

Reading List: Shakespeare and Language

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Language makes up Shakespeare's central accomplishment as a writer. Every aspect of the plays and poems ultimately routes through the hub of language—even those aspects, such as illustration or adaptation, that pivot away from language. Drawing on the rich resources of the Cambridge Shakespeare collection, this list guides readers through six plays and the sonnets at the intersections of language. After starting with *The Merchant of Venice*, a play as provocative as it is accessible, the list proceeds through two closely connected but highly distinct history plays, *Richard II* and *The First Part of King Henry IV*. The Sonnets come next (all of them!) followed by *Love's Labour's Lost*; both offer what Shakespeare calls a "great feast of languages." The great tragedies *Hamlet* and *Othello*, both of which take language as a central concern and which are known for their particularly powerful use of language, round out the list.

Each play has been grouped with three articles from *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare* and one or two articles from *Shakespeare Survey*. The goal of these groupings is to create sometimes unexpected but fruitful combinations of ideas, while overall the list allows readers to develop their grasp on major concepts running through the plays and poems. For example, the three *Worlds of Shakespeare* readings for *The Merchant of Venice* cross questions of personhood (Hirsch on Judaism and Jews and Schülting on Shylock) with questions of dramatic character (Pellone and Schalkwyk) while offering a grounding in early modern English (Rissanen) as the basis for the intersection of personhood and dramatic character.

- Week 1 – *The Merchant of Venice*
- Week 2 – *King Richard II*
- Week 3 – *The First Part of King Henry IV*
- Week 4 – *The Sonnets*
- Week 5 – *Love's Labour's Lost*
- Week 6 – *Hamlet*
- Week 7 – *Othello*

Week 1 – *The Merchant of Venice*

This first week focuses on the concept of character as an effect of language. The articles create the framework for an analysis of Shylock as both a member of a group and as a unique character with a powerfully dramatic individuated voice.

Link to the play hub for *The Merchant of Venice*:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/publications/collections/cambridge-shakespeare/works-of-shakespeare/the-merchant-of-venice>

Core primary text

Shakespeare, William. *The Merchant of Venice*. Edited by M.M. Mahood. 3rd ed. The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316493793>.

Secondary reading

Hirsch, Brett D. 'Judaism and Jews,' In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 709–20. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.092>

Pellone, Elena, and David Schalkwyk. "Content but Also Unwell: Distributed Character and Language in *The Merchant of Venice*." In *Shakespeare Survey 72: Volume 72: Shakespeare and War*, edited by Emma Smith, 72:243–55. Shakespeare Survey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108588072.019>

Rissanen, Matti. "Early Modern English: The Language." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 172–78. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.024>

Schülting, Sabine. "Iconic Characters: Shylock." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 1325–26. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.178>

Week 2 – *King Richard II*

Shakespeare's *Richard II* features remarkably artificial language—that is, language that is noticeably the result of artifice or art. This week's readings link the language craftwork of Renaissance rhetoric with the political questions inherent in this controversial play.

Link to the play hub for *King Richard II*:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/publications/collections/cambridge-shakespeare/works-of-shakespeare/king-richard-ii>

Core primary text

Shakespeare, William. *King Richard II*. Edited by Andrew Gurr. 3rd ed. The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108525770>

Secondary reading

Crider, Scott F. "Figures of Speech (Including Puns)." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 227–32. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.033>

Kiséry, András. "Scandals: Essex, Cobham, and Others." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 1015–21. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.135>

Márkus, Zoltán. "Shakespeare in Quotation Marks." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 1694–96. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.234>

Smith, Emma. "Richard II's Yorkist Editors." In *Shakespeare Survey: Volume 63: Shakespeare's English Histories and Their Afterlives*, edited by Peter Holland, 63:37–48.

Shakespeare Survey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521769150.005>

Week 3 – The First Part of King Henry IV

This week's readings emphasize the theatricality of Shakespeare's language in *The First Part of King Henry IV*. The play's constant gestures at embodied performance in characters such as Falstaff and Hotspur reward continued attention to the words the actors speak for their characters.

Link to the play hub for *The First Part of King Henry IV*:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/publications/collections/cambridge-shakespeare/works-of-shakespeare/the-first-part-of-king-henry-iv>

Core primary text(s)

Shakespeare, William. *The First Part of King Henry IV*. Edited by Judith Weil and Herbert Weil. 2nd ed. The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511806704>

Secondary reading

Bevington, David. "Shakespeare's National Types." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 674–80. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.088>

Freedman, Penny. "Shakespeare's Forms of Address." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 192–98. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.027>

Shaughnessy, Robert. "Falstaff's Belly: Pathos, Prosthetics and Performance." In *Shakespeare Survey: Volume 63: Shakespeare's English Histories and Their Afterlives*, edited by Peter Holland, 63:63–77. Shakespeare Survey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521769150.007>

Weil, Herbert, and Judith Weil. "1 Henry IV: Playhouse Beginnings." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 1557–60. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.212>

Week 4 – The Sonnets

The Sonnets spotlight the eventfulness of Shakespeare's language. The readings for this week offer a layered approach to the sexuality and sensuality of the sonnets while thinking about them as vocalized poems written by a playwright sensitive to how words roll off the tongue.

