



BEYOND THE STAGE

Dramaturgy Notes for the Illinois Shakespeare Festival



PROBING SHAKESPEARE'S WORDS

In the opening scene of *As You Like It*, Orlando complains about his brother Oliver's unfair treatment: "Yet his horses are bred better; he lets me feed with his hinds, bars me the place of a brother, and, as much as in him lies, mines my gentility with my education." But what exactly does "feed with his *hinds*" mean? Is Orlando talking about...deer?

Actually, in Shakespeare's time, *hind* meant servant, especially one who worked on a farm. Orlando is saying that he is forced to sit at the dining table with the farmhands. Later in the line, to "*mine* my gentility with my education" has nothing to do with digging the ground but rather sabotage—as in *undermine*. In other words, Orlando quips that his noble birth is being undermined by his nonexistent education.

You can still get the gist of Orlando's speech without knowing the archaic meanings of these words. However, the actor playing Orlando can communicate the character's frustration with more precision if he understands Shakespeare's vocabulary. With rehearsals for all three productions beginning later this month, the Festival Dramaturg (that is, me, the person writing this article) is putting together a glossary of unfamiliar words and phrases to aid the directors and actors.

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THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT:
AS YOU LIKE IT
CAESAR

Together with volunteer dramaturgs Bobby Voss and Molly Perling, I am currently combing through the footnotes in scholarly editions of *As You Like It* and *Julius Caesar* to compile useful definitions and interpretations of the lines. To find as much information as possible, we are using the Arden Shakespeare and the Oxford Shakespeare as our sources, as well as one of the many excellent Shakespeare Dictionaries available in print. In the case of *Pride and Prejudice*, which is closer to contemporary English, the always handy Oxford English Dictionary with its list of usage quotations by period is our primary guide.

Bobby Voss finds that “working with Shakespeare’s language is like finding treasure chests in each line, and deciphering each line is like finding the gold in each chest! When I am working with the footnotes, I am much more able to see the wit and satire that lives in the text.” These discoveries can be intellectually satisfying, but they also serve a practical purpose. When actors grasp the rich allusions and layers of irony in Shakespeare and Austen’s language, they can incorporate this understanding into their performance so that the audience can immediately pick up on the intention behind every line, even if they do not recognize all the words. In other words, we are poring over the books so that you do not have to.

However, it is deeply rewarding for anyone to read the classics with a dictionary or other reference book in hand. If you want to know the exact meaning of each word in one of your favorite Shakespearean speeches, I recommend giving it a try!