaven stops the nose at it and the moon winks,
The bawdy wind that kisses all it meets
Is hush'd within the hollow mine of earth,
And will not hear it. What committed!
Impudent strumpet!

Iago (Act 2, Scene 3)

And what's he then that says I play the villain?
When this advice is free I give and honest,
Probal to thinking and indeed the course
To win the Moor again? For 'tis most easy
The inclining Desdemona to subdue
In any honest suit: she's framed as fruitful
As the free elements. And then for her
To win the Moor—were't to renounce his baptism,
All seals and symbols of redeemed sin,
His soul is so enfetter'd to her love,
That she may make, unmake, do what she list,
Even as her appetite shall play the god
With his weak function. How am I then a villain
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course,
Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!

Desdemona (Act 4, Scene 2)

I know not how I lost him. Here I kneel:
If e'er my will did trespass 'gainst his love,
Either in discourse of thought or actual deed,
Or that mine eyes, mine ears, or any sense,
Delighted them in any other form;
Or that I do not yet, and ever did.
And ever will—though he do shake me off
To beggarly divorcement—love him dearly,
Comfort forswear me! Unkindness may do much;
And his unkindness may defeat my life,
But never taint my love. I cannot say 'whore:'
It does abhor me now I speak the word;
To do the act that might the addition earn
Not the world's mass of vanity could make me.

Colleen Delany as Desdemona and Avery Brooks as Othello in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's production of Othello, *directed by Michael Kahn. Photo by Carol Rosegg.*