

Edited by Arthur F. Kinney

Poetics and Praxis,
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Speaking the Speech:

Shakespearean Dialogue

The cult of Shakespeare the poet began early and has continued to flourish in the twentieth century. In *The Poetry of Shakespeare's Plays* F. E. Halliday concludes: "It follows . . . that the plays must be read as we read the works of Milton or any other non-dramatic poet. To hear in a theatre a Shakespearean play that we do not know almost by heart is to miss half its beauty."¹ Few Shakespeare scholars would go this far today. A more temperate view, which recognizes that the verse is intended primarily for speaking, is offered by Bertram Joseph in *Acting Shakespeare*: "Verse speaking is a matter of expressing the sense and its implications and of producing melody. Both melody and meaning are inseparable from the structure of words in which they are both embodied. In the actual speaking, emphasis is varied in order to 'make manifest' the precise sense. . . ."²

This comment strikes a reasonable balance. A speech act is a synthesis, not a mixture. Melody is simply the aesthetic value of the sound of the speech act. It is a corollary of speech, not a separable part, and it is present in all speech, whether in prose or in verse. The habit of thinking of melody as something separable from "precise sense" is misleading. Combined with veneration for Shakespeare the poet, it often leads in performance to what may be called "recitation." In recitation the irregular, multi-valued stress patterns of speech flatten into the regular, monotonous beat of the iambic meter, and the effect of pauses in defining natural syntactical units is offset by a tendency to pause, if only briefly, at the end of each pentameter line. The result is hypnotic, the rhetorical equivalent of Muzak. Whole chunks of meaning are swallowed up by the melody. The attention of the audience wanders until it is caught by a Famous Passage and then wanders anew. Evidently the problem is not unique to the twentieth century. Thomas Heywood seems to have had it in mind when he wrote in his *Apology for Actors*, "Be . . . his pronuntiation neuer so musicall and plausiue, yet without a comely and elegant gesture, a gracious and a bewitching kinde of action . . . I hold all the rest as nothing."³

I

In a print-oriented culture it is natural to regard Shakespeare's plays as words on a page, a text. The Renaissance view was quite different. As Hamlet explains to the players, drama is a mirror held up to Nature. The remark is a Renaissance commonplace. If it is taken seriously, it can tell us a great deal about the Renaissance understanding of drama.

The mirror metaphor opposes life to an image of life. In life we are continuously immersed in situations that cause responses. I enter a dining room and notice that the table is set. My response is a question: "What are we having for dinner?" In a play script this sequence is reversed. If the script lacks stage directions, like most Renaissance scripts, it will contain only the question. The modern director or actor must infer the table settings from the speech. Once inferred they are included in the stage set, and when the play is performed an illusion is created. The table settings seem to the audience to cause the question, as they would in real life, although for the director it was, in fact, the question that caused the table settings. The play is an artifice, an image in a mirror.

A dramatic speech arises from a situation, which may be defined as an array of causes. Some of the causes are obvious from the speech itself, which acts in such cases as an indirect stage direction. When this is true, the task of inferring the causes is simple. Othello says "Keep up your bright swords." The speech indicates that the characters he is addressing have swords. Without the swords the speech would be absurd. Once the characters are given swords, however, it seems perfectly reasonable, like a speech in real life.

Are not the speeches in a drama normally caused by other speeches? If character A asks "What day is today?" and character B replies "Wednesday," is not the question the cause of the answer?

Yes and no. The question is one of the causes of the answer, but not necessarily the most important. Suppose the playwright wants to show that character B is a liar. The audience has learned previously that today is Monday. In this case dishonesty, which is a quality of character, will be the true cause of B's statement that today is Wednesday, and A's question merely a strategy to permit the dishonesty to be exhibited. If the dishonesty is not sufficiently obvious from the statement itself, B may wink at the audience while speaking the line.

Suppose B says "*Wednesday!*" in an agitated whisper. This is because Wednesday is the day when A and B plan to escape from prison. The escape is part of the plot. It is the cause of B's agitation. The microphone hanging from the ceiling of the cell is the cause of the whisper. The microphone is part of the set.

