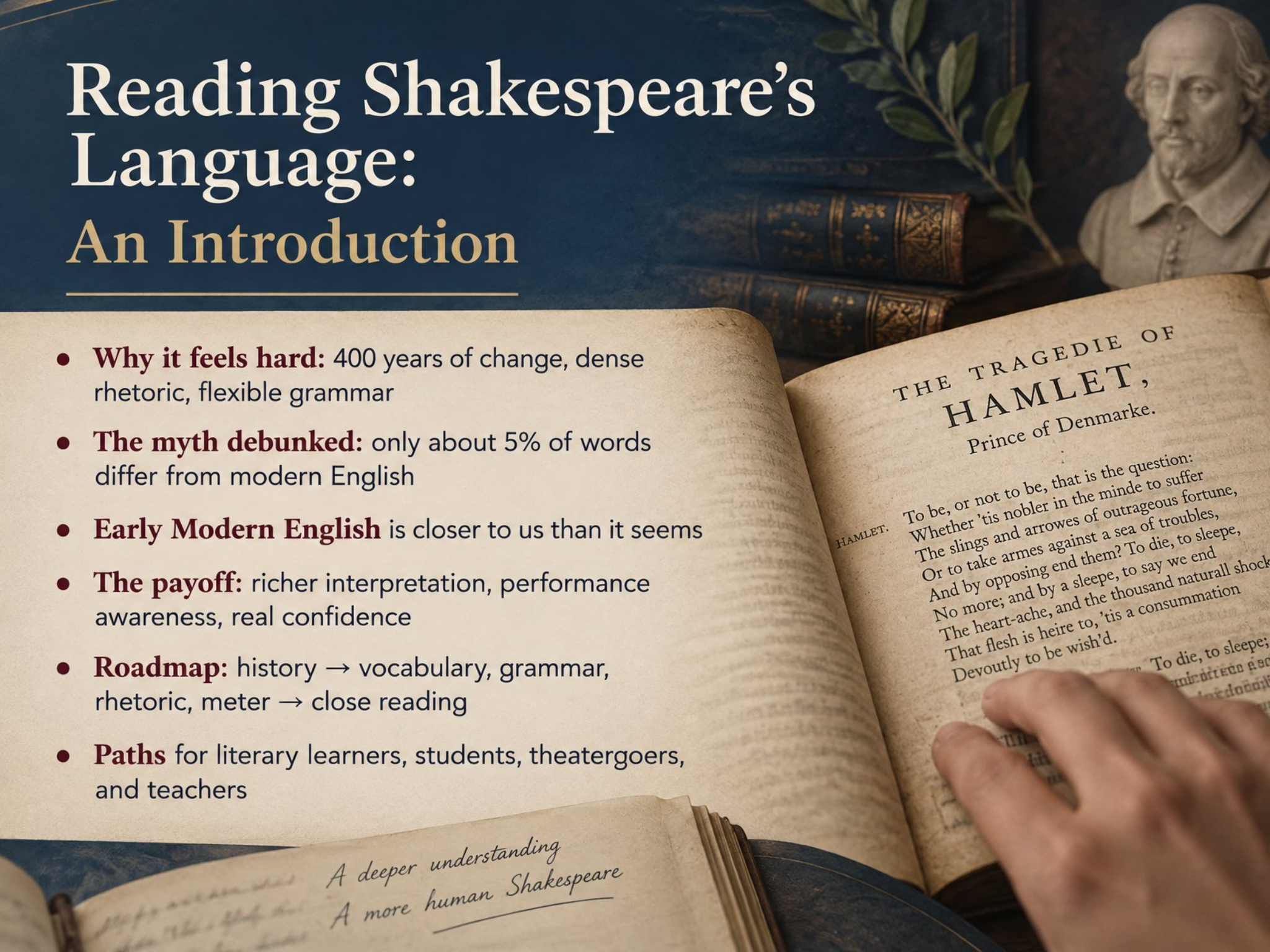
Reading Shakespeare's Language:
An Introduction



