We’re delighted to share with you this resource written by Ben Crystal. Ben is internationally renowned for performing, teaching and writing about Shakespeare and in this resource he shares his passion for finding direction from Shakespeare himself. For an audio recording of Ben reading Hamlet’s speech, visit: www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYiYd9RcK5M and for more from Ben on Shakespeare’s works (fully glossed) visit www.shakespeareswords.com.

‘Poetry is not the opposite of prose. Poetry is the opposite of restraint.’ 

John Guzlowski

Shakespeare’s ‘wrighting’

When Will Shakespeare turned his hand away from acting to ‘wrighting’, it so befell he was really very good at it.

Not just very good. He was so fine at manipulating the favoured poetic form of the time that he was able to coax it, teasing it to reflect and refract the earthy pace of modern language – while with the very same sharpened feather ink-dipped quill, he reached up to soaring heights, painting end-of-the-day sky-scapes of the heart, the soul, and the human condition.

Hidden stage directions

This is familiar territory. Less known is that he folded into these thoughts, soliloquies and conversations the most beautiful directions to his actors: detailed manuals to his friends and colleagues who made his - sometimes lunatic, often never-before-seen-on-stage, always proactive - ideas come to life.

They are as brilliantly complex, infuriatingly open, devastatingly simple stage directions as Miller, Beckett, and Pinter’s can be. The problem is you can’t see them on the page. You have to lift up the bonnet.

They are the motor underneath the words, the engine that runs it all, the mechanics of Shakespeare. A bit like the gaps in the walls of the The Labyrinth (1986), they are there, plain to see - if you know what you’re looking for. By the time they had performed Hamlet his actors had been learning, playing and tinkering with this engine for over ten years.

Think of a person you’ve known or worked with for a year. Do you know their birthday? Their favourite colour? How well would you know them if you’d worked together two years? Five years. How about ten years, three hundred days of the year, every year, day in, day out, having the courage to be vulnerable with each other, pouring your heart out on stage in front of a bunch of strangers. Working with them. Playing with them. Marrying with them. Grieving with them. The shorthand you’d have together would be phenomenal.

Shakespeare’s actors

This is the working relationship Shakespeare’s actors had with each other, that he spent time honing his writing towards. He wrote so that they would have understood within
the blink of an eye the kinds of things you and I need to analyse, break down, and tear apart.

They would have understood: it was their job. Not only that, they were working on parts tailor-made for them. Ever worn a bespoke suit? A dress made to your exact body measurements? Imagine being the actor that gets handed the part of Lady Macbeth for the first time. Not only that, having had it written especially for you.

There are great tools out there that help us get to a similar place of familiarity, and the emotional map is one. I wish I was the maker of this fine technique.

**Discovering Shakespeare’s stage directions**

As I’m not, I will tell you that I learnt it from the extremely talented actor Emma Pallant, and she learnt it from the amazing educational artery that is Globe Education at Shakespeare’s Globe, London, and I take every opportunity I can to further disseminate their sharing of this beautiful tool.

I use this every time I work on a Shakespeare part as an actor, I teach it in as many workshops as will listen, and I spend idle hours on public transport applying this tool to Shakespeare speeches at random, partly because I’m a geek, but mostly because it’s the best tool I know. It makes any part of Shakespeare accessible and easy to analyse, and anyone can do it if they can count to ten.

Shakespeare, when he was writing in poetry, wrote in lines of ten syllables.

As you follow Shakespeare’s twenty-year career, the number of syllables in his poetry alarmingly, increasingly wobbles. There are frequently lines of 4, 5 or 6 syllables, as well as lines of 11, 12 or 13 syllables.

The former allows a pause, a second of thought; the latter indicates the thought being conveyed flexing against the structure of the poetry, the ideas struggling to be contained by the form.

So a line of less than 10 syllables provides a moment for reflection, for consideration, to allow the hurt to hurt, the audience to laugh. The beat stops. The heartbreak.

A line of more than 10 syllables yields a flash of pain, a moment of ache, a sudden sweat amid feverish excitement underneath the words being uttered. The pulse quickens. The heartbeat.