If B shouts "*Wednesday!*" perhaps this is because A is hard of hearing. Perhaps A has been given a hearing aid by the prop department so that the cause cannot be missed. If B says "*Wednesday*" in an angry tone of voice, this may be because A has been pestering him. If B pauses after A's question and looks at a wall calendar, this may be because B is absent-minded or distracted. Perhaps a calendar has been tacked to the wall of the set specifically so that B can look at it before replying.

The word *Wednesday* is neutral. It has only the general meaning assigned to it in the dictionary. It does not take on a precise meaning until its causes have been discovered and incorporated into set, blocking, costume, gesture, expression, and voice inflection at the moment when it is spoken. Taken together, the precise meanings in a play express the motives and emotions which are the source of its illusion of life.

II

To discuss plays in this way requires thinking in terms of performances rather than texts. But performances in the theatre are ephemeral. At the end of its run a production ceases to exist. Reconstructions are possible on the basis of personal memories, reviews, promptbooks, and the like, but even the best reconstructions involve a great deal of unverifiable conjecture. Happily, this situation is now changing. Although there are fundamental differences between live theatre and movies and television, the growing body of Shakespeare on film and videotape allows performances of the latter type to be examined in minute detail. Statements about these recorded performances can be rigorous, moreover, because they can be verified.

The creation of an effective sequence of causes for a brief speech in a Shakespeare play is nicely illustrated by Olivier's film version of *Hamlet*. The speech in question is only three lines. Usually these lines are spoken continuously, with two brief pauses to separate the three sentences:

Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins rememb' red.

(III.i.88-90)

The most obvious cause of this speech is the presence of Ophelia, who does not, at this point, have a line. The cause is visual rather than verbal. Most performances of *Hamlet* stop there.

In Olivier's film the lines are given additional causes. Hamlet is shown walking in a corridor. We know that he is convinced that Claudius is spying on him. He hears a noise but cannot see who has made it. His suspicions are immediately aroused. His line "Soft you now!" means something

like "An unexpected event is happening; I must be careful." He then walks to the end of the corridor and sees Ophelia. She does not "enter" in this version of the play, but is "discovered." Hamlet is relieved and pleased. He exclaims, "The fair Ophelia!" He then walks to her and takes her arm. He notices that she is holding a book of religious devotions. It is the book Polonius gave her before hiding behind the arras. When he gave it to her he remarked:

'Tis too much prov'd, that with devotion's visage
And pious action we do sugar o'er
The devil himself.

(III.i.47-49)

Olivier's decision to make Ophelia's book a devotional manual is justified by this speech, but it is not inevitable. The reason for Olivier's decision is that the devotional manual provides the cause of Hamlet's next words to Ophelia: "Nymph, in thy orisons / Be all my sins rememb'ed."

Instead of being spoken continuously, the speech in Olivier's version is broken by three extended pauses during which Hamlet (1) discovers Ophelia, (2) walks to her, and (3) notices her book. What is normally a rather bland transition becomes, in this performance, a powerfully charged expression of themes that are at the center of the play. The speech seems perfectly, even transparently, natural to the viewer, but the naturalness is the result of an intense analysis of causes. It is poetry of the highest order, not because it is sonorous, but because it is perfectly expressive.

III

The reader of a script forms a generalized mental construct of the situations that generate the speeches. For most readers the construct is adequate as far as plot and character are concerned but vague in respect to the countless immediate causes that are supplied continuously during a performance. To imagine these causes fully would require the reader to do the work done by an entire stage company over several weeks of rehearsal. This would be impossible. Fortunately, it is not necessary. A generalized construct is adequate for normal reading purposes.

A reader has one advantage over members of an audience. He can re-read difficult passages as many times as necessary in order to puzzle them out. On the stage, however, the play moves briskly from beginning to middle to end. Its speeches have to be immediately comprehensible. If a character says "Ouch" for no apparent reason the audience will be baffled, and to that degree the play will go out of focus. If, on the other hand, a piece of furniture is supplied by the prop department against

which the actor can collide, the exclamation becomes perfectly comprehensible and the play can move forward without confusion.