- **Why it feels hard:** 400 years of change, dense rhetoric, flexible grammar
- **The myth debunked:** only about 5% of words differ from modern English
- **Early Modern English** is closer to us than it seems
- **The payoff:** richer interpretation, performance awareness, real confidence
- **Roadmap:** history → vocabulary, grammar, rhetoric, meter → close reading
- **Paths** for literary learners, students, theatergoers, and teachers

Historical and Linguistic Background

LANGUAGE
TEXTS
PEOPLE
IDEAS



- Early Modern English (c. 1450–1700): the language of Shakespeare's plays and poems
- The Great Vowel Shift: original pronunciation revives rhymes and puns (love/prove)
- Vocabulary: inherited words, borrowings, and coinages—'first recorded use' ≠ 'invented'
- Print culture, spelling variation, and the First Folio (1623) as key textual witness
- Original pronunciation (OP) since the Globe's 2004–05 productions: performance and research tool



A RICHER LANGUAGE
A BRIGHTER PAST

Decoding Vocabulary: Words That Have Shifted

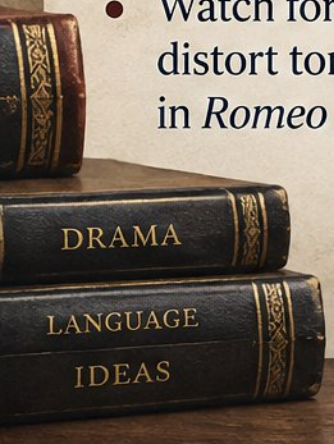
SAME WORDS NEW WORLDS

- False friends look familiar but mean something else: nice = foolish, naughty = wicked, silly = innocent
- Also brawe = handsome, want = lack, fond = foolish
- Lost senses live beside modern ones: dear = grievous, quick = alive, humorous = moody
- Test meanings with context, facing-page glosses, and the OED
- Read the whole speech first, then gloss; don't stop the flow
- Watch for misreadings that distort tone, e.g. 'O dear account!' in *Romeo and Juliet*

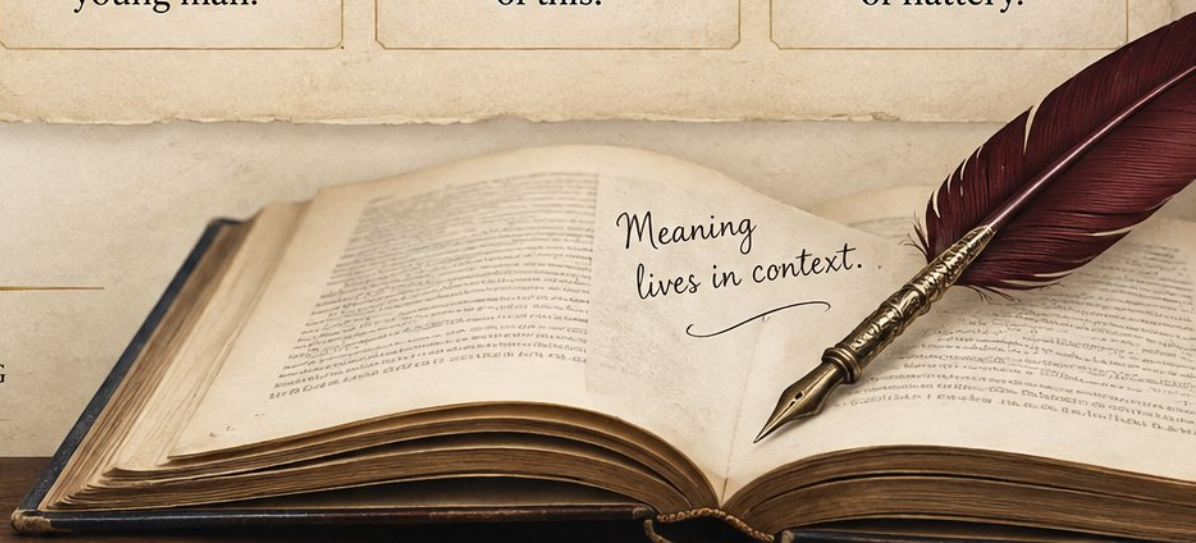
FALSE FRIENDS: A SMALL FIELD GUIDE

nice	naughty	silly
= foolish	= wicked	= innocent
"A nice ordeal of souls!"	"Naughty deeds deserve rebuke."	"A silly child in the world."

brave	want	fond
= handsome	= lack	= foolish
"He is a brave young man."	"I want no more of this."	"She is too fond of flattery."

