
The Art of Shakespearean Scribbling: A Rather Thorough Guide to Writing Like the Bard

Description

The Delightfully Odd Business of Becoming Shakespeare

Let me share something rather counterintuitive about writing like William Shakespeare. The secret isn't in the thee-ing and thou-ing (though we'll get to that business shortly), but in understanding that the chap was essentially a 16th-century influencer with a peculiar knack for making up words whenever he felt like it. Rather like a modern startup founder inventing terms like 'blockchain' or 'metaverse', except Shakespeare's inventions actually caught on.

Why Most People Get It Spectacularly Wrong

The typical approach to Shakespearean writing is about as effective as using a fork to drink soup. People tend to throw in 'forsooth' and 'prithee' with abandon, creating something that sounds less like Shakespeare and more like a medieval tourist trap gift shop. It's the linguistic equivalent of wearing a poorly-fitted costume to a Renaissance fair – everyone knows it's not authentic, but we're all too polite to mention it.

Consider this ghastly attempt:

"Forsooth, mine dear friend, prithee tell me wherefore thou art so vexed upon this fine morrow?"

Compare it with actual Shakespeare:

"But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?"

Notice the difference? One's trying desperately to sound old-fashioned; the other's simply getting on with the job of being brilliant.

The Behavioural Science of the Bard

The Power of Invented Language

Shakespeare didn't merely use words; he conjured them out of thin air when existing ones wouldn't do. Let's examine some of his linguistic innovations:

- 'Barefaced' (Henry IV Part 1)
- 'Moonbeam' (A Midsummer Night's Dream)
- 'Swagger' (A Midsummer Night's Dream)
- 'Bedroom' (A Midsummer Night's Dream – busy play, that one)
- 'Assassination' (Macbeth)

- 'Cold-blooded' (King John)

The lesson? Don't just use language; play with it. Twist it. Make it dance to your tune. If you need a word that doesn't exist, create it. Shakespeare invented 'manager' when he needed a term for someone who manages things. Brilliant in its simplicity, really.

The Psychological Trick of Parallel Structure

The Bard loves to double down on his meanings. Let's dissect this technique:

Original Shakespeare: "This was the most unkindest cut of all" (Julius Caesar)

Technically correct version: "This was the unkindest cut of all"

Modern equivalent: "This was the most unkindest cut of all"

It's technically wrong, but psychologically brilliant. It's like wearing both a belt and braces; redundant perhaps, but twice as memorable. The double superlative hammers home the emotional impact.

More examples:

- "More better" (The Tempest)
- "Most worthiest" (Timon of Athens)
- "Most boldest" (Julius Caesar)

The Actually Useful Bit: A Practical Framework

Step 1: Master the Metaphor Multiplication Table

Shakespeare rarely said anything straight if he could say it sideways. Here's how to develop this skill:

Instead of: "He's angry"

Write: "His mood storms like a tempest-tossed ship upon the brutal seas of Tuesday afternoon's board meeting"

Instead of: "She's indecisive"

Write: "Like a poor player who struts and frets beneath the fluorescent lights of corporate indecision"

Let's examine a classic example:

"All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts"

He's not just saying life is like theatre; he's creating an entire metaphorical framework that he can extend and explore. The stage becomes a metaphor for life, people become actors, and daily routines become performances.

Step 2: The Common Touch

For every highfalutin reference to classical mythology, Shakespeare threw in a dirty joke about bottoms. This isn't just comedy; it's brilliant audience management. Let's look at some examples:

In "A Midsummer Night's Dream":

High culture: "I'll follow thee and make a heaven of hell"

Low culture: [Immediately followed by Bottom the weaver wearing a donkey's head]

In "Romeo and Juliet":

High culture: "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?"

Low culture: [Preceded by a scene full of thumb-biting and bawdy nurse jokes]

The lesson? Mix the sublime with the ridiculous. Your writing should be like a well-made trifle – layers of sophistication and silliness.

Step 3: The Architecture of Wit

Structure your sentences like Russian dolls – meanings within meanings. Let's decode some examples:

Hamlet: "I am but mad north-north-west"

Layer 1: A navigational reference

Layer 2: A comment on his mental state

Layer 3: A meta-commentary on the nature of madness

Layer 4: A joke about people trying to figure him out

Another example from "Much Ado About Nothing":

"He is now as valiant as Hercules that only tells a lie and swears it"

Layer 1: Simple comparison to Hercules

Layer 2: Commentary on false bravado

Layer 3: Satirical take on social pretences

Layer 4: Classical reference for the educated audience

A Curious Observation About Modern Application

What's fascinating is how this approach works splendidly for modern writing. Shakespeare would have been brilliant at Twitter. Consider:

"Brevity is the soul of wit" – The first tweet ever written, just 400 years early

"To be or not to be" – Perfect character count

"Exit, pursued by a bear" – The first stage direction to go viral

Modern applications:

- Corporate emails: "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your attention spans"
- Social media posts: "Some are born viral, some achieve virality, and some have virality thrust upon them"
- Dating profiles: "Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Because your profile pic looks heavily

filtered”

The Rather Obvious Conclusion

The true art of writing like Shakespeare isn't about imitating his style but understanding his thinking. He was, in essence, a master of what we might call 'cognitive layering' – creating content that works on multiple levels simultaneously, rather like those clever advertisements that make you laugh first and think later.

Consider this framework for your next piece:

1. Start with a clear message
2. Add a layer of metaphor
3. Insert a classical or contemporary reference
4. Include a joke or wordplay
5. Throw in a made-up word if needed
6. Mix high and low cultural references
7. Double down on important points with parallel structure

A Final Thought

Remember, Shakespeare wasn't trying to write like Shakespeare. He was simply trying to keep the groundlings from throwing vegetables while simultaneously impressing the box seats. Write with that same delightful tension between high and low, complex and simple, profound and ridiculous.

And if all else fails, make up a word. It worked for him roughly 1,700 times. Not too shabby for a chap from Stratford.

Practical Exercise for the Brave

Try rewriting a modern situation in Shakespearean style:

Modern: “Sorry I'm late, traffic was terrible”

Shakespearean: “Pray pardon my tardiness, for the great metal carriages of our age did wage most bloody civil war upon the tarmac'd fields of the M25”

Modern: “The printer's broken again”

Shakespearean: “Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more, for that mechanical beast doth mock our papers with its blinking lights of red”

Do try this at home, but perhaps not in your next company memo. Unless, of course, you're feeling particularly brave. In which case, forsooth away, dear reader, forsooth away.

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