

ON READING SHAKESPEARE

There are some parts of the plays you'll never understand. But excuse me, I thought that's what great art was supposed to be about. Don't freak out over it. . . . Keep reading.

—P. SELLARS

Reading Shakespeare is undoubtedly difficult for people who have not read much Renaissance drama or poetry, but the more you read the more comfortable it will get. The bottom line is that reading Shakespeare gets easier with practice. The only difference between you as a reader and a Renaissance professor is that he or she has read more of the stuff and is willing to be patient and stick it out until s/he understands the meaning.

If you're still not convinced you can "do" Shakespeare, here are some suggestions on how to boost your reading confidence:

- *Read out loud.* Often the sense will become clearer as you hear it spoken.
- *Read with a pen in hand.* Write down any questions you have as you read, any important moments in the play, any apparent inconsistencies. Some of these will be answered later on, others may make good points for further thinking.
- *Read straight through a scene to get the gist, then read the footnotes.* Don't get all bogged down trying to follow each annotation and definition. Go back afterwards and look up unfamiliar words, but try to develop a rhythm for the language.
- *Read with a theatrical imagination.* Imagine how you would say lines, how a scene would be staged, what the characters are doing when they're not speaking, who could play each of the characters. This will enable you to maintain an interest and will shed some light on the meaning behind the words.
- *Re-read.* OK, we all know how unrealistic it is to expect that you'll actually do this one, but especially for plays you will write papers on, it's a good idea to reread them. Once you know the ending, things spoken at the beginning will take on entirely different meanings.
- *Textual Aids.* There are a million guides, summaries, videos, and reading aids available. You may find it helpful to read one of these or see/watch a production before you actually read the play. However, keep in mind that you will need to know the play well, and not just the plot, for the papers and final exam.

But you're not meant to understand Shakespeare! Everyone thinks that at the end of an art experience they have to answer twenty questions and get nineteen right. No! What matters is your own personal interaction with the play. It doesn't yield itself to an easy reading. It's like life. There's enough there for everyone to find something for themselves.

—P. SELLARS