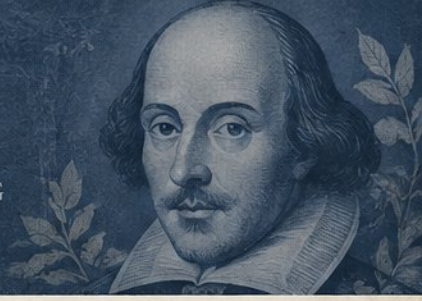


CLOSE READING
BRIGHTER UNDERSTANDING

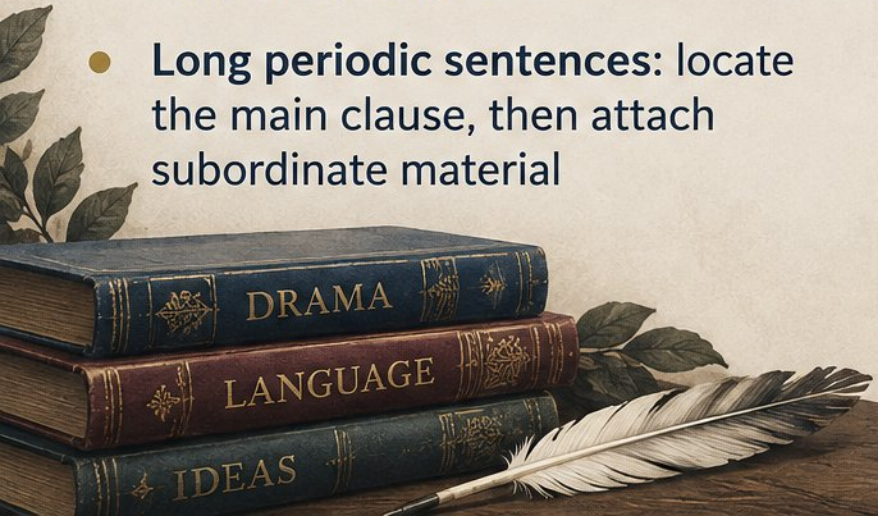


Syntax and Grammar: Unpacking the Sentence

CLOSE READING
BRIGHTER
UNDERSTANDING



- **Flexible word order and inversion** for emphasis, rhyme, or meter
- **Ellipsis:** restore omitted subjects, verbs, and objects from context (Imogen in *Cymbeline*)
- **Pronouns:** thou/thee/thy/thine vs. ye/you; shifting forms signal social nuance (*Petruchio* and *Katherina*)
- **Verb forms:** thou art, thou hast, he doth, he hath; contractions: ’tis, ’twas, o’er, ’em
- **Long periodic sentences:** locate the main clause, then attach subordinate material



“Though worn with travel, and by cares oppressed,
yet doth my heart rejoice, if I may see
you once again.”

Though worn with travel,	and by cares oppressed,	yet doth my heart rejoice,	if I may see	you once again.
Subordinate material		Main clause	Subordinate material	

Ellipsis

“— — — art mistaken.”
(Imogen in *Cymbeline*)

Thou art mistaken.

Pronouns and Social Nuance



thou/thee/
thy/thine
(Petruchio)



ye/you
(Katherina)

LANGUAGE REVEALS A LARGER WORLD

Rhetoric and Figurative Language

WORDS SHAPE MINDS

Metaphor	Simile	Pun	Oxymoron	Antithesis	Rhetorical Question
"All the world's a stage." *(As You Like It)*	"My love is like a red, red rose." *(Sonnet 18)*	"A pun is the soul of wit." *(Twelfth Night)*	"Sweet sorrow." *(Romeo and Juliet)*	"To be, or not to be." *(Hamlet)*	"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" *(Sonnet 18)*
					
Shows one thing as another to create a new understanding.	Makes a comparison using *like* or *as*.	Plays on multiple meanings for effect.	Joins opposing terms to create a striking idea.	Contrasts opposites for emphasis.	Asks a question to make a point, not to get an answer.

