

## Table Work

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At the start of any rehearsal period, the Director takes the actors through a read-through and script analysis called table work. This period is particularly important when working on the elevated language in Shakespeare. When working on plays like *Hamlet*, there are a number of books you should have on the table to help you with meaning. Spread the books on the table and be sure to stop every time you hit a word that is not clear. Everyone should get involved in looking words up and sifting the available information.

The real note here is that you should be prepared to look up key words from each sentence even if you think you know what they mean. Trust me on this – if you try it you will find that pursuing this type of textual rigor upfront will pay off in dividends later in the process. It is particularly true with words we think we know. Very often we find we have become lazy in our thinking and our personal definitions of these words lack clarity and nuance.

The most important book you will need is a complete *Oxford English Dictionary* or *OED*. The best thing to use is the electronic version; which is available by subscription. You will also want to have multiple editions of the play handy. Remember before starting that many of the words in Shakespeare were invented by him, so when the dictionary goes to define it they may reference the line you are working on at that moment.

The sooner you realize that the notes in the various editions are just the opinions – educated though they may be – of fallible human beings, the sooner you will free yourself to pursue the meaning of the words based on all available evidence.

Here is the must-have list of books for Table Work when doing Shakespeare:

1. *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion*. David and Ben Crystal.
2. *Shakespeare's Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary, Volumes I & II*. Alexander Schmidt.
3. *A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sexual Puns and their Significance*. Frankie Rubenstein
4. *Shakespeare's Non-standard English*. Norman Blake.
5. *A Shakespeare Glossary*. C.T. Onions.

6. *Shakespeare's Bawdy*. Eric Partridge.
7. *Who's Who in Shakespeare: A Dictionary of Characters and Proper Names*. Francis Griffin Stokes.

The Editions you will want are the Arden 2 and Arden 3, the two-volume Variorum by H.H. Furness, the three text *Hamlet* by Bernice Kliman, The Norton and Oxford Editions, *The Riverside Shakespeare* and the David Bevington Edition.

**Warning:** be cautious of the Shakespeare-for-Idiots type guidebooks compiled by non-experts that are more often than not way off base. Those titles are designed to give high school students a superficial grasp of the play so they can survive a test in English class. That is the opposite of what you need. Robbing the actors of the depth of Shakespeare's language deprives them of the single greatest textual gift available for their craft.