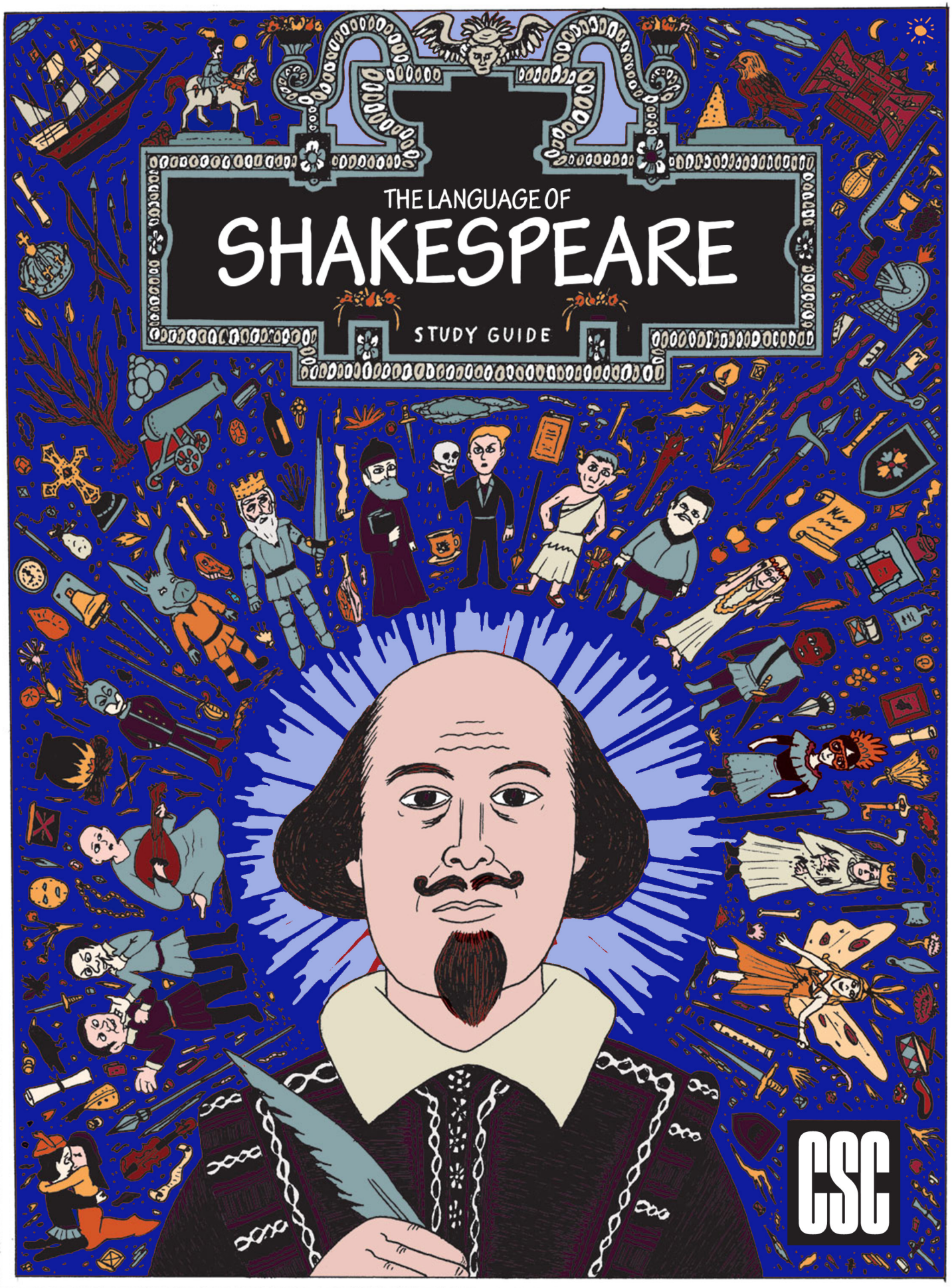
THE LANGUAGE OF
SHAKESPEARE
STUDY GUIDE
CSC

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PART ONE: SHAKESPEARE'S VOCABULARY

SHAKESPEARE'S VOCABULARY

Shakespeare's plays are made up on thousands and thousands of words that are put together to create the classics you know today. When reading a Shakespeare play, you'll probably recognize a majority of the words. However, like our modern playwrights use slang from today, Shakespeare uses a lot of words referencing things that people in the 1600s would understand like Elizabethan politics or Greek history.