As the example from Olivier's *Hamlet* shows, the problem of inferring causes for real plays is often far more difficult—and the options much more numerous—than simply adding a piece of furniture to the set. But the principle is the same. The clarity of the speeches depends on the presentation of their causes. If melody is something that exists separately from “precise sense,” it is irrelevant to this process. At best it can be a kind of musical underscoring of the causes; at worst it will distract from the causes by calling attention to itself. When the meaning of a speech is unclear, it cannot be saved by the most refined RSC accent or the most melodious delivery. A recent article in *Theatre News* (Fall 1982) quotes Fred Adams, the Artistic Director of the Utah Shakespeare Festival, as follows:

The actor I look for is an actor who, within the discipline of [the] line, can find the thought, and when the actor can bring the thought out, the heck with the poetry. They become one, because the thought is inherent in the poetry and when he is working more for the thought, it all falls into place.⁴

IV

Let us now carry the analysis one step further. The word “action” is ambiguous. It can refer to the sequence of events in a play, and it is identical in this sense with what Aristotle called *praxis*. But it can also refer to the activity, including the acting, which occurs when a play is performed. Aristotle defines drama as the imitation of an action (*praxis*) by means of plot (*muthos*). Plot is the “soul” of drama and the first of drama's six parts. The Greek word *poiein*, from which we derive *poet*, means “to make.” A writer becomes a poet, according to Aristotle, by making plots, not by writing verse. Speech is the fourth of Aristotle's “parts.” It is the means by which the first three—plot, character, and thought—are objectified. The fifth part is spectacle (*opsis*), which is roughly equivalent to the modern concept of “staging.”

Renaissance discussions of drama sometimes use the word *action* in the Aristotelian sense, but they also use it to refer to stage action. This usage is particularly common in remarks about drama by actors and playwrights, because it views drama in terms of its end-product, which is production on a stage. To theatre professionals the action on the stage is important not because it is activity—that is, people moving around—but because it is the way the play makes its essence, its action in the Aristotelian sense, visible to the audience.

A theatre company planning to do a Shakespeare play begins with a script, which is a collection of speeches. Since Shakespeare's stage directions are few and brief, almost everything else must be inferred from the speeches: the plot, the psychology of the characters, and the immediate causes that underlie each scene, including those objectified in the details of the set, the props, the costumes, the blocking of the characters, and the behavior of the characters who do not speak. When each scene is fully realized onstage, the play reveals its action progressively. At the end of the final scene, the action has been fully revealed. There is nothing to add.

Evidently the script is an epiphenomenon. It is visible on the page as a text, but its purpose is to lead a company of actors—and eventually an audience—to matters that are not visible on the page. Getting these matters right for a Shakespeare play is extraordinarily difficult. There are few completely successful Shakespeare productions. The companies with the best record are ensemble companies whose members work together on many plays, a little like the members of an Elizabethan acting company, instead of coming together to produce one play and then disbanding.

To move from script to performance is to involve the whole company in the search for causes. Initially the search is general: "What is this play about? It is about indecision." "Why is this character so erratic? He suffers from an Oedipus complex." Later the search narrows. "Why does Hamlet's tone change abruptly while he is talking with Ophelia? Because Polonius has revealed his presence behind the arras by coughing." As the decisions multiply, they compel other decisions. "Why does Hamlet have an Oedipus complex? Because of Gertrude." Therefore Gertrude must be sensual. She should wear a low-cut dress. She should fawn on Claudius. Perhaps she should moisten her lips frequently or caress her hips or fondle Hamlet when she speaks to him.

V

As has been noted, many causes are obvious. When Othello says, "Keep up your bright swords," the other characters have to have swords. Other causes are more subtle. What, for example, should be done about Othello's sword? The purpose of the episode is to show Othello's authority. Is he not more authoritative if he, alone among the Venetian soldiers, goes without a sword? Or if the director decides that he should wear a sword, is he not more authoritative if he quells the riot without drawing his sword? Consider another instance. In *Julius Caesar* the conspirators stab Caesar with short swords. At the end of the play Cassius remarks that he will end his life with the sword he used against Caesar. Nothing has to be made of this. On the other hand, it can readily be used for thematic reinforcement. If Cassius' sword is sufficiently distinctive to

be recognizable, it can cause an ironic reflection: the instrument of murder is the instrument of the punishment for murder; he who lives by the sword dies by it.