Take a speech, any one at random. I like to use the Folio version of the text, it’s the edition edited by two of his actors in the years after he died, and tends to be easier for actors to understand; plus, the Folio version is freely available online.
HAMLET
To be, or not to be, that is the Question:
Whether ’tis Nobler in the minde to suffer
The Slings and Arrowes of outrageous Fortune,
Or to take Armes against a Sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them: to dye, to sleepe
No more; and by a sleepe, to say we end
The Heart-ake, and the thousand Naturall shockes
That Flesh is heyre too? ’Tis a consummation
Deuoutly to be wish’d. To dye to sleepe,
To sleepe, perchance to Dreame; I there’s the rub,
For in that sleepe of death, what dreames may come,
When we haue shuffel’d off this mortall coile,
Must giue vs pawse. There’s the respect
That makes Calamity of so long life:
For who would beare the Whips and Scornes of time,
The Oppressors wrong, the poore mans Contumely,
The pangs of dispriz’d Loue, the Lawes delay,
The insolence of Office, and the Spurnes
That patient merit of the vnworthy takes,
When he himselfe might his Quietus make,
With a bare Bodkin? Who would these Fardles beare
To grunt and sweat vnder a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The vndiscovered Countrey, from whose Borne
No Traueller returns, Puzels the will,
And makes vs rather beare those illes we haue
Then flye to others that we know not of.
Thus Conscience does make Cowards of vs all,
And thus the Natiue hew of Resolution
Is sicklied o’re, with the pale cast of Thought,
And enterprizes of great pith and moment,
With this regard their Currants turne away,
And loose the name of Action. Soft you now,
The faire Ophelia? Nimph, in thy Orizons
Be all my sinnen remembred
I’ve underlined the last three words of every thought. There are six thoughts before Hamlet turns his attention to Ophelia. Five of them end half way through the line of poetry (thoughts called mid-line endings, a sign that the character is changing tack, interrupting themselves to begin again in a different direction). Two of Hamlet’s thoughts are questions, there are no exclamations, and no emotional words like O, Alack, Woe, or Alas.

It takes him 33 or so lines to say six things, he keeps changing tack, doesn’t exclaim (get excited), nor does he become obviously emotional: his speech has the structure of someone exploring a big idea for the first time. We’ll stop at ‘loose the name of Action’ as he then turns his attention to Ophelia.

But we want to know what he feels about it, and without an emotional word (compare his previous speech, O what a rogue and peasant slave am I which is filled with emotional words) it’s hard to tell what piques him - so we have to lift up the bonnet, and here’s one way of doing that.

Using the ruler on the screen, justify the speech more to the centre of the page and write the numbers 8 9 10 11 12 to the left of the speech, next to the character name, like this:

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8 9 10 11 12

HAMLET
To be, or not to be, that is the Question:
Whether ’tis Nobler in the minde to suffer
The Slings and Arrowes of outragious Fortune,
Or to take Armes against a Sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them: to dye, to sleepe
No more; and by a sleepe, to say we end
The Heart-ake, and the thousand Naturall shockes
That Flesh is heyre too? ’Tis a consummation
Deuoutly to be wish’d. To dye to sleepe,
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Now, my favourite Sudoku-like game: count the syllables of each line on your fingers.

The first line has 11 syllables, so I’m going to put an X under 11, next to that line.

The second line has 11, so I’ll put an X under 11.

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8 9 10 11 12

X
X
X

HAMLET

To be, or not to be, that is the Question:
Whether ’tis Nobler in the minde to suffer
The Slings and Arrowes of outragious Fortune,
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The third has 11, so X under 11.
And so on. When you reach the end of the speech, draw a line through the centre of each X, connecting up the dots, so you get something that looks like this:

