

IS SHAKESPEARE INCOMPREHENSIBLE?

by Lindsay Price

Shakespeare.

Hard?

Yes.

Incomprehensible?

No.



It takes a little work, a lot of practice and a really good dictionary but you too can fully understand Shakespeare. Here's how:

Make it Modern

It's important to remember that when Shakespeare worked on his plays, he was not writing in an archaic, foreign, hard-to-understand language. He was writing in the English of the time. **Modern English.** It seems foreign because language and sentence structures have evolved over the centuries. Granted, people were not running around speaking in iambic pentameter and a lot of what he wrote has a heightened style with poetic imagery.

Shakespeare also used words that were unfamiliar to his own audience mostly because he made them up - words that are still in our vocabulary such as aerial, mimic, and zany. But for the most part, **his audience was the common man.** When they watched *ROMEO AND JULIET*, *TAMING OF THE SHREW*, and *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*, Shakespeare's audience heard modern English.

To that end, one way to fully understand Shakespeare is to **make it modern.** 21st century modern English. Write out a

modern equivalent to the text. Think those modern words as you read Shakespeare's and it will all begin to make sense.

The next thing to consider is that while **language** has changed, **emotions** haven't. Shakespeare's characters feel love, jealousy, pride, greed just as modern characters do. If you can pinpoint the emotion in the text, that's a lot more significant than understanding every single word. When you understand the emotion of a text, you understand motivation, drive, action. You understand the play as a whole.

A Good Dictionary is Your Friend

Many of the difficulties with understanding Shakespeare stems from the use of unfamiliar words. It's easy to comprehend why that would be frustrating at first glance. The solution for this is pretty simple - grab a good dictionary and find out what **each of those unfamiliar words mean.** You'll need a dictionary with archaic definitions; some word definitions have evolved over time, which can also lead to confusion when trying to understand what Shakespeare is trying to say. Here's a great example:

- ❖ In the 21st century the word *presently* means: **soon.**
- ❖ In Shakespeare's time *presently* means: **immediately. Right now.**

The distinction gives a much different tone and a very specific emotion to this line from *ROMEO AND JULIET*:

Continued Over...



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The Fine Print

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*Do thou but call my resolution wise, And
with this knife I'll help it presently.*

Juliet speaks to Friar Lawrence after learning of Romeo's banishment. She's ready to kill herself immediately if they can't be together.

Take your time and figure out the right definition for every unfamiliar word. Is it going to be quick? No. But it will help to part the fog that is Shakespeare.

Speak, Don't Read

Shakespeare was never meant to be read silently. This is one of the issues with including Shakespeare on an English curriculum: It's taught as a novel and not as a play. Add to that the number of teachers who hate the Bard as much as their students! It's no wonder there is an ongoing campaign to remove Shakespeare from schools.

Shakespeare should be spoken aloud, performed, heard, felt. That's when all the puzzle pieces of understanding Shakespeare will fall into place. Again it's not easy. Start small, start with one line at a time. Repeat it over and over till it feels comfortable. Define the unfamiliar words, write a modern equivalent to the line. Think of the modern words as you say the Shakespearean words. Shout it. Whisper it. Solidify the emotion.

Before you know it, you'll understand Shakespeare as if you've been reading him your whole life. 🐣