Clear enough. But what props should be used in the tavern scenes in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*? Drinking cups, certainly, because the speeches mention drinking. But how should the cups be used? Should Falstaff drink only before a speech or when a line mentions drinking, or should he freely punctuate his speeches with draughts of sack? If the answer to the latter question is *yes*, as it is in many productions, the draughts of sack become the causes of moments of silence. These moments can be used, in turn, for dramatic emphasis or humor, or simply to break lengthy speeches into short units that are easily understood by the audience.

At the beginning of *The Comedy of Errors* Aegeon delivers a long speech recounting his pitiful misadventures. It is interrupted twice by comments from the duke. Although no one else speaks, the initial stage direction and the formality of the proceedings justify the inference that Aegeon is addressing a large audience. How should the listeners be deployed? What sort of byplay should occur as they listen, and how should Aegeon react to the byplay? Without byplay, the speech is a tedious lump of exposition. Appropriate byplay brings the speech to life by supplying causes for the way it is organized and for changes in Aegeon's emotions and tone of voice as he delivers it. A similar problem is created by Prospero's long expository speech near the beginning of *The Tempest*. Here there is only one listener, Miranda. If the interaction between father and daughter is made emphatic, the speech ceases to be exposition and becomes drama. If not, it becomes a narrative lump to be disposed of as painlessly as possible so that the real play can begin. Finding the causes for the movements of Prospero's thought, for the changes in his mood, and for Miranda's decisions to break in where she does and not elsewhere is the initial challenge of *The Tempest*. Productions of the play seem to fail to meet this challenge as often as they succeed.

VI

Thus far we have considered theory and stage practice. It will now be useful to turn to historical evidence. In the first place, Shakespeare and his contemporaries wrote plays in blank verse which looks very much like poetry, in the sense of melodious language, and not in prose. Did they not intend these plays to be poetic in the sense of melodic? In the second place, once written, the blank verse was spoken by actors. Did the actors emphasize the melody of the verse or de-emphasize it, and did the audience respond to the melody or ignore it? Since Shake-

speare was a member of an acting company, he had to write plays that the actors approved and that drew audiences. For Shakespeare, questions of literary style are inseparable from questions of acting style and popular taste.

In *The Poetics of Jacobean Drama* Coburn Freer argues that the poetry of verse drama was important for Elizabethan actors and audiences in addition to being appreciated as dramatic speech. Later, when the plays were read more often than seen in the theatre, they began to be considered “poems” and were valued more for the elegance of their language than for their action. As this happened, playwrights began to consider themselves “men of letters” and to write as much for the reading public as for the stage.⁵

Freer seeks to redress the imbalance created by print culture, and he shows convincingly that Jacobean dramatists used poetry dramatically to reinforce theme, plot, and character.

Without in any way detracting from Freer’s very considerable accomplishment, it is possible to note that many Renaissance authors cited by Freer attack drama that is self-consciously “poetic.” Thomas Nashe, for example, condemns “ideot Art-masters . . . who (mounted on the stage of arrogance) thinke to out-brave better pennes with the swelling bumbast of bragging blanke verse . . . [and] the spacious volubilitie of a drumming decasillabon.”⁶ Nashe’s point seems to be that many Elizabethan authors rely on exotic sound effects rather than careful dramaturgy. The word “bombast” occurs frequently in Elizabethan comments on dramatic verse. It is normally used, as here by Nashe, to criticize verse that calls attention to itself and panders to the groundlings. One of Greene’s charges against Shakespeare is that he “supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blanke verse as the best of you.”⁷ Joseph Hall, who is also cited by Freer, cites *Tamburlaine* as a notorious example of inflated verse and goes on to ridicule all theatre poetry. Such poetry does not mean very much, Hall observes, but it pleases the crowd:

[If the author] can with termes Italianate,
Big-sounding sentences, and words of state,
Faire patch me up his pure *Iambick* verse,
He ravishes the gazing Scaffolders.⁸

As Freer observes, Hall “rejects [verse drama] altogether, emphasizing in particular the link between its emptiness of content and its sloppiness of technique.”⁹ Charges of bombast and sloppy technique do not show special sensitivity to the verse element in drama. Instead they show scorn for it—either in general, as in Hall’s case, or, as in the case of Nashe, in those instances where sound effects are used to hide poverty of invention.