- Core figures: metaphor, simile, pun, oxymoron, antithesis, rhetorical questions
- Rhetoric persuades and characterizes—argument, not decoration
- Puns: sole/soul and *awl/all* (*Julius Caesar*); hart/heart (*Twelfth Night*)
- Dogberry's malapropism: "comparisons are odorous" (*Much Ado*)
- Grammar-school training made Shakespeare's audience attuned to figures



Verse, Prose, and Meter

- Blank verse and iambic pentameter: the default line of serious speech
- Prose switches signal status, comedy, emotion, or breakdown
- Rhyme, couplets, and songs stand out as marked modes
- Meter marks meaning: stress, caesura, feminine endings, enjambment
- Short and shared lines cue pace, interruption, and dramatic pressure

VERSE (Blank Verse)

◡ / ◡ / ◡ / | ◡ / ◡ / ◡ / ◡

The wind re | turns at last to set us free

(feminine ending)

PROSE

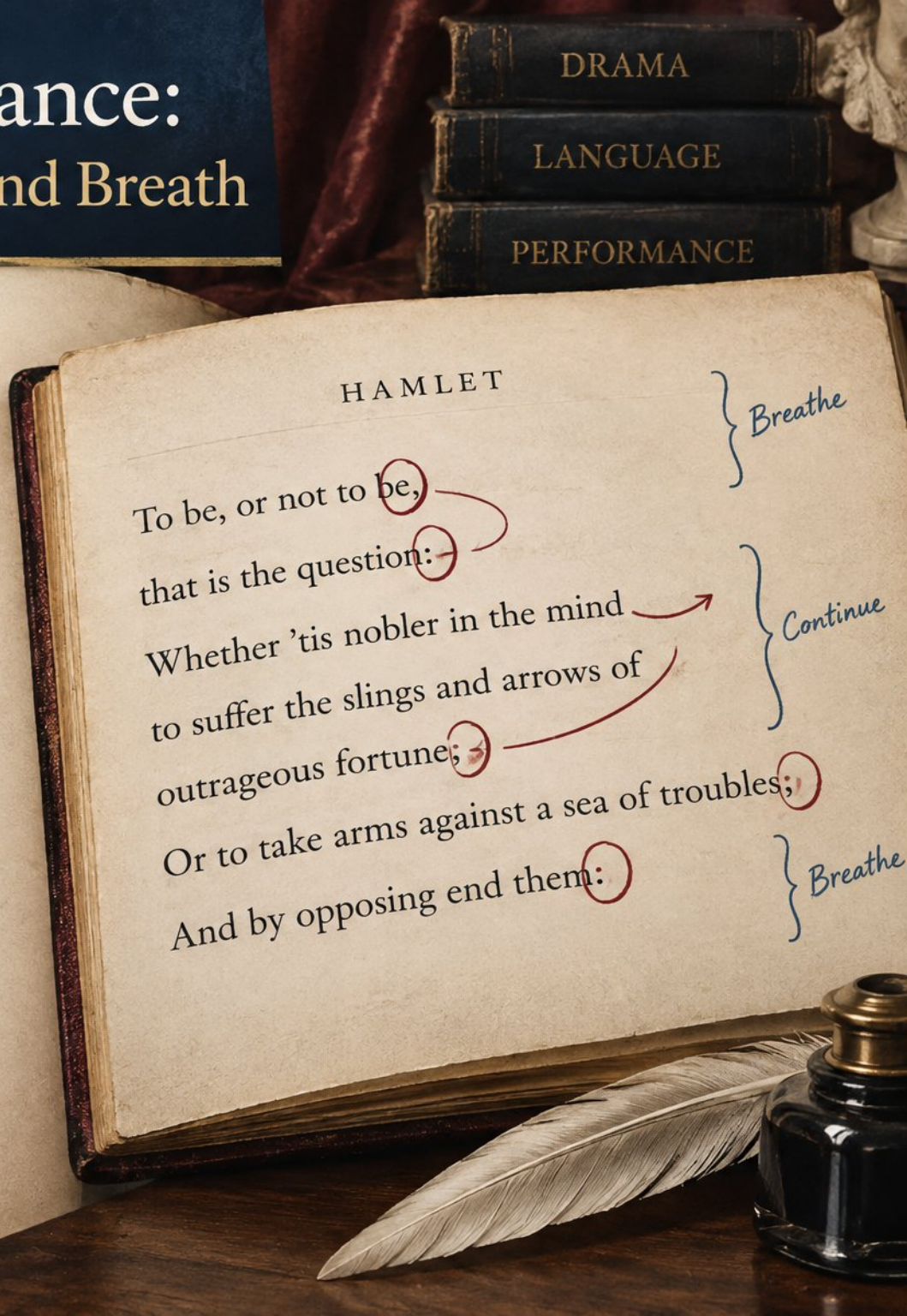
He looked around the room, unsure what to say next. The others waited, and at last he spoke in a quieter, more ordinary voice, choosing his words with care.