WHERE DO THE WORDS COME FROM?

20,000 ROOT WORDS

These are words that were already used in the English language at the time, like "good," "parting," or "sorrow."

"Good night, good night! parting is such sweet sorrow,
That I shall say good night till it be morrow"
Romeo and Juliet, Act II, Scene 2

1,700 NEW PHRASES

These are words or phrases Shakespeare made up, like "foul play," "fortune-teller," or "school-boy."

"All is not well; I doubt some **foul play**; would the night were come!"
Hamlet, Act I, Scene 2

375 ANIMALS AND PLANTS

Think of all the times Shakespeare used an animal or flower to describe the setting, or a metaphor to describe a feeling or action.

"The **cuckoo** then, on every tree,
Mocks married men; for thus sings he;
Cuckoo, cuckoo, cuckoo"
Love's Labour's Lost, Act V, Scene 2

250 MYTHOLOGICAL CHARACTERS

These are words describing fantastical characters, many from Greek or Roman mythology. Examples include "mermaid," "basilisk," or "Poseidon.

"I'll drown more sailors than the **mermaid** shall,
I'll slay more gazers than the **basilisk**,"
Henry VI, Act IV, Scene 1

142 LITERARY REFERENCES

These are references to books, plays or history. Examples include references to Nestor, a Greek leader; Ulysses who is featured in *The Odyssey*, a Greek Epic; and Sinon, a character in Virgil's *Aeneid.*

"I'll play the orator as well as **Nestor**,
Deceive more slyly than **Ulysses** could,
And, like a **Sinon**, take another Troy."
Henry VI, Act IV, Scene 1

90 NAUTICAL TERMS

These are words that relate to sailing, like "mariners," "brine," and "vessel."

"All but the **mariners** plunged into
the foamy **brine** and quit the **vessel**"
The Tempest, Act I, Scene 2

Fun fact: By using 20,000 root words, Shakespeare was working with nearly half the number of existing words in the English language at the time. That's a mouthful!

AN INVENTING WORDSMITH

While a lot of these words existed beforehand, Shakespeare invented words, some of which are listed below:

ACTIVITY

Make up a word! Think of an object feeling or action and make up a word to describe it. Write a sentence with that word–maybe a mini scene?

PART TWO:
RHYME AND RHYTHM

RHYME AND RHYTHM

Like any other wordsmith, Shakespeare uses vocabulary, rhyme, and rhythm to suggest emotions, relationships and motivations. Did people in Shakespeare's day speak in rhymed verse? No, of course not — no more than we speak in rap. But then and now, people have enjoyed the rhythm and rhyme of verse—and sometimes the language and rhythm of verse tunes us in more immediately, more completely to the feelings and choices of characters. That's why people listen to the blues, hip-hop, and classical music—it's simply another medium of language and sound that gives us an emotional rhythm with which we can identify.

Shakespeare employs several forms of language in his plays. Check out some of the forms below:

PROSE

Prose is what we think of as everyday speech, without specific rules or rhyme and rhythm. Prose is the everyday language used then and now. Since verse was the conventional method of writing in Elizabethan England, Shakespeare was actually pushing the literary boundaries by including prose in his plays.

"Had you rather Caesar were living, and die all slaves, than that Caesar were dead, to live all freemen? As Caesar loved me, I weep for him... but as he was ambitious, I slew him."
Julius Caesar, Act III, Scene 2

At first glance, it may seem that Shakespeare used verse and prose to indicate a character's status (rich, powerful, educated characters speak in verse; poor, common fools speak in prose) but upon closer look, you'll find that many characters go back and forth between verse and prose, and they do so at very specific moments in the play. Actors pay close attention to when characters speak in verse and when they speak in prose, because Shakespeare made these choices on purpose, and it can tell the actor a lot about how their character thinks and feels.

Pro-Tip: A quick way to tell verse from prose: lines of verse begin with capital letters, while prose will appear in paragraph form.

VERSE

Verse can be defined as giving order or form to the random stress pattern of prose. Verse is all about combining stressed and unstressed syllables to create rhythm. The basic unit of verse is a foot, which is a repeating combination of stressed and unstressed syllables. An iamb, or iambic foot, is a foot of poetry containing two syllables, with an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable, for example,"ta DUM."