Renaissance attacks on excessively poetic language are complemented by arguments that drama is essentially plot rather than language. These

arguments are derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*. They appear in England first in Sir Philip Sidney's assertion in the *Apology for Poetry* that verse is "but an ornament and no cause to Poetry."¹⁰ Nine years after the publication of the *Apology*, John Marston remarked in his preface to *The Malcontent*:

I would fain leave the paper; only one thing affects me to think that scenes invented, merely [i.e., "purely"] to be spoken, should be enforcedly published to be read . . . but I shall entreat . . . that the unhandsome shape which this trifle in reading presents may be pardoned for the pleasure if afforded you when it was presented with the soul of lively action.¹¹

The word *soul* suggests that Marston is thinking of Aristotle. He is, at any rate, in accord with Sidney. It is action, not language, that the play is intended to express, and it is an "unhandsome shape . . . in reading." A similar position is taken by Sir Richard Baker in *Theatrum Triumphans* (1670) during a discussion of the sources of dramatic pleasure:

The *Ingeniousness* of the Speech, when it is fitted to the Person; and the *Gracefulness* of the *Action*, when it is fitted to the speech; and therefore a Play *read*, hath not half the pleasure of a Play *Acted* . . . and we may well acknowledge that *Gracefulness of Action* is the greatest pleasure of a Play.¹²

The word *action* as used by Marston and Baker is ambiguous for reasons already noted. Marston seems closer to, and Baker more distant from, Aristotle. But we are on solidly Aristotelian ground with the preface by John Dennis to *The Comical Gallant* (1702):

As in the mixture of the Humane frame,
'Tis not the Flesh, 'tis the Soul makes the Man,
So of Dramatic Poems we may say,
'Tis not the Lines, 'tis the Plot makes the Play.
The Soul of every Poem's the design,
And words but serve to make that move and shine.¹³

As should be clear, Dennis' comments have a long tradition behind them. A corollary of this tradition is the idea that dramatic verse should be "conversational" rather than "poetic." The Italian poet Trissino observed in 1521 in the introduction to his tragedy *Sophonisba* that unrhymed verses (*versi sciolti*) are proper for drama because they permit the rapid give-and-take of natural dialogue.¹⁴ In England, drama abandoned fourteeners for blank verse, not because blank verse was more poetic, but because it was less artificial—more like natural speech and better suited to expressing what Marston calls "the soul of lively action." It may be noted that the tradition associating blank verse with natural speech was

still strong in 1665 when Thomas Howard defended it in the preface of *Four New Plays* with the observation that rhyme is premeditated and hence unnatural and improbable in drama. John Dennis sums up the tradition. In his essay on *The Genius and Writings of Shakespeare* (1712) he observes that Shakespeare

. . . seems to have been the very Original of our *English* Tragical Harmony; that is the Harmony of Blank Verse, diversified often by Dissyllable and Trissyllable Terminations. For that Diversity distinguishes it from Heroick Harmony, and bringing it nearer to common Use, makes it more proper to gain Attention, and more fit for Action and Dialogue. Such Verse we make when we are writing prose; we make such Verse in common Conversation.¹⁵

Freer considers this comment a bizarre "Augustan" approach to Shakespeare.¹⁶ In fact, the reference to a dramatic form of verse that is different from heroic and closer to "common use" and "conversation" comes straight from the *ars metrica*, which was taught in Elizabethan grammar schools along with Plautus and Seneca, and the comments on gaining attention and on action and dialogue are paraphrased from Horace's *Ars Poetica*.

Renaissance opinions about dramatic verse were at best divided. But one may suggest guardedly that the balance favors the idea that drama is action and that dialogue should incline to the norm of conversation. The groundlings liked Marlowe's "mighty line," but they also liked the more restrained style of the later Shakespeare, and they liked prose dialogue, as witness the popularity of Falstaff. It is undoubtedly true, however, that in the seventeenth century dramatists began to write for the printing press as well as the theatre. Ben Jonson is in the forefront of these dramatists, and the list includes Chapman and Fletcher as well as closet dramatists like Fulke Greville and John Milton. In all of these authors a desire for literary elegance competes with concern for effective stage drama.