Reading for Performance:
Punctuation, Line Endings, and Breath

- Punctuation directs thought: periods close, colons open, commas shift
- Line endings matter: end-stopped vs. run-on lines create emphasis
- Strong final words reveal a speech's emotional architecture
- Folio punctuation vs. modern editorial 'fixes' changes meaning
- Try it: read aloud, mark end stops, paraphrase in a 'Shakespeare sandwich'

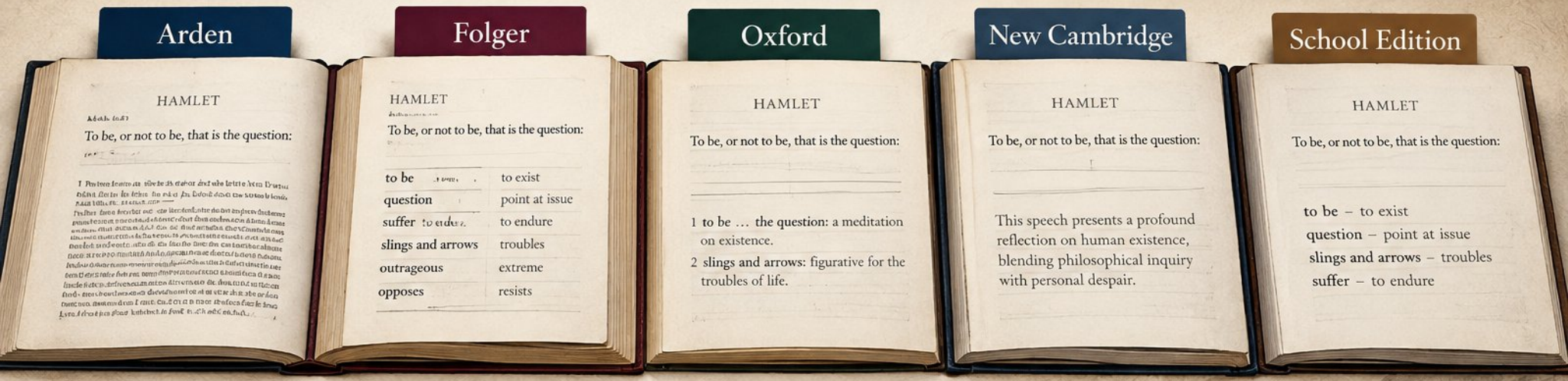
"SAME WORDS.
A DEEPER LISTEN."



