Reading Shakespeare’s Language

For many people today, reading Shakespeare’s language can be a problem—but it is a problem that can be solved. Those who have studied Latin (or even French or German or Spanish) and those who are used to reading poetry will have little difficulty understanding the language of Shakespeare’s poetic drama. Others, however, need to develop the skills of untangling unusual sentence structures and of recognizing and understanding poetic compressions, omissions, and wordplay. And even those skilled in reading unusual sentence structures may have occasional trouble with Shakespeare’s words. Four hundred years of “static”—caused by changes in language and in life—intervene between his speaking and our hearing. Most of his immense vocabulary is still in use, but a few of his words are not, and, worse, some of his words now have meanings quite different from those they had in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the theater, most of these difficulties are solved for us by actors who study the language and articulate it for us so that the essential meaning is heard—or, when combined with stage action, is at least felt. When reading on one’s own, one must do what each actor does: go over the lines (often with a dictionary close at hand) until the puzzles are solved and the lines yield up their poetry and the characters speak in words and phrases that are, suddenly, rewarding and wonderfully memorable.

Shakespeare’s Words

As you begin to read the opening scenes of a play by Shakespeare, you may notice occasional unfamiliar
words. Some are unfamiliar simply because we no longer use them. In the opening scenes of Macbeth, for example, you will find the words aroint thee (begone), runnion (a slatternly woman), coign (corner), anon (right away), alarum (a call to arms), sewer (a servant who oversees the serving of food), and hautboy (a very loud wind instrument designed for outdoor ceremonials, the forerunner of the orchestral oboe). Words of this kind are explained in notes to the text and will become familiar the more of Shakespeare's plays you read.

Some words are strange not because of the "static" introduced by changes in language over the past centuries but because these are words that Shakespeare is using to build a dramatic world that has its own geography and history and story. Macbeth, for example, builds, in its opening scenes, a location, a past history, and a background mythology by references to "the Western Isles," to "valor's minion," to "Bellona's bridegroom," to "thanes," "Sinel," "Glamis," and "Cawdor," to "kerns and gallowglasses," to "the Weird Sisters," to "Norwegian ranks," to "Inverness" and "Saint Colme's Inch." These "local" references build the Scotland that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth inhabit and will become increasingly familiar to you as you get further into the play.

In Macbeth, as in all of Shakespeare's writing, the most problematic words are those that we still use but that we use with different meanings. In the second scene of Macbeth we find the words composition (meaning "terms of peace") and present (meaning "immediate"); in the third scene, choppy is used where we would use "chapped" or "wrinkled," addition where we would use "title"; in the seventh scene, receipt is used to mean "receptacle." Again, such words will be explained in the notes to this text, but they, too, will become familiar as you continue to read Shakespeare's language.