
Shakespeare composed multiple forms of poetry, or verse, for different kinds of dramas and a wide range of characters and plots. In taking up the topic of prosody, the study of the kinds of poetic composition, this chapter will show how his predominant verse form contributes to the theatrical effectiveness and meaning of his plays. But first a broad definition may be helpful: Verse may be defined as a succession of articulate sounds regulated by a rhythm so definite, that we can readily foresee the results that follow from its application. Rhythm is also met with in prose, but in the latter its range is so wide, that we can never anticipate its flow, while the pleasure we derive from verse is founded on this very anticipation.1

Although composed nearly 200 years ago, this formulation offers a clear distinction between ordinary language and most types of poetry. It is especially useful in identifying the sense of expectation that poetic form stimulates in the perceiver. In most English prose, a listener hears the reiterated rhythm, presumes and desires that it will continue, and notices when it changes or fails. A simple illustration of such an aural design is found in Macbeth:

Eye of newt and toe of frog,  
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,  
Adder's finger and blind-worm's sting,  
Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,  
For a charm of powerful trouble,  
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.  

(4.1.14-19)

Here the patterns depend upon both rhythm and rhyme. While Shakespeare works in a variety of poetic forms, some stymied and some unrhymed, all his verse is rhythmic. The particular rhythms derive from the chosen meter, the measured arrangement of sounds in the poetic line, or, simply, the 'beat'.

Metre in verse creates meaning, as a modern critic explains: First, all meter, by distinguishing rhythmic from ordinary statement, objectifies that statement and impels it toward a significant formality and even ritualism. The second way a meter can "mean" is by varying from itself ... departures from metrical norms powerfully reinforce emotional effects. First the ponem, and then variation of the pattern: these are the two central concepts required for an understanding of Shakespeare's poetic
style. For the original audiences, such patterning was one of the principal attractions of
the theatrical experience. Today, however, we tend to prefer what Gertrude in Hamlet
calls ‘more matter with less art’ (2.2.96). In other words, we like theatre to look and
sound ‘natural’ or ‘realistic’, suspecting that artifice or obvious ornament is pretentious
or at least inauthentic. Too many modern actors and directors disregard the rhythmic
structure of dramatic speech, instead pausing for effect when it suits them, or perhaps
lingering indulgently over favourite words. Their aim is to make the language sound
more ‘natural’, the character’s speech more psychologically credible. But Shakespeare
and his audience delighted in patterns and forms, and to neglect the rhythm of the
lines is to deprive the listener of vast resources of pleasure and significance.

The pattern of blank verse

The verse form that Shakespeare favoured for dramatic speech, what we might call
his default metre, is unrhymed iambic pentameter, or blank verse. An iamb is a two-
syllable unit of sound, with the first syllable unstressed and the second stressed (‘7’). A
good example of a natural iamb is the word because, which never varies in pronunci-
ation: the first syllable is always soft, the second hard (an alternative description to
‘unstressed’ and ‘stressed’). Other kinds of poetic units are available, each known as a
poetic ‘foot’: the most common are the trochee (as in ‘essay’), the dactyl (as in ‘care-
fully’), and the anapest (as in ‘interrupt’), and virtually all poets occasionally enlist
these feet for particular dramatic purposes. But the iamb is by far the dominant unit in
English poetry from the middle ages to the modern period, and some writers attribute
its centrality to its correspondence with ‘the natural rhythm of the language’.2 The
structure of blank verse, with its alternation of unstressed and stressed syllables, creates
a pulsating rhythm that is predictable, reliable, and thus comforting in its regularity. It
is said that the alternation of unstressed and stressed sounds approximates the ‘lub-
dub’ rhythm of the human heartbeat, and that since this rhythm is slightly faster than
the heartbeat, it quickens our pulse and thus impels us to match the slightly faster
pace. Metre first creates a relation between speaker and listener. As it does so, it also
unites an audience in the perception of the rhythmic pattern, affording them what has
been called ‘the experience of simultaneity’.4

In most of Shakespeare’s verse, five iambics are joined together to form a poetic line of
iambic pentameter. We might begin by ‘scanning’ two well-known lines, i.e. noticing
and marking the number of feet and the stresses within them:

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?
(Roméo and Juliet, 2.1.44)

