

SHAKESPEARE'S INSULTS | 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

And now for something completely different! One of the things people tend to love most about Shakespeare is how well he writes *insults*! Not only are they interesting to puzzle out—they're a lot of fun to play around with!

So... have fun with these!

Macbeth - Act V

Macbeth's castle is about to be attacked, and he is *not* happy about it.

MACBETH

The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!
Where got'st thou that goose look?

SERVANT

There is ten thousand—

MACBETH

Geese, villain!

SERVANT

Soldiers, sir.

MACBETH

Go prick thy face, and over-red thy fear,
Thou lily-liver'd boy. What soldiers, patch?
Death of thy soul! those linen cheeks of thine
Are counselors to fear. What soldiers, whey-face?

SERVANT

The English force, so please you.

MACBETH

Take thy face hence.

- patch = fool
- whey = the milky leftovers from making cheese

Macbeth is mostly just finding ways of saying "You're white as a sheet, you coward!" How many ways of saying "Your face is white with fear" can you find? (We count six!) Which one is your favorite?

Say Macbeth's first two lines, but really exaggerate first sound of every word (it might sound a little funny!). How does it feel to say those lines in that way?

- Notice that of some of those sounds get repeated: "D," "G," "TH." Try it again, but really exaggerate those sounds. How does that change the lines?
- Notice how the sounds force you to do really different things.
 - The "D"s are at the front of your mouth and you spit them out with your tongue.
 - The "G"s are farther back and you can't spit them—they prompt you to give a lot of "oomph" to the vowel sounds that follow.
 - Where in your mouth does "TH" want to be? How does it come out?
 - You can do the same thing for all of Macbeth's lines here. ("Go prick thy face" is super-fun!). Actually, you can do it with any Shakespeare line.

This poor soldier is just doing his job, which happens to be bringing Macbeth some *really* bad news: their army is outnumbered and the enemy is at the gates. But the soldier has no control over that. Why does Macbeth get mad at the him? Why does *anyone* get mad at the person delivering bad news?

How would you play Macbeth in this scene? Does he actually think the soldier is a coward? Is he just taking out his own fear on someone else? Is he still convinced that he can win somehow? Is he angry because he thinks the soldier is lying? Try it a few ways and see which one you like best.

How would you play the servant in this scene? Is he surprised by Macbeth's outburst? Was he expecting it? Is he afraid? Defiant? Just too exhausted to react? How does that change the scene?

What does this scene (and the characters) look like in your imagination?

King Lear - Act I, Scene i

Read the words carefully, looking for all of the clues about the character and how she might be saying the lines.

Cordelia was just disowned by her father, but she's got a few words for her sisters before she goes.

1 The jewels of our father.
This one isn't spitting or growling like some of the others. How does this one come out? It looks like a compliment out of context, but it's not. Say it "straight," like a compliment. Then make it into an insult. How did you have to change your voice or tone to make it insulting?

2 I know you what you are, / And like a sister am most loath to call / Your faults as they are named.
This line is the opposite of most of the others. Instead of saying something specific, Cordelia says she could "call your faults as they are named," but she won't. We don't know what faults she's talking about. Is this *more* insulting or *less* insulting than a specific insult and why? When do people insult others directly and when do they do it indirectly, like Cordelia? Have you known anyone who always speaks indirectly like this?

3 Stood I within his grace / I would prefer him to a better place.
This one is *much* more direct. How does it "want" to be spoken? It's different from the others, right? How is it different?

CORDELIA

The jewels of our father, with washed eyes
Cordelia leaves you. I know you what you are,
And like a sister am most loath to call
Your faults as they are named. Love well our father.
To your professéd bosoms I commit him,
But yet, alas, stood I within his grace
I would prefer him to a better place.
So farewell to you both.

professéd = with openly declared affection
prefer = offer

These characters have a more intimate relationship than the others we've included—they are sisters. How do you think that changes the way Cordelia speaks and what she says? How do people fight with family members differently from strangers? Do you speak differently with family members?



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You can respond to these in any way you choose:

Write

ACT IT OUT

Talk about it

Draw

THINK ABOUT IT
... up to you!

These three dudes are on a ship that's about to sink, but only one of them is doing anything about it.

The Tempest - Act I, Scene i

BOATSWAIN

Yet again? What do you here? Shall we give o'er and drown? Have you a mind to sink?

SEBASTIAN

A pox o'your throat, you bawling, blasphemous, uncharitable dog.

BOATSWAIN

Work you, then.

ANTONIO

Hang, curl! Hang, you whoreson, insolent noise-maker! We are less afraid to be drowned than thou art.

- pox= the disease of smallpox, usually a nasty outcome
- cur = dog
- whoreson =fatherless

Sebastian's line is great for playing with those fun popping/spitting sounds (nerds call them "plosives!"), like "P" and "B" and "D." Use those—really make those plosives EXplosive! The line gets more fun the more you use those sounds.

First of all, the Boatswain is literally just trying to save Sebastian's and Antonio's lives. Why are they insulting him? Have you ever gotten mad at someone trying to help you out?

Secondly, Sebastian and Antonio really like piling extra words into their insults. (Not just a "dog," but a "bawling, blasphemous, incharitable" one!) Does that make the insults sting less or more? Where't the limit?

This scene takes place on the deck of a ship that is about to get destroyed in the middle of a storm. What does that look like in your imagination? You could sketch it or make a comic book of it—or just shut your eyes and imagine it.

As You Like It - Act III, Scene ii

JAQUES

I thank you for your company, but, good faith, I had as lief have been myself alone.

ORLANDO

And so had I, but yet for fashion's sake I thank you too for your society.

JAQUES

God b'wi'you, let's meet as little as we can.

ORLANDO

I do desire we may be better strangers.

JAQUES

I pray you, mar no more trees with writing love-songs in their barks.

ORLANDO

I pray you, mar no more of my verses with reading them ill-favoredly.

JAQUES

Rosalind is your love's name?

ORLANDO

Yes, just.

JAQUES

I do not like her name.

ORLANDO

There was no thought of pleasing you when she was christened.

Each of these guys thinks he's smarter than the other one. They don't like each other very much.

(Also, Orlando has been writing really lousy poems about Rosalind and carving them into tree trunks... because that's a totally reasonable thing to do...)

This is really just a long, awkward, snarky goodbye. But neither of them wants to leave without getting in the last word. Why do people do that? What feels so good about getting the last word?

If you were illustrating this scene in some way—perhaps for the graphic novel version of *As You Like It!*—how would you represent these characters, their relationship, and their attitudes toward each other?

If you were directing this scene, what would it look like? What would you tell the actors to do? Would you go a traditional route, or try something more unusual? Perhaps a puppet show? A dance-off? A tennis match?

Enough with the prompts! Get creative and have fun. Remember, it's called a play for a reason. And Shakespeare gives us a *great* theatrical playground, just as he gives us so many opportunities to gain insight and perspective.