

Exercise 1

1. Paraphrase the Duke's speech at the beginning of *A Comedy of Errors*, 1.1.3-25. Your paraphrase should be in modern English prose, and roughly the same length as the original (160 words).
2. Paraphrase the Duke's speech again, at one third the length (about 55 words), preserving as much of the sense and structure as you can.
3. Paraphrase the Duke's speech a third time, in a single sentence (of not more than 20 words), preserving as much of the sense and structure as you can.
4. Write a 500 word commentary on the original speech, a) describing its structure, syntax, and diction (see below) and b) explaining the motives of its complexities and peculiarities. What does the speech do that a paraphrase cannot? And how and why does it do it?

Our first exercise is in paraphrase, a valuable way of reckoning with the complexities of Shakespeare's language. If poetry is what is lost in translation, we cannot expect much poetry to survive when we replace the hard words and streamline the syntax. But economical and faithful paraphrase is itself an art, and there is a great deal to be learned about what Shakespeare wrote by setting it side-by-side with your best effort to capture its sense.

Paraphrase will focus our attention on at least three things: the structure of the speech (the order of its speech acts and ideas); its syntax (the way that the sentences are put together); and its diction (the kinds of words it uses). You are rewriting the speech to make it as clear as possible to a modern reader. The game of producing three versions will test how far you can compress it, and what happens when you do. Where the original is already clear, you do not need to make changes (i.e., you can use many of the words of the original). Adopt new words or constructions only where they simplify and clarify. There can be overlap in vocabulary and phrasing between your three versions. The following basic techniques will be useful:

- Cast complex sentences into simpler forms. The Duke's sentences are long, with many dependent clauses ("Who, wanting guilders to redeem their lives, / Having sealed his rigorous statutes with their bloods, / Excludes all pity") and departures from basic subject-verb-object word order ("It hath in solemn synods been decreed"). Making two or more simpler sentences from one long one, and regularizing the word order, will go a long way toward clarity.
- Eliminate redundancies where you can without great loss of sense.

- Replace difficult words with modern English equivalents. The notes to the play in the Norton and Oxford editions will help you; you may also find it useful to consult the OED online (accessible from the course's Blackboard site).

What your commentary is after is fundamentally the question: what more is there to this speech, besides what we can extract of its bare sense? If it is complicated, how and why? If it is difficult, how and why? If it is obscure or ambiguous, how and why? The *how* here is a matter of description: pointing to specific features of its structure, syntax, diction. The *why* reaches out into the play as drama: why might the play begin with such a speech? Why might the Duke speak this way, given what we see later about issues of law and commerce, social and political order and confusion? Comparisons to other moments in the play may be useful, but your concentration should fall on these lines (and may fall on a particular, illuminating feature: it is more important to make an illuminating argument, to identify something in the speech and explain it, than to make a catalogue of everything you notice.)

A few more definitions that may be helpful.

Syntax: the structure of sentences. For example: basic word order (subject-verb-object) or alternatives; simple or complex; or, if you remember a little more of that high school grammar: hypotactic (with lots of subordinated clauses) or paratactic (without subordination).

Diction: the kinds of words in use. For example, monosyllables or polysyllables, plain-spoken or sophisticated words, formal or informal, and so on. Especially interesting is the difference between Latinate words, like “confiscate,” and native, Anglo-Saxon words, like “sprang.” Shakespeare is always playing them off one another.

Structure: the way a speech (or a scene, an act, a play, etc.) is put together; any large features that give it shape. So, you might speak of the way its sentences change in character as it proceeds, or the way the mood fluctuates, how the diction changes, and so on.

Speech acts: a useful way of thinking about the various things that language can do. For example: description, logical argument, simple statement, promise, complaint, apology, compliment, refusal, thanks, question, answer, and so on. (The term is borrowed from the Philosopher of language J. L. Austin, with the range of examples considerably expanded.) A speech might begin with statements, turn to apology, and end with a promise, for example—an interesting arc to follow and explain.