He fairest loved me, oft invited me
(Othello, 1.3.127)

The number of feet is significant because it is not too few and not too many. Lines
containing two feet (dactyl) or three (trimeter) or four (tetrameter) sound brief and
somehow naive, an effect Shakespeare exploits for the paradoxical tragedy that ends
A Midsummer Night’s Dream:

And farewell friends,
Thus Thoë ends.
Adieu, adieu, adieu.
(5.1.332-4)

Children’s poems or nonsense rhymes understandably employ such metre, in which
the rhymes or stops come so close together. On the other hand, lines extending longer
than five feet frequently split in half, a problem apparent in a passage from The
Arrangement of Paris, a play written in the early 1580s by George Peele:

OENONE. False Paris, this was not thy vow, when thou and I were one,
To range and change old love for new; but now those days be gone.
But I will find the goddess out, that she thy vow may read,
And fill these woods with my lament, for thy unhappy deed.
(3.3.585-6)

By contrast with these two extreme cases, the five-syllable line is just right: long
enough not to sound stale, and short enough not to fracture.

The adjective ‘blank’ in ‘blank verse,’ signifying an absence or lack, establishes one of
the defining characteristics of the form, the absence of rhyme. Until the middle of
the sixteenth century, all English poetry was composed to rhyme in some fashion,
whether in couplets or alternating lines or some other scheme: prominent examples
are the ten-syllable rhyming lines of Geoffrey Chaucer’s The Canterbury Tales or the
lyric poems of the early Renaissance, such as Thomas Wyatt’s sonnets. But apparently
poets perceived a need for an alternate verse form appropriate for serious narrative
poems.

The first known example of blank verse written in English was a translation by Henry
Howard, Earl of Surrey, of part of Books II and IV of Virgil’s great epic, the Aeneid. Surrey
was perhaps prompted to his formal experiment by an Italian translation of Virgil
published in 1539; it was composed in an unrhymed eleven-syllable line known as
versi scolasti, or ‘freetext’, i.e. freed from the constraints of rhyme.5 Although Surrey
probably completed his translation in the 1540s, it first appeared in Tate’s Miscellany,
an important collection of 271 poems published in 1556. The expressive possibilities
inherent in the form apparently struck other writers fairly quickly. It was taken up by
Roger Sackville and Thomas Norton for their drama Gorboduc (performed in 1559), and
within a mere three decades it had become the dominant medium for serious English
playwrights.

To establish a kind of base line against which to measure later developments,
especially Shakespeare’s distinctive handling of the form, it is useful to listen to an
example of early Elizabethan blank verse so as to observe its rhythmic properties in a relatively uncomplicated state. In the second act of *Gorboduc*, Sackville and Norton stage the dangers of political division by setting two brothers, Ferrex and Porrex, against each other. Here Porrex declares his unwillingness to communicate further with his treacherous sibling:

PORREX: In mischief such as Ferrex now intends,
   The woeful instruments of war by them use.
   Shall I so hazard any one of mine?
   Shall I betray my trusty frieonds to him?
   That have disclosed his treason unto me?
   Let him entreat that fear, I fear him not.
   Or shall I, to the king, my father send?
   Yea, and send now, while such a mother lives,
   That loves my brother and that hates thine?

(2.2.42-51)

This is what an uncomplicated, standard version of blank verse sounds like. The ear immediately registers the uniformity of the iambic structure, the almost unwavering succession of similar units of sound, unstressed-stressed. No line lacks a syllable; no line contains an eleventh syllable (i.e., no line is 'hypermetrical'); no line displays a feminine ending (i.e., a case in which the final word has an added, unstressed syllable). Units of thought tend to correspond to units of poetry: in other words, phrases and clauses are apt to fall into ten-syllable segments. Every line but one is end-stopped, and even when the stop is only a pause, the speech unfolds in regular measures of five iambics. Only rarely do the poets depart from their firm rhythmic structure. In the third line, a double accent calls attention to the phrase 'just war'. And, most noticeably, at the head of the next-to-last line, the stress falls on 'yea', the syllable that would normally be unstressed, as a trochee ('yéa', and) is substituted for an iamb.