Link to the hub for *The Sonnets*:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/publications/collections/cambridge-shakespeare/works-of-shakespeare/the-sonnets>

Core primary text

Shakespeare, William. *The Sonnets*. Edited by G. Blakemore Evans. 2nd ed. The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139836623>

Secondary reading

Grazia, Margreta de. "The Scandal of Shakespeare's Sonnets." In *Shakespeare Survey: Volume 46: Shakespeare and Sexuality*, edited by Stanley Wells, 46:35–50. Shakespeare Survey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL0521450276.004>

Hadfield, Andrew. "Poetry." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 549–54. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.070>

Malm, Mats. "Voluptuous Language and Ambivalence in Shakespeare's Sonnets." In *Shakespeare Survey: Volume 69: Shakespeare and Rome*, edited by Peter Holland, 69:302–12. Shakespeare Survey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/SSO9781316670408.023>

Schiffer, James. "The Sonnets Onscreen." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 1959–66. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.275>

Week 5 – *Love's Labour's Lost*

Shakespeare's most linguistically self-conscious play, *Love's Labour's Lost* never separates language from the bodies of those who speak, hear, write, or read it. This week's readings locate the play's language at the intersections of race, gender, and class.

Link to the play hub for *Love's Labour's Lost*:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/publications/collections/cambridge-shakespeare/works-of-shakespeare/love-s-labour-s-lost>

Core primary text(s)

Shakespeare, William. *Love's Labour's Lost*. Edited by William C. Carroll. The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781139836517>

Secondary reading

Findlay, Alison. "Women's Culture." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 529–36. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.069>

Hendricks, Margo. "Race and Nation." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 663–68. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.086>

Magnusson, Lynne. "A Play of Modals: Grammar and Potential Action in Early Shakespeare." In *Shakespeare Survey: Volume 62: Close Encounters with Shakespeare's Text*, edited by Peter Holland, 62:69–80. Shakespeare Survey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009: <https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL9780521111034.006>

West, Will. "Entertainments: Baiting, Dances, Contests." In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 148–55. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.022>

Week 6 – Hamlet: Prince of Denmark

The “words, words, words” of *Hamlet* are almost too familiar, so this week’s readings aim to defamiliarize them by stressing the play’s uncanny place in the history of critical theory, cultural translation, and rhetorical theory.

Link to play hub for *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/publications/collections/cambridge-shakespeare/works-of-shakespeare/hamlet-prince-of-denmark>

Core primary text(s)

Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet: Prince of Denmark*. Edited by Philip Edwards. 3rd ed. The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316594117>

Secondary reading

Carson, Rob. “The Linguistic Turn and the Cultural Turn.” In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 1754–61. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.247>

Chiba, Jessica. “*Hamlet*, Translation and the Linguistic Conditions of Thought.” In *Shakespeare Survey 76: Digital and Virtual Shakespeare*, edited by Emma Smith, 112–27. Shakespeare Survey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009392761.012>

Rhodes, Neil. “Rhetoric.” In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 223–27. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.032>

Thompson, Ann. “*Hamlet* 3.1: ‘To Be or Not to Be.’” In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 1144–50. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.152>

Week 7 – *Othello*

Othello features some of Shakespeare’s most powerful, dramatic, and grammatically interesting language. This week’s readings attempt to draw new connections between that language and the play’s explicit and often troubling concerns with race and gender.

Link to play hub for *Othello*:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/publications/collections/cambridge-shakespeare/works-of-shakespeare/othello>

Core primary text(s)

Shakespeare, William. *Othello*. Edited by Norman Sanders. 3rd ed. The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316416051>

Secondary reading

Fanego, Teresa. “Shakespeare’s Grammar.” In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 184–91. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.026>

Floyd-Wilson, Mary. “Explaining Racial and Sexual Differences.” In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 788–95. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.102>

Sheeha, Iman. “[A] Maid Called Barbary: *Othello*, Moorish Maidservants And The Black Presence In Early Modern England.” In *Shakespeare Survey 75: Othello*, edited by Emma Smith, 89–102. Shakespeare Survey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009245845.007>

Stern, Tiffany. “Production Processes.” In *The Cambridge Guide to the Worlds of Shakespeare*, edited by Bruce R. Smith, 122–28. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316137062.018>