

HAMLET | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Shakespeare's language can seem scary, but give it a try! *Go at your own pace, and have fun!*



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

The Shakespeare

Hamlet

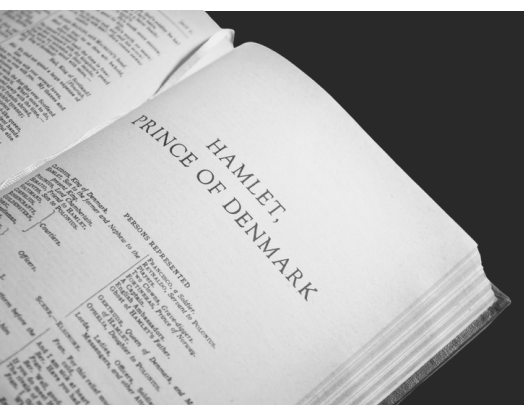
Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounc'd it to you, trippingly on the tongue, but if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustuous periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to totters, to very rags, to spleet the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the word, to the action, with this special observance, that you o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so o'er done is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

The Translation

Hamlet

Perform the speech just as I taught you, musically and smoothly. If you exaggerate the words the way some actors do, I might as well have some newscaster read the lines. Don't use too many hand gestures; just do a few, gently, like this. When you get into a whirlwind of passion on stage, remember to keep the emotion moderate and smooth. I hate it when I hear a blustery actor in a wig tear a passion to shreds, bursting everyone's eardrums so as to impress the audience on the lower levels of the playhouse, who for the most part can only appreciate loud noises and pantomime shows. But don't be too tame, either—let your good sense guide you. Fit the action to the word and the word to the action. Act natural at all costs. Exaggeration has no place in the theater, where the purpose is to represent reality, holding a mirror up to virtue, to vice, and to the spirit of the times.

- 1 Read the Shakespeare.
- 2 Read the translation.
- 3 Read the Shakespeare again!



(SUPER-NERD ALERT: in classical rhetoric, logical explanation was called “logos” and expressing emotion was called “pathos.” These terms have been around for so long, even Shakespeare would have thought they were old-fashioned! They were coined by Aristotle more than 2000 years ago.)

Hamlet switches between telling the actors what they should do and what they shouldn't do.

- Go through the speech and make a mark wherever he switches from “do it like this” to “don't do it like that” or back again.
- Read the speech aloud. Pay attention to how your voice naturally changes where you've made markings: we speak differently when telling people what *to do* and what *not to do*.

Hamlet switches between logically explaining how to act and expressing how he feels about good or bad acting.

- Go through the speech again and make a *different* mark wherever Hamlet switches from explanation to emotion or back again.
- Read the speech aloud again. Pay attention to how your voice naturally changes where you've made markings: we speak differently when we're *explaining* something and when we're *expressing emotion*.



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You can respond to these in any way
you choose:

- Write
- Draw
- Act it out
- Talk about it
- Think about it

... up to you!



Hamlet tells the players to speak their lines "trippingly on the tongue"—and then he does it himself. A good acting warm-up for this is to repeat, "The lips, the teeth, the tip of the tongue," really opening the mouth and pronouncing those consonants. Try it!

Now speak Hamlet's lines, and *really* take your time. Speak as clearly as possible, as if the players don't understand what you mean. How does this affect your understanding of the piece? How does it affect your performing of it?

"To hold the mirror up to nature..." What does that mean to you? How would you explain it? What would it look like?

Let's say you—not Hamlet!—were the one bossing these actors around. Do you agree with him? What advice or direction would you give the actors? How would you phrase it?

If you were one of the actors, how would you respond to Hamlet?



If you were directing this play, what are some ways that you could stage this scene?

If you were playing Hamlet, what are some ways you could perform this speech?

Hamlet REALLY doesn't want to see "over the top" acting. But are there times when hamming it up works in a movie or a play? If so, what are some examples?