Such simple variation opens a window onto the potential complexity of the medium. A generation later Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, George Peele, George Chapman, and other poets and playwrights began to explore these possibilities in earnest, developing the sound of dramatic speech and making it suitable for the representation of complex human problems. Marlowe in particular adopted certain strategies to 'colour' the verse, to make certain words and phrases stand out in relief from the regularity of the line: in particular he liked to end a line with an impressive sounding proper name which, while conforming to the metrical pattern, finished the phrase definitively and advertised the poet's virtuosity, nouns such as 'Persepolis', 'Zenocrate', 'Tripoli', and 'Tamburlaine'. When Shakespeare appeared on the scene around 1590, he began by imitating Marlowe and his contemporaries, and the blank verse of his earliest theatrical efforts, while not without interest and occasional brilliance, is not much more structurally complicated than the lines from *Gorboduc*.

Shortly, however, the young Shakespeare began to exploit the potential variables. Over the course of his career he utterly transformed the sound of the pentameter line. The sophistication of his mature verse, particularly its distance from the uncomplicated lines from *Gorboduc*, is audible in almost any passage from one of his last plays, as in the fourth act of *Cymbeline*, when the heroine awakens from a drugged sleep:

   Yes, sir, to Milford Haven, Which is the way?
   I thank you. By yon bush? Pray, how far thither?
   O'd's pipekins, can it be six mile yet?
   I have gone all night. Faith, I'll lie down and sleep. 

(4.2.293-6)

This is still blank verse, but it is the work of a writer who has been experimenting with the form for twenty years. The remoteness from the early versions of iambic pentameter, including Shakespeare's own, could hardly be more striking. Regularity is maintained, but only barely, because the poet has admitted numerous variations and challenges to the sovereignty of the pentameter line.

The animating factor in Shakespeare's poetry, as in most English blank verse, is the tension between the iambic pattern and opposition to its regularity. The process of fitting English sentences into the pentameter frame generates a series of rhythmic variations, violations of the underlying scheme that range from the practically imperceptible to the fiercely arresting. The most efficient way of understanding Shakespeare's achievement is to survey some of these major deviations, identifying and illustrating the way the poet modifies the basic rhythm for the purposes of music and meaning.

**Variations of the pattern**

Although every line of iambic pentameter resembles every other, thanks to the similarity of structure, nevertheless some form of acoustic variation touches every line. Consider two famous cases. First, the Prince of Denmark's very first utterance:

> A little more than kin and les then kind.  

( *Hamlet*, 1.2.65 )

Strictly speaking, the line offers no irregularities, no variations in the iambic beat. And yet there are audible differences among the degrees of stress given to each hard syllable: the first syllable of 'little', even though it occupies a stressed position and is crucial to the meaning of the statement, probably receives less emphasis than the nouns 'kin' or 'kind'. No two actors speaking the line will give it precisely the same inflection. Second, the opening line of *Twelfth Night*:
If music be the food of love, play on
(Twelfth Night, 1.1.1)

Here 'play on' is technically an iamb, although it is often spoken as a spondee, a foot in which equal stress is given to both syllables: play on. Even if the actor slavishly obeys the iambic structure, giving less weight to the technically unstressed 'play' and more to the stressed 'on', still 'play' will receive a stronger hit than any of the other four unstressed syllables in the line (if; is, the, and of).

Thus, in every line of Shakespearean iambic pentameter the regularity of the stressed and unstressed sounds is present but not absolute. And in no two lines will the pattern be identical. Each line is distinctive, varying according to the semantic sense of the words and the delivery of the actor.

A major variant that appears infrequently in the early plays and becomes more prominent as the poet matures artistically is the practice of dividing a line of iambic pentameter between two speakers—and sometimes more than two. Earlier dramatists tended to write fairly long speeches for their characters, but as they gained experience their scenes became increasingly dialogic, making the sharing of a line seem natural:

CASSIUS: Who offered him the crown?
CASCA: Why, Antony.
(Julius Caesar, 1.2.233)

Such dovetailing of lines and even shorter segments makes the dialogue more conversational, less oratorical: characters seem to be talking with one another, not just at one another. The division of lines also accelerates the tempo of a conversation or a group scene. As characters trade off phrases in a rhythmic fashion, the listener may intuit a growing agitation or increasingly intimate engagement. This is especially true of argumentative characters such as Petruchio and Katherine in The Taming of the Shrew, or Richard III and his adversaries.