Working with Editions, Annotations, and Digital Resources

READ • EXPLORE • DISCUSS

TEXTS PEOPLE PLACES IDEAS



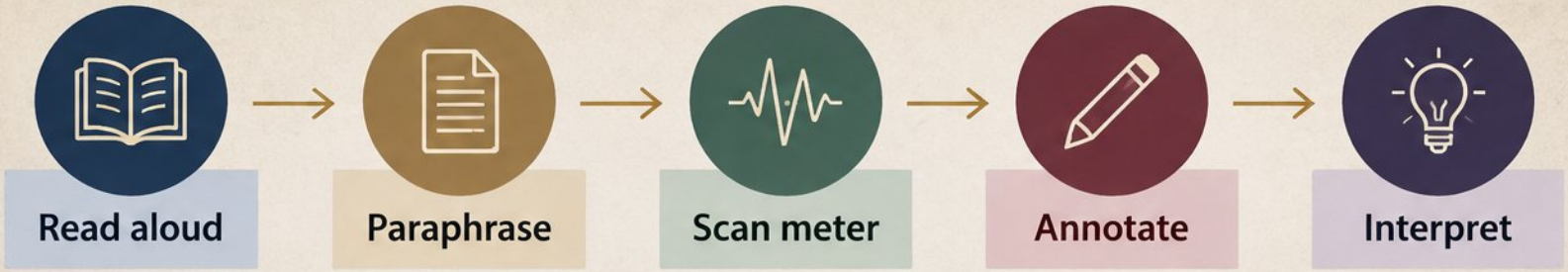
- Arden: deep scholarly notes; Folger: free facing-page glosses
- Oxford, New Cambridge, and school editions serve different readers
- Use glosses to support, not replace, your own reading
- Digital: Folger Digital Texts, Internet Shakespeare Editions, First Folios Compared
- Also consult the OED and ShakespearesWords.com for word histories
- Cite editions clearly; separate text, gloss, and criticism
- Choose by purpose: first read, close study, or performance



SHAKESPEARE • EDITIONS • CONTEXT • CONVERSATION

Close Reading in Action: A Step-by-Step Method

READ
THINK
DISCUSS
GO DEEPER



Worked example: the Romeo and Juliet Prologue, line by line

Diction — Syntax — Tone

Two households, both alike in dignity,

In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,

Imagery — Sound

SAME WORDS. DEEPER MEANING.



- The method: read aloud → paraphrase → scan meter → annotate → interpret
- Worked example: the *Romeo and Juliet* Prologue, line by line
- Annotate diction, syntax, sound, imagery, and tone—not just plot
- Pitfalls: over-paraphrasing, ignoring context, forcing modern meanings
- Ask of every passage: Who speaks? To whom? Why here? What changes?

SLOWER READING. RICHER UNDERSTANDING.

From Page to Stage: Performance-Based Analysis

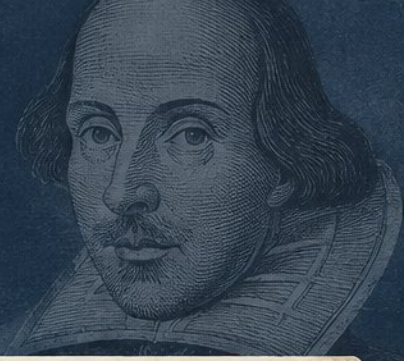
- Actors notice breath, stress, antithesis, and midline breaks that silent readers miss
- Short and shared lines cue pace, interruption, and unspoken space
- Compare Folio and modern punctuation in Romeo's 'But soft' soliloquy
- Watch productions with textual awareness: staging choices reveal interpretation
- Try staging a two-line scene or a whispered reading with translation

Folio (Original Punctuation)		Modern Editorial Punctuation
But soft what light through	Breath	But soft! what light through
yonder window breakes		yonder window breakes?
It is the East and Iuliet	Shared line	It is the East, and Juliet
is the Sunne		is the sun.
Arise faire Sunne	Pace	Arise, fair sun,
and kill the enuious Moone		and kill the envious moon,
Who is already sicke and pale	Midline break	Who is already sick and pale
with griefe		with grief,
That thou her Maid art farre	Antithesis	That thou her maid art far more
more faire then she		fair than she!



Classroom and Study Applications

READ
DISCUSS
EXPLORE
GROW



Line toss

Take turns tossing a line across the room and keep the scene going.

GUIDED

Two-line scenes

In pairs, perform a scene using only two lines each.

GUIDED

Shakespeare insults

Read and try out Shakespeare's insults in context.

TOWARD INDEPENDENT

Modern translation exercises

Rewrite a passage in modern language.

INDEPENDENT

- Line toss, two-line scenes, Shakespeare insults, modern translation exercises
- Scaffold from guided glossing toward independent close reading
- Multilingual learners: use idioms, false friends, pronunciation as entry points
- Beginners: choose plot-driven prose comedies like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- Assess close reading and performance awareness, not memorized plot facts



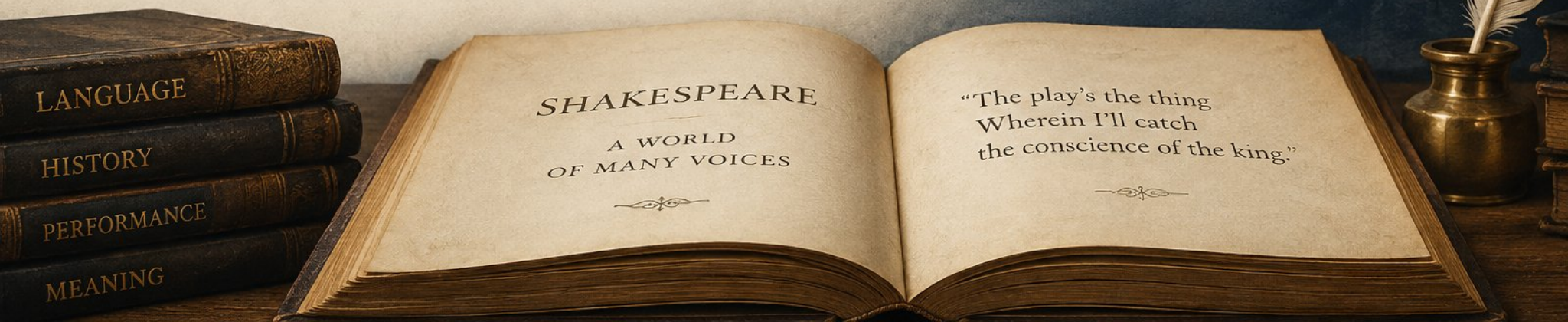
LITERATURE BUILDS LARGER THINKING

Reading Shakespeare in Translation and in Original Pronunciation



- Translation aids access but loses sound, puns, and cultural texture
- Original Pronunciation revives rhymes, puns, and social nuances on stage
- OP is a reconstruction—there was no single 'Elizabethan accent'
- Case studies: love/prove, hour/whore, lines/loins
- Choose OP, modern pronunciation, or translation based on your audience

Modern Translation	Original Pronunciation
“love”	“love” ⟷ “prove”
“hour”	“hour” ⟷ “whore”
“lines”	“lines” ⟷ “loins”



Common Pitfalls and How to Avoid Them

BETTER READERS BRIGHTER IDEAS



SAME HUMANITY, NEW PERSPECTIVE.

- Treating Shakespeare as a foreign language: most lines yield to modern intuition
- Leaning on 'No Fear' translations instead of building real reading skills
- Ignoring line breaks, punctuation, and verse-to-prose switches
- Treating every word as a pun—or missing the puns that matter
- Forcing modern meanings onto false friends; losing historical nuance
- **Fix:** read aloud first, then gloss; test each meaning against context



Wrap-Up: Key Takeaways and Next Steps

READ
THINK
EXPLORE
DISCOVER

Five Core Skills

vocabulary | syntax | rhetoric | meter | performance

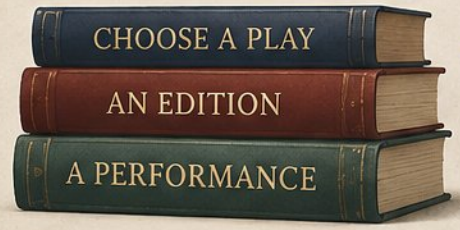
- Five core skills: vocabulary, syntax, rhetoric, meter, performance

Reading Routine

read aloud → paraphrase → scan → annotate → interpret

- Reading routine: read aloud, paraphrase, scan, annotate, interpret

Next Steps



- Next steps: choose a play, an edition, a performance to compare

Keep Exploring

- Keep exploring: Folger Digital Texts, ShakespearesWords.com, OED, OP recordings



Reflect

- Reflect: What still puzzles you? Which passage will you read aloud next?

SAME WORDS.
NEW PERSPECTIVES.
A DEEPER YOU.

◡ / ◡ / ◡ / ◡ / ◡ /
da – DUM da – DUM da – DUM da – DUM da – DUM



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