VII

The emphasis of Sidney on plot and of Marston on "action" raises the question of how verse was spoken by Renaissance actors. It is useful to approach this subject by asking how verse was spoken by people in general during Shakespeare's lifetime. Unquestionably it was spoken as variously as it is by people today, but an idea of what was considered proper is provided by John Brinsley's textbook *Ludus Literarius*, published in 1612. Brinsley distinguishes between the way verse (in this case Latin verse) is recited in school and the way it should be recited in normal circumstances:

So in all Poetry, for the pronounciation, it is to bee uttered as prose; observing distinctions and the nature of the matter, not to bee tuned foolishly or childishly after the manner of scanning a Verse as it now of some is.¹⁷

This suggests a naturalistic delivery de-emphasizing meter and emphasizing motive and emotion. It accords nicely with a straightforward interpretation of Hamlet's advice to the players about speaking English verse. Speeches are to be spoken "trippingly on the tongue"—that is, they should not be slurred. Passions are not to be "torn to tatters"—that is, the actor should imitate the expression of passion in real life. The action should be suited to the word and the word to the action—that is, gesture and speech inflection should complement each other. Thomas Heywood amplifies Hamlet's advice about words and actions in his *Apology for Actors* (1612). Rhetoric teaches the actor, he says, "to fit his phrases to his action and his action to his phrase, and his pronounciation to them both."¹⁸ In this comment "phrase" appears to mean syntactical rhythm, the thought rhythm of the sentence. "Action" means gesture and expression. "Pronounciation" seems to mean intonation, which is a matter of emotion—angry, sorrowful, joyful, ironic, and the like. None of these is related to verse as verse. All of them are related to what Brinsley calls "distinctions and the nature of the matter"—that is, "precise sense."

Unfortunately these instructions tell us little about Renaissance actors. In *Theatre for Shakespeare* (1955) Alfred Harbage complains, "There is extant not a single piece of analytic description of Elizabethan acting in general or of an Elizabethan actor in a particular role."¹⁹ Despite this lack of evidence, Harbage concludes that Elizabethan acting was "formal," which presumably means stylized gestures and heavy emphasis on the poetic qualities of the verse.

Harbage's conclusions are similar to those reached by Bertram Joseph in the first edition of *Elizabethan Acting* (1951). To remedy the lack of evidence for acting *qua* acting, Joseph turned to the rhetorical theory of delivery. Here there was ample evidence, including the elaborately illustrated treatise on delivery by John Bulwer titled *Chironomia* (1644). Joseph concludes that Elizabethan acting followed rhetorical formulas. He speculates that the speech of the actors might have been like "*stilo recitativo*" and "chant" or opera.²⁰ He states emphatically that "the naturalistic conception of drama" has no relevance to the English Renaissance stage.²¹

This might seem to settle the matter. In 1964, however, a second edition of *Elizabethan Acting* appeared. In the second edition the references to *stilo recitativo* and opera have been dropped. The thrust of the second edition is summed up in a word which was explicitly rejected in the first edition. The word is "naturalness":

As the Elizabethan actor responded to variations in the style of his lines, so the style of his performance varied. Rhythm, tempo of speech and movement, and melody of speech would have been affected by stylistic variations, but there would still have remained untouched the essential naturalness of behavior, which was that of such a person communicating what was within him in the circumstances of action.²²

This description is reasonable. Although there were doubtless many acting styles in the sixteenth century, this comment is consistent with Richard Flecknoe's famous description of Burbage's acting:

. . . *Burbidge*, of whom we may say that he was a delightful *Proteus*, so wholly transforming himself into his Part, and putting off himself with his Cloathes, as he never (not so much as in the Tying-house) assum'd himself again until the Play was done; there being as much difference betwixt him and one of our common Actors, as between a Ballad-singer who onely mouths it, and an excellent singer, who knows all his Graces, and can artfully vary and modulate his Voice, even to know how much breath he is to give to every syllable. He had all the parts of an excellent Orator, animating his words with speaking, and Speech with Action; his Auditors being never more delighted then when he spake, nor more sorry then when he held his peace; yet even then he was an excellent Actor still, never falling in his Part when he had done speaking, but with his looks and gesture maintaining it still unto the heighth, he imagining *Age quod agis* onely spoke to him: 'so as those who call him a Player do him wrong, no man being less idle then he whose whole life is nothing else but action; with only this difference from other mens, that as what is but a Play to them is his Business, so their business is but a play to him.²³