Pro Tip: A good way to remember the word "iamb" is to think of it as: i AM, i AM, i AM, i AM, i AM

BLANK VERSE

Blank Verse is the standard poetic form Shakespeare uses in his plays. It can also be defined as unrhymed iambic pentameter— that is, a line of poetry containing five ("penta" meaning five) iambic feet, not rhyming with any adjacent line. That's ten syllables all together. The pattern flows easily for English speakers, and the stresses match the human heart beat —

"ta DUM, ta DUM, ta DUM, ta DUM, ta DUM," or "i AM, i AM, i AM, i AM, i AM."

If you say, "The Yankees and the Mets are famous teams." with natural inflection, you will have spoken a line of iambic pentameter.

The Yankees and the Mets are famous teams
The YANK I ees AND I the METS I are FA I mous TEAMS

Here are two more:

I take the subway every day to school
i TAKE I the SUB I way EV I ery DAY I to SCHOOL

I can't go out because my homework's late.
i CAN'T I go OUT I be CAUSE I my HOME I work's LATE

Here's an example from *Romeo and Juliet*

"But soft! What light through yonder window breaks?"
but SOFT I what LIGHT I through YON I der WIN I dow BREAKS

-*Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, Scene 2

RHYMED VERSE

Even though most of Shakespeare's plays are written in blank verse, he still makes frequent use of rhyme—especially when he wants to call your attention to something. Words that rhyme really stand out when we hear them spoken aloud, so these words are of particular importance to the actors.

"By all vows that ever men have broke–
In number more than ever women spoke–
In that same place thou hast appointed me
Tomorrow truly will I meet with thee."
-*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Act I, Scene 1

IRREGULAR VERSE

Shakespeare doesn't always write verse in perfect iambic pentameter. The rhythmic patterns change, and so do the number of syllables. This was pretty innovative stuff in Shakespeare's day. He was one of the first writers to regularly break form. Just like a change from prose to verse is a clue for the actor, so is a variation in the verse pattern. For instance, take a look at this line from Marc Antony's speech in *Julius Caesar*:

"Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!"
WOE to / the HAND/ that SHED/ this COST/ ly BLOOD.

-*Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene 1

TROCHEES AND CHANGES IN IAMBIC RHYTHM

Often, when Shakespeare wants to catch an audience's ear on a specific word or phrase, he'll switch up the iambic rhythmic pattern of unstressed/stressed syllables (ta DUM). One of these irregular meters is called a trochee. A trochee is the exact opposite of an iamb: TA dum. Compared to an iamb, this feels surprisingly unnatural to speakers of the English language, so Shakespeare often uses trochees for his supernatural characters (the witches in *Macbeth;* Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*). He also inserts it into regular lines of iambic pentameter. This often happens when a character is attempting to seem particularly forceful or demanding.

Double, double toil and trouble
DOU ble | DOU ble | TOIL and | TROU ble

-*Macbeth*, Act IV, Scene 1

MISSING FEET AND SILENCE

Shakespeare writes in iambic pentameter, which means there are five poetic feet per line: ta DUM, ta DUM, ta DUM, ta DUM, ta DUM. If a line is short, we say it is "missing feet". This interrupts the flow of the poetry, and forces the actors to find meaning in a moment of silence. Check out the next few lines in the scene following Brutus' decision to let Marc Antony speak at the funeral in *Julius Caesar:*

Marc Antony, here, take you Caesar's body.
mark ANT/ to NY/ here TAKE/ you CAE/sar's BO/dy
You shall not in your funeral speech blame us,
you SHALL/ not IN/ your FUN/'ral SPEECH/ blame US
But speak all good you can devise of Caesar
but SPEAK/ all GOOD/ you CAN/ de VISE/ of CAE/ sar
In the same pulpit whereto I am going,
IN the/ same PUL/ pit WHERE/ to I/ am GO/ ing
After my speech is ended.
AF ter/ my SPEECH/ is EN/ ded __ / __ __

-*Julius Caesar*, Act III, Scene 1

FEMININE ENDINGS

Shakespeare does not relentlessly follow the rhythm in every line. He occasionally varies the stresses or uses a period in the middle of a line, which causes us to pause longer. Nor does every line contain exactly ten syllables. Some lines may contain an added syllable and others may drop a syllable. Shakespeare's most common variation in iambic pentameter is the use of the feminine ending — lines of text that add an unstressed eleventh syllable.