Sometimes multiple effects attend such sharing of lines, as in the scene from Troilus and Cressida where Cressida is presented to the Greek army:

ULYSSES: May I, sweet lady, beg a kiss of you?
CRESSIDA: You may.
ULYSSES: I do desire it.
CRESSIDA: Why, beg too.
DIOMEDES: Lady, a word, I'll bring you to your father.
NESTOR: A woman of quick sense.
ULYSSES: Fie, he upon her!
(4.6.48-9, 54-5)

The poet intended the rhythm to be heard, thus framing the moment in a kind of touchy formality. Also, the splitting of these lines creates a flirtatious repartee, an exchange presumably troubling to spectators who have just witnessed the amorous paring of Cressida from Troilus.

In the previous passage, Ulysses' line contains eleven syllables: a common Shakespearean variant is to allow an extra syllable, or sometimes two or three, making what is called a hypometric or extrametrical line. Usually, although not always, the extra syllable hangs off the end of the line. In fact, the most famous line in all of world drama is hypometric. Whether scanned as

To be or not to be, that is the question,

or

To be or not to be, that is the question,

Hamlet's opening line has eleven syllables.

Early on Shakespeare assigns these extra syllables specific tasks, such as the elucidation of character. For example, when Richard III awakens from a dream just before the final battle at Bosworth Field, the flaccid line endings connote irresolution and self-doubt:

...All seven are, all used in each degree,
Throng to the hot, cry ' гард! 'Gulity, guil' me.
I shall despise. There is no creature loves me,

Methought the souls of all that I had murdered
Came to my tent, and every one did threat
Tomorrow's vengeance on the head of Richard.
(5.3.124-4, 158-60)

Regret and fear, emotions new to Richard, require accentuation, and the extra syllables effectively perform such labour. Furthermore, they are supported in this task by other corruptions of the familiar beat. In the early plays, with their poetic uniformity, hypermetry is relatively rare, so that an overcrowded line occurs only about ten percent of the time. As Shakespeare's career progressed, however, he became increasingly tolerant of the additional syllable, so that by the end of his career every third line is hypometric. The result is a deliberately complex, challenging metrical scheme appropriate for ambiguously represented characters and actions.

The more he begins to play with the form, the more Shakespeare seems to enjoy cutting off a speaker or stopping a sentence in the middle of a line. This mid-line pause is known as a casse, from the Latin word for 'cut', cæsare. Such a hesitation or halt is by no means a Shakespearean innovation: from Surrey forward every poet who wrote blank verse either pauses, changes direction, or ends a sentence in the middle of the line. But the frequent use of mid-line pauses, even of several stops in a single line, is characteristic of a much more sophisticated form of poetry, a style of verse written for a more acoustically sensitive audience. Elizabethan dramatic poets, the young Shakespeare among them, tended to stop after the fourth or the sixth syllable, i.e. after the second or third foot. This is especially true in speeches where the previous line is enjambed (when the phrase is allowed to run into the next line without an end-stop), as in this passage from one of the earliest histories, Henry VI Part Two:
Sometime he talks as if Duke Humphrey’s ghost were by his side; sometime he calls the King. (3.2.375–6)

A more adventurous use of the pause occurs in Isabella’s passionate plea to Angelo in Measure for Measure:

ISABELLA: ... How would you be
If he which is the top of judgement should
But judge you as you are? O, think on that,
And mercy then will breathe within your lips,
Like man new made.

ANGELO: Be you content, fair maid,
It is the law, not I, condemn your brother.
(2.2.77-82)

Such rhythmic complexity is typical of Shakespeare’s work from mid-career, i.e. from Hamlet forward.

The most complicated kind of stop is that known as an ‘epic caesura’: the pause comes after the unstressed half of an iambic foot; sometimes this soft beat is an extra syllable; and usually the next syllable is unstressed as well. That doubling of unstressed syllables, with a stop between them, serves to isolate the two parts of the thought and thus to sharpen the thematic contrast, as after the murder in Macbeth:

Wake Duncan with thy knocking, I would thou couldst.
(2.2.72)

Eoles in the line make a strong impression, but their effect depends entirely on the listener’s familiarity with the normally seamless verse.

Frequently the poet disrupts the metrical structure by inverting the stresses in the iambic foot, that is, substituting a trochee for an iamb. Richard III famously begins with a soliloquy in which the villain seizes the audience’s attention and announces his monstrous plan. The speech, and therefore the play, begins with an inverted foot:

Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this son of York
(1.1.1-2)

After the initial trochee the line rights itself and finds its regular rhythm, but the first stressed syllable proclaims Richard’s individualism and audacity. Antony and Cleopatra also begins with such an outburst. An argument is apparently in progress, and the first speaker contradicts his partner:

Nay, but this doltage of our General’s
Overflows the measure.
(1.1.1-2)

One explanation for Shakespeare’s attraction to syllabic inversion is that such an acoustic reversal is a contrast to a contrast, an antithesis to an antithesis: the normal opposition, unstressed-stressed, is reversed to stressed-unstressed. And obviously the iambic feet before and after the trochee are affected because the normal alternating relation is violated.

The emphatic function of such a metrical tool soon became clear to Shakespeare. A speaker who forcefully breaks the regular pattern accentuates the word or phrase that causes the rupture and thus gives special prominence to the inverted foot. Such transpositions often occur in moments of exceptional tension or crisis:

O that this too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and softly weep! I would it were so!
(4.4.129-30)

Bring me no more reports. Let them fly all.
(5.3.3)

HERMIONE: ... You, my lord,
Do not mistake.
LEONTES: You are mistook, my lord—
(2.3.82-3)

In this last exchange the double violation of the iambic pattern acoustically conveys the emotional violence of the struggle between suspicious king and blameless wife. Because the poetry of The Winter’s Tale, like that of all the late plays, is notoriously irregular, it is not always possible to find specific meanings in particular poetic turns. But here the value of the disrupted pattern is indisputable.

Sometimes both syllables in the foot receive equal stress. This variation, known as the spondee, is often used like the trochee, to underscore a particular moment by signalling the importance of a word or phrase:

Cry “lavoccia” and let slip the dogs of war.
(7.1.276)

And that which should accompany old age
(5.5.32)

There is room for variation in the speaking of a spondaic phrase: two different Mark Antony’s or Macbeths might give slightly different (rather than identical) weight to each syllable of his spondee. But more important than such slight differences is the power of the foot to distort the momentum of the iambic beat.

Shakespeare has many other tricks up his metrical sleeve. To mention only a few: the headless line, in which the initial unstressed syllable is eliminated; the short line, in which the omission of two or three feet brings the speaker to an emphatic halt; the alexandrine, a line with six full feet. Another major consideration is location—where in the line the irregularity occurs. A trochee beginning a line, for example, makes a vastly different impact from a trochee in the final position.
Sentence and line

All these variations arise from the poet’s need to superimpose English sentences onto the dominant acoustic system, to fit the character’s apparently spontaneous utterances into themetrical frame. Thus the constant, most potent threat to the regularity of the iambic pentameter is the unpredictable energy of sentences formed into verse. Sometimes the phrases or clauses lie nicely in their five-foot beds, ending where the line ends, and causing no real trouble (as in the excerpt from Coriolanus), while others resist arrangement by running past the end of the line, or stopping in the middle, or posting syntactical difficulties that subvert or contradict the metrical scheme (as in Imogen’s speech from Cymbeline).

In all but his earliest plays Shakespeare exhibits a technical proficiency that allows him to match or not match sentence to line, as he sees fit. In Othello’s narrative of his military past, sentences happily conform to the underlying pattern:

Wherein I spoke of most disastrous chances,
Of moving accidents by flood and field,
Of hair-breadth escapes ... 
(1.3.133-8)

Here the phrases are long, most of them just as long as the pentameter line; and those that do outrun the end of the line, i.e., that are enjambed, come to a graceful pause in the middle of the next line (‘And sold to slavery’). There is little to counteract the uniformity of the iambics, and the pleasure of the persistent rhythm is reinforced by other poetic repetitions, such as the reiterated prepositional phrases beginning with ‘Of’, the alliterating pairs of words (‘flood and field’), and other instances of assonance and consonance. Although there is little variation in the rhythm, variety and excitement derive from the diverse vocabulary, the combination of long and short words, the verbal crowding of line 135, and other such poetic strategies.

In the middle of King Lear, by contrast, language strains to escape the confines of the pentameter line:

But yet I call you servile ministers,
That have with two pernicious daughters joined
Your high engendered battles against a head
So old and white as this. Of O’er is foul!
(King Lear, 3.2.13-23)

This mad plea to the heavens displays, formally speaking, the same iambic structure as the lines from Othello’s self-justification, but the acoustic effect—and therefore the meaning—is entirely different. In the first lines of Lear’s outburst, the multiple stops and starts noticeably retard the tempo and communicate the bewilderment and self-dissention that have begun to rule Lear’s consciousness. The bombastic inversions of the first line create a dactylic rhythm, a tripping measure that communicates Lear’s state of madness. The simple clauses and the absence of conjunctions fix a grammatical pattern that competes with the metrical design. At last, in the second half of the speech, a kind of poetic momentum is achieved. But its speed and power make the lines seem almost ungoverned, as if they are not under control and likely to crash into something, which they do with the mid-line stop and the concluding ‘O! O! it is foul!’

In addition to the length and shape of clauses, the diction chosen may alter the metrical effect of a passage. One source of fruitful conflict in English poetry—according to some poets it is the primary conflict—is verbal origins, i.e. Latinate and Anglo-Saxon. Words descending from Anglo-Saxon tend to be monosyllabic, whereas those derived or borrowed from romance languages are more likely to be polysyllabic. When these two different kinds of words are combined, the resulting phrase can be especially arresting, as in Hamlet’s ‘incestuous sheets’, or ‘precious diadem stole’, or ‘rank corruption’.

Often Shakespeare makes music from such combinations, but he sometimes takes special care to limit himself in a particular passage to long words or to short words, and such a limitation has metrical consequences. At the beginning of the last scene of Othello, for example, the hero delivers a soliloquy over the sleeping body of Desdemona, whom he has come to murder. He begins simply, with monosyllabic words that convey the gravity of his mood:

It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul,
Let me not name it to you, thou chaste stan.

(5.2.1-2)

As the speech becomes more passionate, his vocabulary becomes more flamboyant: ‘monumental alabaster’, ‘flaming minister’, ‘cunning’st pattern of excelling nature’, ‘Promethean heat’. And then as he draws to a close, the diction changes markedly again:

One more, one more.

He thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee,
And love thee after. One more, and that’s the last.

(5.2.17-19)
A group of words similar in length creates yet another counter-rhythm, another aural scheme that is superimposed upon, or set against, the fundamental beat. Shakespeare often uses such a tactic at moments of reverence, as at the end of Titania’s speech about the birth of the Indian boy (A Midsummer Night’s Dream, 2.1.121–42), or in parts of Henry V’s Saint Crispin’s Day oration (Henry V, 4.3.40–67).

**Music and meaning**

What remain to be considered are the implications of this metrical system, the musical effects and even the symbolic value of blank verse employed as a dramatic instrument. The actor must respect the rhythmic structure of the lines, but must at the same time transmit to the audience the meaning of the sentences being spoken and make the language sound spontaneous, as if the character were inventing the words. It is this tension between rhythmic pattern and syntactic and semantic variety that makes the verse invigorating to hear. Commenting on the ‘clotted, irregular rhythms and mis-accented’ speech of Leonato in The Winter’s Tale, the great theatre director Sir Peter Hall insists that

[These irregularities only make emotional sense and can only affect an audience, if the actor knows the underlying regularity beneath them. He must rival in the cross-rhythms, ride the irregularities and use the humps in the smoothness for emotional purposes. He must not give up forcing the line to scan.... But it is the tension between that regularity and the irregularity of the speech which expresses the emotional turmoil.]

Hall goes on to compare the Shakespearian speaker to a jazz player who improvises but always keeps the beat. Some critics propose that we think of the iambics as the rhythm of a musical piece, and of the sentences as constituting the tune. Others compare these opposing claims to the interplay of the left- and right-hand lines in a piano piece. ‘Counterpoint,’ ‘countercurrent,’ ‘cross-rhythms’—these familiar descriptions effectively convey the generative tension that animates Shakespeare’s dramatic poetry. The metrical structure and its controlled deviations also function symbolically. Every single lamb, we recall, is founded on an acoustic contrast (unstressed/stressed). This opposition makes blank verse an especially appropriate medium for Shakespeare to have taken up since contrast or antithesis is perhaps his most pervasive artistic technique. Dark and light, court and commons, men and women, Egypt and Rome, crowd scenes and duets, poetry and prose, good and evil—the plays are saturated with oppositions and conflicts and antitheses within contrasts.