VIII

To return to Shakespeare, it is an over-simplification to assume that norms of dramatic dialogue are determined by limitations of the ability of the audience to understand natural speaking. Drama is a code. As long as the code is shared by actors and audience, almost any stylistic norm from Kabuki to Stanislavski will work. The question is, what was the code of Shakespeare's theatre? The answer suggested, though tentatively, by a review of the historical evidence is that the norm was somewhat closer to natural speaking than has been generally admitted. This may explain why the productions of Brian Bedford at the Stratford Festival in Ontario have been so successful both with audiences and with crit-

ics. Bedford tends to de-emphasize the melody of Shakespeare's verse in order to emphasize its "precise meaning." His quite unmelodious delivery of Angelo's lines in *Measure for Measure* helped to create what may be the definitive version of the play for the present generation. Is it not possible that he succeeded because his acting style approximated the acting style for which the play was originally written? When directing *Titus Andronicus* Bedford accomplished a still more difficult feat. He overcame Shakespeare's lurid Ovidian verse and showed that wrapped in it is a play of considerable power, even though it is no masterpiece. The success of Bedford's *Titus* also suggests something about Shakespeare's apprenticeship. The actors who first performed *Titus* were seasoned professionals. Is it not possible that, like Bedford, they recognized a drama latent in the verse of *Titus* and performed it in the expectation that its author would improve with experience? Of course he did improve. In the process, he may have learned as much from the actors as they eventually learned from him.

Whatever the reasons, Shakespeare became less interested in poetry for the sake of poetry as he matured. In *Titus* the poetry is gratuitous. Only the most inspired performance can keep the play from becoming *grande guignol* melodrama. In the mature plays, conversely, the norm is more conversational, and it is the clear establishment of this norm that makes the great poetic moments so effective. In fact, in *Hamlet* Shakespeare seems to call attention to the dialogue norm through passages that contrast with it. The "play within a play" is identified by its dumbshow as archaic; it is written in heroic couplets, which is probably as close as Shakespeare dared come to the fourteeners of the older drama except in comic episodes like the play of *Pyramus and Thisby* in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The player's speech about Hecuba is written in heavily-accented, highly-ornamental blank verse. It is not archaic, but it is definitely old-fashioned. Both the "play within the play" and the player's speech stand out because they are "poetic" in comparison to the play's norm.²⁴

The language in Shakespeare's mature drama is validated by its relation to action rather than to poetry. The relation is expressed by the actor through gesture, facial expression, and voice inflection. Without entering the labyrinth of modern linguistics, one can observe that the phonetic codes of voice inflection depend on stress, pitch, and duration. The phonetic codes are supplemented by syntactic codes that include rhythm, stress, gradation, and silence. If the action of a play manifests itself in each scene as an array of causes, phonetic and syntactic codes allow the causes to be objectified in speech. The melody of this kind of speech is its sound regarded aesthetically. It is a corollary or by-product, not a separable element.

Poetic codes, on the other hand, arise from characteristics of language rather than action. Iambic pentameter is an arrangement of stresses that is much the same in any situation, and an English sonnet is fourteen lines of rhymed iambic pentameter whether it is written in the Renaissance or in the Romantic period and whether its subject is love or revolution. All good poets adapt meter to subject, but this is not the point. If the responsibility of an actor is to sound like "such a person communicating what was within him in the circumstances of the action," to use Bertram Joseph's description, the responsibility of blank verse is to sound like blank verse. "The sound of blank verse" is what admirers of Shakespeare's poetry mean by the "melody" of his line. It implies making the five-beat rhythm and such additional sound effects as substitution, caesura, and alliteration perceptible in speech. But, as has been noted, this kind of speaking easily becomes recitation. Stendhal remarked that the public of his day "loves to hear the recitation of lofty sentiments in fine verse." He added, however, that true dramatic pleasure occurs when we forget our surroundings and the speech medium and succumb to the stage illusion.

