

Highlights

- Shakespeare’s verse contains hints on how to play a character or scene.
- Conventional iambic pentameter, or blank verse, establishes a pattern of ten syllables per line, five unstressed alternating with five stressed.
- Variations in that pattern—such as feminine (unstressed) line endings, extra stresses, short lines, lines shared by two actors, or end-stopped lines—reveal character and guide an actor’s delivery.

Questions to Consider

1. Barton suggests that Shakespeare and other Elizabethan playwrights used iambic pentameter to help actors control their breathing better and thereby phrase their lines more easily on outdoor stages. Can you think of other advantages of blank verse?
2. To demonstrate shared verse lines, David Suchet and Patrick Stewart play a short exchange between the king and his counselor from *King John* (Act III, Scene 3) twice—once using pauses, and once picking up the cues quickly. From this snippet of dialogue, how does your impression of the characters change in the two different readings?
3. In discussing archaic pronunciations of words in verse, Barton advises actors to rely on old pronunciations to preserve the rhythm and ease of speech as Shakespeare wrote it. How do you, as an audience member, react to hearing an actor use unfamiliar pronunciations?
4. According to Barton, actors should become very conscious of the verse in rehearsal but shouldn’t think about it in performance. What do you think he means? Do you agree or disagree?

Highlights

- Striking a balance between the Elizabethan and modern traditions requires the actors to make Shakespeare’s words seem “found, coined, or fresh-minted” at the moment they’re uttered.
- Barton advises actors to look for antitheses—words or thoughts set in opposition to each other within the same line or speech—and play them.
- Hamlet’s advice to “suit the action to the word, the word to the action” serves modern actors well.

Questions to Consider

1. Think about the recording of Sir Frank Benson delivering Mark Antony’s famous oration from *Julius Caesar* (Act III, Scene 2). Listen to it again, if possible. How would you describe Benson’s style, and how is it different from that of more modern Shakespearean performers?
2. According to Barton, Elizabethan English was rougher, tougher, and more American than current British English. What do you think he means? How will his observation affect you, as an audience member, as you see and hear various productions on stage and screen?
3. Roger Rees notes, “so much of our literature and playwrighting today seems to be obsessed with the lack of language . . . the spaces and the pauses.” Can you think of examples from books, plays, TV shows, or films? To what effect are such pauses or spaces used?
4. As Barton says, Shakespeare’s characters “*need the language* to express their situation and their characters.” To what extent do you think that Barton’s observation is truer in Shakespeare than in other works?

Highlights

- Like most of Shakespeare's characters, Shylock is neither wholly good nor wholly evil but a collection of inconsistencies—flawed, contradictory, and ultimately human.
- Patrick Stewart portrays Shylock as the quintessential alien or outsider, one obsessed with money and possessions.
- David Suchet emphasizes Shylock's Jewishness and explores it in the context of his relationships with his friends and enemies.



Questions to Consider

1. Whose portrayal of Shylock affected you most powerfully and why?
2. What tools did each actor use to communicate his vision of the character?
3. How did each actor highlight the inconsistencies that made Shylock a three-dimensional human?
4. If you've enjoyed other productions of *The Merchant of Venice*, how would you describe their Shylocks? Can you imagine alternatives to Suchet's and Stewart's approaches to the character?

Highlights

- Most of Shakespeare's set speeches and soliloquies have three parts: the response to a specific set of circumstances, the character's intellectual and emotional exploration of that situation, and the resolution.
- In these speeches, the actor must avoid generalizing the emotion and instead engage the audience so that they follow the character's thought process.

Questions to Consider

1. Patrick Stewart delivers Titus's long speech from Act III, Scene 1 of *Titus Andronicus* twice—once in a manner that Barton refers to as “generalized,” and once not. What specific differences did you notice in the two performances?
2. Barton concludes by noting, “In dialogue, a character reaches out to another character, and in a soliloquy, a character reaches out to the audience.” How does Michael Pennington reach out to you, as the audience, in his performance of Hamlet's soliloquy?
3. With Barton's general direction and the company's examples as your guides, try to deliver Hamlet's famous soliloquy yourself. Afterward, discuss your intentions and technique. Here's the text:

