

# SHAKESPEARE SHUFFLE

## EXPLORING SHAKESPEARE'S SYNTAX

### What's syntax?

Syntax is a fancy word for the arrangement of words in a sentence. Its roots mean 'together' and 'arrange'. Although Shakespeare never used the word syntax in his plays and poems, it started to appear in other English books shortly before he was born in the mid-16th century.

### Why are Shakespeare's words in such a strange order sometimes?

Shakespeare's characters often speak in poetic forms of verse. Sometimes words are arranged in a way that fits the verse or supports a rhyme. Shakespeare also almost certainly studied Latin in school. This language has relative freedom when it comes to word order, and those choices can signify nuances in meaning. It's possible Shakespeare's training in Latin at school increased his interest in and facility with syntax, and that's reflected in his writing.

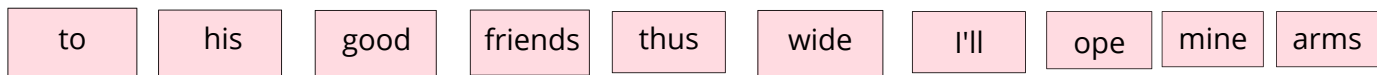


### THE LINE:

**"To his good friends thus wide I'll ope mine arms"**

Laertes says this line about Polonius when speaking to Claudius in the play *Hamlet*.

### Put each word onto its own piece of paper:

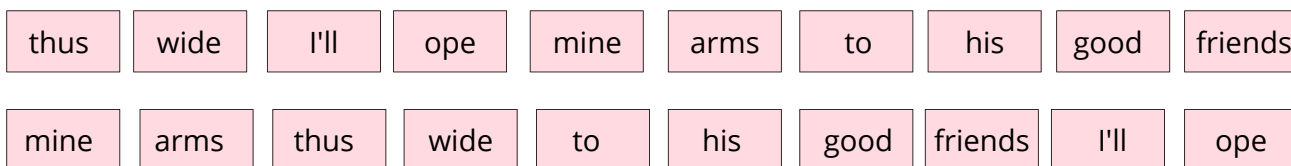


### Now rearrange the words in a way that makes more sense to you:



### How many other ways can you rearrange the words, and still have it mean the same thing?

For example:



### Try speaking the line each of the different ways, and then speak the line as Shakespeare wrote it.

- Why do you think Shakespeare has Laertes say it this way?
- What's the effect of this particular word order?

# SHAKESPEARE SHUFFLE

EXPLORING SHAKESPEARE'S SYNTAX

## MORE LINES FOR YOU TO SHUFFLE



Using index cards or scrap paper, choose a line and write a single word on each piece of paper. Lay them out in a line to make a sentence. Then begin to move the words around.

Start with the simplest way we might say the sentence today, and then discover all of the variations you can find without changing the meaning of the sentence.

With another piece of paper and a pencil, write down each of the variations you discover, and speak them out loud if you can. You might be surprised how many ways you can rearrange the words and still retain the meaning.

***Under love's heavy burden do I sink.***

(Romeo from Act 1, scene 4 in *Romeo & Juliet*)

***O full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife.***

(Macbeth from Act 3, scene 2 in *Macbeth*)

***These words like daggers enter in mine ears.***

(Gertrude from Act 3, scene 4 in *Hamlet*)

***With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls.***

(Romeo from Act 2, scene 2 in *Romeo & Juliet*)

***My mistress with a monster is in love.***

(Puck from Act 3, scene 2 in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

***She was a vixen when she went to school.***

(Helena from Act 3, scene 2 in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

## Questions to consider

- How easy was it to find a simple, straightforward version? How many variations were you able to find? Did you have any favourite variations?
- When you go back to the version Shakespeare wrote, what features do you notice? What's the effect of that specific word order? Why do you think the character speaks the line in this particular way? What might it tell us about the character and their situation in the moment?

## Strategy for the future

Whenever you come across a line in Shakespeare that's confusing, you can try this technique. The first step is to make sure you know what all the words mean. Then see if moving the words around can help you make sense of the line. The more time you spend with Shakespeare, the more you'll get used to Shakespeare's syntax. Who knows, maybe you'll start playing around with syntax in your own writing or speaking!