No one would deny that Shakespeare wrote supremely beautiful and melodic passages. Obviously, he did. In the mature plays these passages coincide with moments of great emotional intensity, like the moment when Prospero abandons his magic, or with lyrical moments like Perdita's sheep-shearing festival. Even normally prosy characters like Enobarbus and Caliban become poetic when deeply moved. In such cases the poetry is both an expression of mood and an indirect stage direction, as explicit as a stage direction by Shaw in *Major Barbara*. It says, "This moment is critical; make sure you give it the proper emphasis." To the audience the poetry seems natural and reasonable at such a moment because it expresses causes that explain it. From the point of view taken here, the poetry arises from and is validated by the action, which remains in Shakespeare, as in Aristotle, the soul of drama.

IX

A final observation. If Renaissance dramatists valued blank verse because of its conversational quality, why were they so reluctant to use prose? Dramatic dialogue began in England with the chanted dialogue of liturgical drama. It changed into complex rhyming stanzas in the Corpus Christi plays, and into fourteeners in the mid-sixteenth century. Fourteeners gave way to prose and blank verse for comedy and to blank verse for serious drama, but there the movement toward simplified dialogue stopped. The Restoration, in fact, reverted to couplets. Not until George

Lillo's *London Merchant* (1731) did England produce a respectable tragedy in prose, and prose did not become the norm for serious drama in English until the late nineteenth century.

The shift from the chanted dialogue of liturgical drama to prose is part of a larger movement. It is a movement, generally, from ritual to naturalistic forms of expression. Verse and stylized acting are signs that the English theatre continued to be influenced, at least until the 1590s, by the ritual traditions of the Middle Ages. Between *Tamburlaine* and the closing of the theatres, there seems to have been a gradual shift toward naturalism. It was encouraged by the Aristotelianism evident in Sidney's *Apology*. It is expressed in the widespread criticism of "bombast" in dramatic dialogue and in the increasing use of stichomythia and prose between 1600 and 1640, even though the counter-tendency to regard plays as "literature" was undoubtedly also at work. On the other hand, the movement remained tentative. The tradition of using prose for "lower-class" characters and verse for upper-class ones, and the continued presence of explicitly lyrical passages in Shakespeare and the Jacobean dramatists examined by Coburn Freer shows that the older tradition still exerted a powerful influence up to the closing of the theatres.

After the Restoration the Renaissance tradition was modified, though not entirely replaced, in England by neoclassic style. Couplets were not defended on the basis of their expression of "Nature," but on the basis of their ability to protect the poet from flights of fancy and "enthusiasm" which carried him beyond Nature. The debate over couplets and blank verse is beyond the scope of this essay, but it can be followed in critical statements by Howard, Dryden, and Milton, among others.

The cult of drama as literature played a large part in preserving verse drama in the Romantic and Victorian periods. Renaissance dramatists, however, probably had a practical reason, in addition to the pull of tradition, for retaining blank verse. The most frequent explanation for verse from the Greeks to Wordsworth's preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is that it is easy to memorize.²⁵ The explanation is correct. Verse is much easier to memorize than prose. Renaissance actors had to commit a staggering number of lines to memory. Not only did they frequently play double or triple roles in a single play, but they had to perform in several plays in the course of a typical week.

The actors must have needed all the aids to memory that were available. If, by 1600, the norm for acting was speech rather than recitation, one significant motive for retaining verse must have been that it is easier to memorize than prose. If this conjecture has merit, it follows that actors shared responsibility with tradition, bombast-loving groundlings, and dramatists aspiring to literary fame for the retention of blank verse in English Renaissance drama.

X

Throughout this discussion “verse” has been used in opposition to “prose.” Verse and prose, however, are both literary. They are intended for reading or recitation. A script is different from a text. By the same token, the speeches in a script, whether in meter or not, are different from literature. To call them verse (or poetry) or prose is to perpetuate the misunderstandings introduced by print culture. Not even Coburn Freer entirely escapes this error, for his discussion is concerned principally with dramatic elements such as theme, plot, and characterization which are found in a text, and seldom with values that emerge only in production. The term “dialogue” expresses precisely what the speeches (including the soliloquies) in a script want to be. It therefore might be salutary to abandon the words *verse* and *prose* along with the word *text* when dealing with drama and to adopt the word *dialogue* along with the word *script*. The question of dialogue in blank verse or fourteeners or prose is quite different from the question of verse and prose in general.

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