Reading Shakespeare

Actor Richard Burton once said he loved the sound of Shakespeare’s words because they made “such a beautiful noise.” When he said this, he was referring to the way in which Shakespeare’s words seem to come alive musically when they are spoken aloud. Spoken aloud is the key. All of Shakespeare’s plays and poetry were written to be said aloud, and it is sometimes difficult for a newcomer to his works to get a sense of how truly rich and lovely they are without learning first how his words sound. However, it is not as easy for us to see a performance of Shakespeare’s plays, and appreciate the way the words sound. Because of this, it is necessary to learn how to read and understand Shakespeare’s plays.

Tips:

1. One reason Shakespeare can seem so daunting is due to the unfamiliar words. Languages do not just happen, they are the result of many hundreds and even thousands of years of development. The English language is in a constant state of change. Every year hundreds of words enter our language and many more are dropped from our language. The English language contains around 300,000 words, but your vocabulary is around 3,000 words, and you get by on about 150. By contrast, William Shakespeare had a vocabulary of about 15,000 words. Many of those words were invented by Shakespeare in order to use in his play.

2. If you can not figure out the words in context of the play, you should make use of the footnotes at the bottom of the page. If it is a word Shakespeare made-up, the footnotes will provide an explanation. If it is a slang phrase of his time or a word that has been dropped from the English language, the footnotes will explain that too.

3. When in doubt how to read a line, remember the greatest stress of a line usually comes at the end of the sentence. An example of this is in Romeo and Juliet which may be misunderstood if spoken incorrectly.

   “Wherefore art thou Romeo?” is sometime said with an accent on the word where, although the accent should be placed on the name Romeo. Accenting the first word of this sentence suggests that Juliet is asking where Romeo is, when in fact she is asking, “Why are you named Romeo? Why are you the son of my family’s enemy?”

4. Pay close attention to punctuation. When a line ends with a period, stop. If it ends with a comma, pause but do not completely stop. If the line does not end with punctuation, continue reading without stopping or pausing.

Thus in plain terms: your father hath consented
That you shall be my wife, your dowry ‘greed on,
And will you, nill you, I will marry you.
Now Kate, I am a husband for your turn,
For by this light, whereby I see thy beauty—
Thy beauty that doth make me like thee well—
Thou must be married to no man but me,
For I am he am born to tame you, Kate,
And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate
Conformable as other household Kates.
Here comes your father. Never make denial.
I must and will have Katherine to my wife.

(II.i.261–272)

Same quote written as a paragraph:

Thus in plain terms: your father hath consented that you shall be my wife, your dowry
“greed on, and will you, nill you, I will marry you. Now Kate, I am a husband for your
turn, for by this light, whereby I see thy beauty—thy beauty that doth make me like thee
well—thou must be married to no man but me, for I am born to tame you, Kate, and bring
you from a wild Kate to a Kate conformable as other household Kates. Here comes your
father. Never make denial. I must and will have Katharine to my wife.

5. Omissions
Again, for the sake of his poetry, Shakespeare often left out letters, syllables, and whole
words. These omissions really aren’t that much different from the way we speak today.
We say:

"Been to class yet?"
"No. Heard Ulen's givin' a test."
"Wha'sup wi'that?"

We leave out words and parts of words to speed up our speech. If we were speaking in
complete sentences, we would say:

Have you been to class yet?
"No, I have not been to class. I heard that Mrs. Ulen is giving a test today."
"What is up with that?"

A few examples of Shakespearean omissions/contractions follow:

'tis ~ it is
ope ~ open
o'er ~ over
gi' ~ give
ne'er ~ never

i' ~ in
e'er ~ ever
oft ~ often
a' ~ he
e'en ~ even
6. Yoda speak: Have you ever watched the character Yoda in the Star Wars series? It always sound like he is talking in riddles. However, if you just switch the order of the words in Yoda’s sentences around you can figure out exactly what he is saying. It is very similar with Shakespeare. Many of my students have asked me if people really spoke the way they do in Shakespeare's plays. The answer is no. Shakespeare wrote the way he did for poetic and dramatic purposes. There are many reasons why he did this--to create a specific poetic rhythm, to emphasize a certain word, to give a character a specific speech pattern, etc. Let’s take a look at a great example from Robinson's Unlocking Shakespeare's Language.

I ate the sandwich.
I the sandwich ate.
Ate the sandwich I.
Ate I the sandwich.
The sandwich I ate.
The sandwich ate I.

Robinson shows us that these four words can create six unique sentences which carry the same meaning. When you are reading Shakespeare's plays, look for this type of unusual word arrangement. Locate the subject, verb, and the object of the sentence. Notice that the object of the sentence is often placed at the beginning (the sandwich) in front of the verb (ate) and subject (I). Rearrange the words in the order that makes the most sense to you (I ate the sandwich). This will be one of your first steps in making sense of Shakespeare's language.