

# Shakespeare's Language

## **Unusual Word Arrangements**

Students often wonder 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.

Look at these 6 different sentences made from 4 words:

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

They all carry the same basic meaning but the emphasis is different in each. When you are reading Shakespeare's writing, 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).

## **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 Brown's givin' a test."

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

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

A few examples of Shakesperean omissions/contractions are:

'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

### **Unusual Words**

Most of us run into problems when we come across archaic words that are no longer used in Modern English. Or worse, when we run across words that are still used today but have much different meanings than when Shakespeare used (or invented!) the words. This is particularly troublesome, because we think we know what the word means, but the line still doesn't make sense.

Although it is frustrating when we come across these unknown words, it is not surprising. Shakespeare's vocabulary included 30,000 words. Today our vocabularies only run between 6,000 and 15,000 words! Because Shakespeare loved to play with words, he also created new words that we still use today..