

Core B | Shakespearean Play Vocabulary

Act: Shakespeare's plays are usually divided into five acts - which are subdivided into scenes. There was not necessarily any clear division between the acts in a performance.

Alliteration: Repetition of consonant sounds. A device related to rhyme. "I am Fortunes fool."

Antithesis: An opposition. Shakespeare often used antitheses (pl.) to express confusion and conflict. Example: "Not having that which, having, makes them short."

Aside: A line spoken to one or more characters which cannot be heard by the remaining characters. An aside can also be addressed to the audience.

Blank verse: Unrhymed iambic pentameter.

Carnival: A masquerade in which people dress up. Kings dress up as beggars - and peasants dress up as kings. In literature the Carnival Motif is when roles are inverted - often with a humorous effect. In Romeo and Juliet, for instance, the nurse dresses up as a Lady - and appears ludicrous because she does not know how to behave in that role.

Chorus: The character who speaks the prologue - and often the epilogue.

Clown: In Shakespeare's plays, the term "clown" is most often synonymous with "fool".

Comedy: A drama that is light, humorous and satirical in tone and often ends happily.

Dialogue: When two or more characters talk with each other.

Dramatic irony: Dramatic irony occurs when a situation is understood by the audience, but not by the characters on stage. For example, the audience knows that Titania has fallen in love with a dim-witted man who has the head of a donkey, but she does not notice this about him.

Epilogue: Usually spoken by a main character at the end of a play, the epilogue concludes the play and is often an apology for the play - or a request for applause.

Exit/Exeunt: "He/she leaves." "They leave."

Extended metaphor: An elaborate and fanciful figurative device which often incorporates metaphor, simile, hyperbole or oxymoron. It is intended to surprise and delight by its wit and ingenuity.

Foil: A character that works as a contrast to another character may be termed a "foil". Foil, thus, is an important dramatic tool.

Fool: A type-character often kept at court to entertain the nobles. There were "wise" fools, intelligent men hired for entertainment purposes, and natural fools - idiots kept for amusement. Shakespeare's fools are usually "wise".

Foreshadowing: When characters on stage say something that hints at something that will happen later on. When Romeo leaves Juliet at her window at the end of Act 3, he says: "dry sorrow drinks our blood". This is a foreshadowing of their deaths at the end of the play.

Groundling: A condescending term used to refer to the standing audience in the open courtyard. The groundlings' tickets were the cheapest around. They usually cost one penny.

Hyperbole: Figure of speech based on exaggeration and exaggerated images.

Metafiction: Metafiction is when fiction talks about fiction. When Shakespeare's characters talk about "the stage" etc., these lines are essentially metafictional. The Puritans in London criticized the plays for being manipulative and illusionist. Metafictional lines were among Shakespeare's ways of showing the Puritans that his plays were merely stories - and not "trickery" or "The Devil's work".

Metaphor: Image consisting of two parts that are not directly connected. Example: "Your eyes are lodestars" (1.1.186)

Monologue: A line spoken by one person.

Oxymoron: A form of antithesis where the opposing words are placed next to each other. It makes a very strong image. Example: "loving hate".

Pathos: Strong emotion. Often used as a comic device, because exaggerated emotions are often funny. In Shakespeare's works this comic device is most often employed in connection with lower class characters who accidentally make themselves appear hilarious.

Personification: An image where things/ideas etc. are given human feelings or attributes. Example: "Love, so gentle in his view, should be so tyrannous".

Prologue: The introduction to/ presentation of the play. Often given to the audience by the character "Chorus". Often in verse.

Prop: Shakespeare's plays made use of many props on stage. Among the props were swords, shields, crowns, blood bags, cut off limbs etc.

Prose: Shakespeare moved between verse and prose in his plays. Prose is characterized by run-on-lines of varied length, no rhyme and no meter. Shakespeare usually has the lower classes speak in prose. Prose is also used when the characters talk about the menial things in life.

Pun: Word play that makes use of a word that has several meanings. Often Shakespearean puns are bathos - sexual innuendoes. "I saw no man use you at his pleasure."

Repetition: Repetition was a favorite device of Shakespeare's. He used to repeat words or phrases to add drama and contrast to the plays. "Do you quarrel, sir?" / "Quarrel, sir? No, sir."

Rhyming couplet: Shakespeare often used a rhyming couplet (two rhymed lines) to indicate something important in a play - or a shift on stage, for instance an important character entering the stage, a scene/act ending etc.

Scene: The subdivision of an act. There was no marked division between the scenes in an Elizabethan performance.

Simile: A comparison that uses "like" or "as". Example: "My bounty is as boundless as the sea, / My love as deep".

Soliloquy: A line in which a character talks to him-/herself and reveals his or her private thoughts. Convention dictates that other characters on stage cannot hear the soliloquy, but usually the character is alone on stage.

Stage direction: The kind of dramatic discourse that gives the director and/or actors information relating to the performance of the play. (Who is on stage? What does the character do? How is a line delivered? etc.)

Verse: Shakespeare moved between verse and prose in his plays. Verse is characterized by rhythm and meter. Shakespeare's verse is written in iambic pentameter. Sometimes the lines are rhymed - usually to indicate a particularly important point, or the end of a scene/act. Verse is usually reserved for the higher classes among the characters - or for people who speak about lofty topics such as love.