All matter else seems weak; she cannot love,
Nor take no shape nor project of affection.

all MAT | ter ELSE | seems WEAK | she CAN | not LOVE
nor TAKE | no SHAPE | nor PRO | ject OF | a FEECT | ion

-*Much Ado about Nothing*, Act III, Scene 1

SHARED LINES & SPLIT LINES

Shakespeare sometimes splits a line of verse, so that two characters share the ten syllables. This is called a shared line or a split line, and helps show quick thinking or strong emotion, as well as creating a sense of accelerated action. Thus we have both the effect of poetry AND of natural speech. Have a look at these shared lines, from a conversation between the Macbeths just after the murder of King Duncan in *Macbeth*:

LADY MACBETH
Did not you speak?

MACBETH
When?

LADY MACBETH
Now.

MACBETH
As I descended?

They scan as:
did NOT | you SPEAK | when NOW | as I | de SCEND | ed?

-*Macbeth*, Act II, Scene 2

That's one line of verse, shared by two characters, over the course of three sentences that are so simplistic, they would probably not be taken for poetry on their own!

MALAPROPISM

A malapropism is the act of misusing or the habitual misuse of similar sounding words, espeically with humorous results. Dogberry, the inept police officer, creates much of the comedy found in *Much Ado About Nothing* through his frequent misuse of language (malaprops). In fact, people have coined "Dogberryism" as an alternate word for malapropism.

"Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two auspicious persons..."
-*Much Ado About Nothing*, Act III, Scene 5

Dogberry is confusing the words comprehended with apprehended and auspicious with suspicious.

PART THREE:
THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE

THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE

Shakespeare used many elements of language, such as specific vocabulary, rhyme, rhythm, and form to create the classic stories we know today. In Shakespeare's plays, every word and rhyme is a choice. As you read his work, look at the vocabulary and form and consider their impact on the story. Why do you think Shakespeare rhymes one line, but not another? Why does he use a trochee instead of an iamb? Why do some characters use literary references?

PHRASES BEYOND THE GRAVE

Shakespeare's words are not just prevalent on the stage — they have become a part of our everyday life. Along with inventing words, Shakespeare invented phrases, many of which are still used today. See anything familiar?

Heart of Gold
Foul Play
What's done is done
seen better days
The world is my oyster
Knock, Knock, Who's there?
Too Much of a Good Thing
Full Circle
Wear your heart on your sleeve
Lie Low
Be All End All
Wild Goose Chase
Love is Blind
Dead as a Doornail
Too much of a good thing
Brave New World
A Piece of Work
Naked Truth
Laughing-stock
Good Riddance
A Sorry Sight
In a Pickle
Off with his head
Break the Ice
Send him packing
Green Eyed Monster
Be All End All
Make your hair stand on end
Baited-Breath
Faint Hearted
Heart of Hearts
Come What May

CONCLUSION

The most important thing to remember when preparing to read or hear Shakespeare is that it's still English. As we might listen to a new song on an album or on the radio a few times before we pick up every word and layer of meaning, we might have to mull over a passage of a play a few times in order to glean meaning from the language tools Shakespeare employs. A basic knowledge of the use of language and poetic form can enhance understanding and enjoyment of Shakespeare's plays.

PART FOUR: SOURCES

SOURCES

TEACHING SHAKESPEARE
by Rex Gibson

Shakespeare for Dummies
by John Doyle (CSC Artistic Director) and Ray Lischner

The Friendly Shakespeare
by Norrie Epstein

The Genius of Shakespeare
by Jonathan Bate

Brush Up Your Shakespeare!
by Michael Macrone

Essential Shakespeare Handbook
by Leslie Dunton-Downer and Alan Riding

William Shakespeare and The Globe
written and illustrated by Aliki

Eye Witness Shakespeare
written by Peter Chrisp, photographed by Steve Teague

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Classic Stage Company (CSC) is the award-winning Off-Broadway theater committed to re-imagining the classical repertory for contemporary audiences. Founded in 1967, CSC uses works of the past as a way to engage in the issues of today. Highly respected and widely regarded as a major force in American theater, it has become the home to New York's finest established and emerging artists, the place where they gather to grapple with the great works of the world's repertory.

The National Endowment for the Arts in partnership with Arts Midwest presents *Shakespeare in American Communities*. CSC is one of 40 professional theater companies selected to participate in bringing the finest productions of Shakespeare to middle- and high-school students in communities across the United States. This is the twelfth year of this national program, the largest tour of Shakespeare in American history.

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