**HAMLET**

To be, or not to be, that is the Question:
Whether ’tis Nobler in the minde to suffer
The Slings and Arrowes of outrageous Fortune,
Or to take Armes against a Sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them: to dye, to sleepe
No more; and by a sleepe, to say we end
The Heart-ake, and the thousand Naturall shockes
That Flesh is heyre too? ’Tis a consummation
Deouutly to be wish’d. To dye to sleepe,
To sleepe, perchance to Dreame; I there’s the rub,
For in that sleepe of death, what dreames may come,
When we haue shuffel’d off this mortall coile,
Must giue vs pawse. There’s the respect
That makes Calamity of so long life:
For who would beare the Whips and Scornes of time,
The Oppressors wrong, the poore mans Contumely,
The pangs of dispriz’d Loue, the Lawes delay,
The insolence of Office, and the Spurnes
That patient merit of the vnworthy takes,
When he himselfe might his Quietus make,
With a bare Bodkin? Who would these Fardles beare
To grunt and sweat vnder a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The vndiscouered Countrey, from whose Borne
No Traveller returns, Puzels the will,
And makes vs rather beare those illes we haue
Then flye to others that we know not of.
Thus Conscience does make Cowards of vs all,
And thus the Natiue hew of Resolution
Is sicklied o’re, with the pale cast of Thought,
And enterprizes of great pith and moment,
With this regard their Currants turne away,
And loose the name of Action.
Mapping the heart of Shakespeare

First off, remember the line next to the speech should be straight - he’s supposed to be writing in regular iambic pentameter. It does settle down towards the end, but evidently the ideas he’s conveying in the speech keep trying to burst out of the poetic form. Well, what happens after we die is a big idea, so that makes sense. But how does Hamlet feel about any of it?

Turn the page through 45 degrees, and these metrical irregularities become the character’s heartbeat.

Just like a heart rate monitor in a hospital, spiking in moments of distress, lulling in moments of reflection.

This is the character’s pulse, flickering, rising and falling, an indicator of their feelings towards their subject matter.

Interpreting the text in performance

Was Shakespeare that good? Yes, it seems that he was.

Doesn’t this make Shakespeare constrictive?

No. This is the framework, the scaffold tower to support your building of the speech. Then once you’re in front of an audience you must trust your own instincts rather than have them watch you remember numbers on a scale.

This is the beginning, a suggestion, a nudge in the right direction from your kindly, helpful playwright.

Feelings, nothing more than feelings

How does Hamlet feel about the items in the list he makes: the oppressor’s wrong, the poor man’s contumely, the pangs of dispriz’d love, the law’s delay, the insolence of office and the spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes?

Most folk would answer he might feel the most about ‘The pangs of dispriz’d love’, because of Ophelia. But it’s a line of ten syllables. His pulse flickers on ‘The oppressors wrong...’ and ‘The spurns that patient merit of the unworthy takes’, both lines of eleven. Perhaps this is more a speech about killing Claudius than it is about suicide.

The lines where the pulse peaks to 12 syllables are then especially spicy ones for the noble Prince, content therein that makes his heart truly race. Whether the word Naturall is three syllables (nat-ur-all) or two (nat-ral), and so makes the line 10 or 11, is a great opportunity for discussion. There’s an idea that important words were capitalised in the Folio (see also ‘Resolution’). ‘Naturall’ is capitalised, so class vote usually swings in favour of three syllables, giving an 11 beat line for ‘The Heart-ake’.

He sets up the discussion of what happens after we die, then says such a thought must give us pause. So Shakespeare breaks the metre, giving a line of eight syllables, allowing a pause after the word pause.
Shakespearean daily practice

With no rehearsal time or space available to him, he wrote directions into his actors’ speeches so he wouldn’t need to see them rehearse through the whole thing 20 times; they’d intuit so much that the first run-through would be pretty close to perfect.

The complicated bits, the dances, the fights and big group scenes might need a tidy and polish, but aside from that would Shakespeare’s actors have had to do an exercise like this? Probably not. They were working on this type of poetry every day; they would’ve sensed the wrinkles in the verse as they would the time of the day from the sun in the sky.

There are tools we need to break open Shakespeare’s works because none of us can spend 20 years being paid to do this, with the same friend every day, in front of an eager audience who are desperate to be entertained, keen to hand over their money so they can be made to laugh, gasp, weep and sob.

I spent too many years throwing Shakespeare’s tin of baked beans around a room, starving and burning to drink the sweet familiar deliciousness inside.

This is the can-opener.

‘A poem is like a rare little watch: alter the delicate juxtaposition of cogs, and it just may not tick.’

Sylvia Plath