FURTHER READING

Brook, G. L. *The Language of Shakespeare* (London: Deutsch, 1976). This book is a compilation of 450 descriptive observations about Shakespeare's language, grouped into eight broad thematic areas: vocabulary, syntax, accidence, word-formation, features of pronunciation and writing, metre, rhetoric, and language varieties.

Crystal, David and Ben Crystal. *Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2002). This book is an alphabetical compilation of the Early Modern English vocabulary found in Shakespeare, interspersed with a thematic treatment of selected language topics.

Hulme, Hilda M. *Explorations in Shakespeare's Language* (London: Longmans, 1962). This book provides a further interpretation of some 200 of the more difficult items in Shakespeare, seen within the context of the language of his time.

Kermode, Frank. *Shakespeare's Language* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2000). This is an investigation of the development of Shakespeare's language over time, considering the period around 1600 as pivotal, and illustrating the argument through the detailed analysis of critical passages.

Quirk, Randolph. 'Shakespeare and the English language'. In R. Quirk, *The Linguist and the English Language* (London: Edward Arnold, 1974). This essay illustrates Shakespeare's personal use of English and his linguistic interests, seen against the backdrop of the language of his time.

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8 Shakespeare's verse

Russ McDonald

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 poetry, 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 fork 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 rhymed and some unrhymed, all his verse is rhythmic. The particular rhythms derive from the chosen *metre*, 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'.[2] First the pattern, 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 (ˇ/). A good example of a natural iamb is the word *because*, which never varies in pronunciation: 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 'carefully'), 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'.[3] 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 iambs 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?
> (*Romeo and Juliet*, 2.1.44)

> Her father 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 (dimeter) or three (trimeter) or four (tetrameter) sound brief and somehow naive, an effect Shakespeare exploits for the parodic tragedy that ends *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> And farewell friends,
> Thus Thisbe 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 Arraignment 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 laments, | 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 inane, 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 alternative 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 sciolti*, or 'freed verse', i.e. freed from the constraints of rhyme.[5] Although Surrey probably completed his translation in the 1540s, it first appeared in *Tottel'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 mischiefs such as Ferrex now intends,
> The wonted courteous laws to messengers
> Are not observed, which in just war they use.
> Shall I so hazard any one of mine?
> Shall I betray my trusty friends to him,
> That have disclosed his treason unto me?
> Let him entreat that fears, 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 hateth me?
> (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 unvaried 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 iambs. 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 ('Yea, 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?
> 'Od's pitykins, 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 less than 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*, *ic*, *the*, and *of*).

Thus, in every line of Shakespearian 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 half-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 Petruccio 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 Grecian 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, fie 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 parting of Cressida from Troilus.

In the previous passage, Ulysses' line contains eleven syllables: a common Shakespearian variant is to allow an extra syllable, or sometimes two or three, making what is called a *hypermetrical* 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 hypermetrical. 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 several sins, all used in each degree,
Throng to the bar, crying all, 'Guilty, guilty!'
I shall despair. 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.
(5.5.152–4, 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, hypermetrism 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 hypermetrical. 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 *caesura*, from the Latin word for 'cut', *caedere*. Such a hesitation or halt is by no means a Shakespearian 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.[6] 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)

Holes 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 dotage of our General's
O'erflows 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 too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew
(*Hamlet*, 1.2.129-30)
Bring me no more reports. Let them fly all.
(*Macbeth*, 5.3.1)

HERMIONE: ... You, my lord,
Do but mistake.
LEONTES: You have mistook, my lady—
(*The Winter's Tale*, 2.1.82-3)

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 'havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war
(*Julius Caesar*, 3.1.276)
And that which should accompany old age
(*Macbeth* 5.3.25)

There is room for variation in the speaking of a spondaic phrase: two different Mark Antonys 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 derail 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 the metrical 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 *Gorboduc*), while others resist arrangement by running past the end of the line, or stopping in the middle, or posing 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 scapes i'th' imminent deadly breach,
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery, of my redemption thence,
And portance in my traveller's history
(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 iambs, 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:

Rumble thy bellyful! Spit, fire! spout, rain!
Nor rain, wind, thunder, fire, are my daughters.
I tax not you, you elements, with unkindness;
I never gave you kingdom, called you children,
You owe me no subscription. Then let fall
Your horrible pleasure. Here I stand, your slave,
A poor, infirm, weak, and despised old man.
But yet I call you servile ministers,
That have with two pernicious daughters joined
Your high engendered battles 'gainst a head
So old and white as this. O! O! 't 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-division 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! 't 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, you chaste stars.
(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.
Be 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-accents' spoken by Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, the great theatre director Sir Peter Hall insists that

> [t]hese irregularities only make emotional sense and can only affect an audience, if the actor knows the underlying regularity beneath them. He must revel in the cross-rhythms, ride the irregularities and use the bumps 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.[7]

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 iamb, 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—so 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 iambic 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 tune and rhythm of it as at one with the sense—sometimes outbidding the sense—in telling him what to do and how to do it, in telling him, indeed, what to *be*.[8]

FURTHER READING

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

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

Fussell, Paul. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: Random House, rev. edn. 1979). The standard work on metrics and stanzaic arrangement in English verse, this compact book is clear, lively, and illustrated with pertinent examples from a wide range of Anglo-American poetry.

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'.

Preminger, Alex and T. V. F. Brogan, *et al.* (eds.). *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, rev. ed. 1993). This immense volume, its topics alphabetically arranged and its entries written by numerous experts, is indispensable to anyone interested in Shakespeare's (or anyone else's) poetry.

Saintsbury, George. *A History of English Prosody from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day*. 3 vols.

(London: Macmillan, 1923 [1906–1910]). Although written a century ago, this is a standard work on English metrics—comprehensive, authoritative, and still valuable.

Steele, Timothy. *All the Fun's in How You Say a Thing: An Explanation of Meter and Versification* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999). This recent introduction to the subject of prosody is witty, wide-ranging, and readable, with an excellent bibliography and notes.

Wright, George T. *Hearing the Measures: Shakespearean and Other Inflections* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002). This collection of essays extends the metrical interests of *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* (see below), dealing not only with Shakespeare but with some modern poets as well.

Wright, George T. *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988). Wright's is the most comprehensive recent study of Shakespeare's poetic instruments. The early chapters put the dramatist's practice in the context of sixteenth-century poetry; the later chapters are especially suggestive about how the playwright creates meaning with poetic metre.

NOTES

1. Edwin Guest. *A History of English Rhythms*, 2 vols. (London: William Pickering, 1836–38), I, 1. Guest's definition does not apply, of course, to such twentieth-century innovations as 'free verse', or other kinds of irregularly patterned language.
2. Paul Fussell. *Poetic Meter and Poetic Form* (New York: Random House, rev. edn. 1979), p. 12.
3. Raymond Chapman. *Oxford Companion to the English Language*, ed. Tom McArthur (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 496.
4. Bruce Smith. *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 218.
5. See the entry for 'blank verse' in *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*, ed. Alex Preminger and T. V. F. Brogan, *et al.* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, rev. edn. 1993).
6. See George T. Wright. *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), *passim*, and the initially daunting graphs in Ants Oras, *Pause Patterns in Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama: An Experiment in Prosody* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1960), pp. 46–52.
7. *Exposed by the Mask: Form and Language in Drama* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2000), p. 48.
8. Quoted in Richard David. 'Actors and Scholars: A View of Shakespeare in the Modern Theatre', *Shakespeare Survey 12* (1959), p. 81.

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