The difference between the two syllables of an iamb is yet another example, albeit a microscopic one, of Shakespeare’s favourite method. Just as all these thematic antitheses depend upon each other to shape an audience’s evaluation of the play’s characters and actions—the contrast between, for example, Desdemona’s virtue and Iago’s villainy—to the antithetical relation between sounds is thematically meaningful. The competition between sounds is as vital in its own sphere as the contest between characters. For example, words or phrases that threaten to play havoc with the lamic pentameter may be seen as offering the same kind of rebellion in the acoustic sphere as a political or social rebel does in the realm of court politics. Similarly, the struggle between an idiosyncratic phrase and the normal acoustic order that governs the sound of the line is a tiny version of the conflict between a character like Hamlet and the apparently ordered, conventional world he feels obliged to resist. Such a contest informs virtually every speech with meaning.

It is worth reminding ourselves that it is mainly through language that we come to know the thoughts and actions of Shakespeare’s characters. Their initial claim on our attention is physical. We receive from them sensible impressions that our minds then interpret—or, in the vulgar, they speak and we hear—and how they speak is as important as what they say. The English director Harley Granville-Barker, who in his productions at the beginning of the twentieth century swept away the visual spectacle of the Victorian theatre and replaced it with renewed attention to the aural dimension, stresses the priority of Shakespeare’s poetry in bringing character to life. The Shakespearian play offers the audience a strange surpassing of this modern work-a-day world.... We must have a beauty of speech that will leave us a little indifferent to the sense of the thing spoken.... The actor, in fine, must think of the dialogue in terms of music of the tone and rhythm of it as at one with the sense—sometimes overthrowing the sense—in telling him what to do and how to do it, in telling him, indeed, what to be.8

**FURTHER READING**

Atttridge, Derek. The Rhythms of English Poetry (London: Longman, 1982). Atttridge’s study is a readable, mostly up-to-date survey of prosody and its importance to various kinds of poetry over several centuries.

Borth, Stephen. An Essay on Shakespeare’s Sonnets (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). Although concerned with many different poetic features, Borth is attentive to the operation and value of iambic pentameter and offers numerous insights into the musical and significant contributions of rhythm.


McDonald, Russ. Shakespeare and the Arts of Language (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001). This introduction contains chapters on Renaissance rhetoric, on the major poetic properties of Shakespeare’s language, and on the playwright’s changing attitudes towards his medium. See especially the chapter entitled ‘Loosening the Line’.


9  The society of Shakespeare’s England

Carole Levin

Medieval laws, which dictated how people of different social groups should dress by regulating fabrics, colours, and styles, were still in existence in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. These ‘sumptuary’ laws were part of an attempt to keep people in their places and to mark those who tried to move out of them, for England was still a hierarchical, highly structured society with careful delineations of status. Yet by the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and her successor, James I (1603–25), a number of people broke these clothing laws with impunity. There was more fluidity and mobility than in previous centuries, and for some people, especially those who were ambitious and literate, there was a possibility to move beyond the social rank to which they had been born. Shakespeare is the most famous example of those who saw playwriting as one means to success. In the process of achieving his private ambitions, he transformed theatrical experience for his contemporaries—and theatrical history for all time.

We can imagine a whole range of different statuses and backgrounds when we consider audiences at the public theatres of the London suburbs in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This chapter will examine not only the variety of people who attended Shakespeare’s plays but also people of the royal court and of the countryside. In addition to differences of social status, it will consider differences of gender and will also look at those social groups that were perceived to be ‘outsiders’ in early modern English culture. It is important to recognize that although there were parallels and confluences between the fictional societies of Shakespeare’s plays and those of his world, we cannot read one for the other.

The court

The very top of the social scale was held by the monarch at court. It certainly seems to be significant that when Shakespeare began to write and have his plays performed the monarch at that court was a woman, thus destabilizing the structure of a society that had always expected a king who would be father of his people as well as, it was hoped, father of the son who would be the next king. Elizabeth, an unmarried woman, did not