

Hamlet's Advice to the Players

HAMLET:

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumbshows and noise: I would have such a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant; it out-herods Herod: pray you, avoid it.

Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor: suit the action to the word, the word to the action; with this special o'erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so overdone is from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure. Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of the which one must in your allowance o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that I have seen play, and heard others praise, and that highly, not to speak it profanely, that, neither having the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian, pagan, nor man, have so strutted and bellowed that I have thought some of nature's journeymen had made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably.

O, reform it altogether. And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them; for there be of them that will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too; though, in the mean time, some necessary question of the play be then to be considered: that's villanous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it. Go, make you ready.

Unfamiliar Words

Here are all the words that may not be familiar to a modern reader. It's often worth looking up words you think you know as many have different meanings in Shakespeare's time.

trippingly: in a nimble or lively manner

lief, had as: should like just as much

temperance: self-control, moderation

tempest: a violent storm

beget: obtain, develop, nurture

passion: passionate outburst

periwig-pated: wearing a wig

profane: irrelevant, flippant

dumbshows: mime, use of gesture to tell a story

Town-crier: a person employed to make public announcements.

robustious: boisterous, unruly

groundlings: audience standing in a theatre courtyard (typically lower class)

capable of: appreciative of, able to take in

overdo: outdo, surpass

Termagant: noisy and overbearing character in mystery plays

Herod: Bible character, a Judean king, typically portrayed as a wild and angry figure

warrant: assure, promise

action: movement, demeanour, gesture

modesty: moderation, restraint, discipline

nature: human nature

purpose: matter in hand

feature: physical appearance, looks

scorn: folly, foolishness

form: image, likeness, shape

tardy: inadequately, slow witted

unskilful: undiscerning, ignorant, uneducated

censure: judgement, criticism

overweigh: prevail over

allowance: acknowledgement, admission, confirmation

Christian: ordinary person, normal human being

journeyman: common workman

indifferently: to some extent, fairly well

barren: dull or apathetic

quote: note, write

table: writing tablet, notebook

want: lack, need, be without

cullison: badge, emblem

blabber: mumble

cinquepace: a type of five-step capering dance