

SHAKESPEARE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF VERSE DRAMA, 1660-2017

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis offers an account of how verse drama, despite the entrenched cultural significance of Shakespeare, came over time to occupy a marginal, often maligned position within English theatre. The introduction establishes its critical-creative methodology: I approach the question not only as a critic, but as a practitioner exploring what T. S. Eliot called ‘the possibility of a poetic drama’ in the modern world. The first chapter demonstrates how verse dramatists over the last thirty years have been inhibited by continuous comparison to Shakespeare. The remainder of the thesis argues more broadly that verse drama between the Restoration and the present day has articulated itself directly in response to an evolving understanding of Shakespearean drama.

Chapter Two examines Shakespeare’s own dramatic verse as a model which skilfully exploits the dialectic between norm and variation made possible by a shared metrical framework to stage conflicts between individuals and communities. Chapters Three to Five explore in turn how verse dramatists between 1660 and 1956 engaged with the same dialectic, both politically and prosodically. The thesis closes with an extended reflection on my own practice as a contemporary poet-playwright, discussing three scripts where I experimented with counterpointing individuals and communities through dramatic verse.

*for my grandmother,  
Joyce Dorothy Junkin*

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## CONTENTS

A NOTE ON REFERENCING	I
A NOTE ON TEXTS	III
INTRODUCTION	1
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	
‘OUR AGE IS WHAT COMES AFTER POETRY’: VERSE DRAMA TODAY	35
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	
WHAT IS SHAKESPEAREAN VERSE DRAMA?	60
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	
‘IRREGULAR MAN’S NE’RE CONSTANT, NEVER CERTAIN’: REGULARITY AND RESISTANCE IN VERSE DRAMA, 1660-1789	134
<b>CHAPTER FOUR</b>	
‘WE LIVE POORLY IN THE DEAD LINE’: SHAKESPEARE IN VERSE DRAMA, 1789-1900	184
<b>CHAPTER FIVE</b>	
‘THAT WARDOUR STREET ELIZABETHAN’S / WRONG FOR YOU’: ATTEMPTS AT A COMMUNITY, 1900-1956	241
<b>CHAPTER SIX</b>	
‘SOME ODD FREAKISH THING THAT’S ALWAYS WAITING TO COME IN’: EXPLORATIONS THROUGH CREATIVE PRACTICE	296
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	359

## A NOTE ON REFERENCING

References through this thesis are given in MLA 8; that is to say, in accordance with the guidelines laid down by the 8<sup>th</sup> edition of the *MLA Handbook*. As these differ in some respects from the more familiar 7<sup>th</sup> edition, I will clarify here some of the elements of the revised style which might otherwise strike my readers as unusual, and give a brief account of one modification I have made for the particular needs of this project.

MLA 8 streamlines punctuation within references. In most cases, commas alone are sufficient to separate the components of a reference. Full stops are primarily given before a new ‘container’ – such as the name of a book, a database, or a website in which the source material was located – is listed, as follows:

Easthope, Anthony. ‘Problematizing the Pentameter.’ *New Literary History*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1981, pp. 475-492. *JSTOR*, doi:10.2307/469025. Accessed 9 Jul. 2017.

This version of MLA style no longer requires the place of publication or the medium (e.g. print) of a source to be given. In printed works published before 1900, however, the *Handbook* recommends that the place of publication, rather than the publisher, should be included. Here I offer an example of both kinds of reference:

Fry, Christopher. *Venus Observed*. Oxford University Press, 1950.

Field, Michael. *Fair Rosamund. Callirhoë: Fair Rosamund*. London, 1884, pp. 131-204. *Chadwyck-Healey: English Verse Drama Full-Text Database*, [http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx\\_ver=Z39.88-](http://gateway.proquest.com/openurl?ctx_ver=Z39.88-)



2003&xri:pqil:res\_ver=0.2&res\_id=xri:lion&rft\_id=xri:lion:ft:dr:Z000077159:0&rft  
.accountid=8630. Accessed 10 Jul. 2017.

My thesis ranges widely across time periods and authors. As such, it incorporates a number of figures whose works are now primarily available in edited, multi-volume sets, each volume of which might itself be edited by a different group of scholars. Where multiple volume of such a set are used within a chapter, rather than separately enumerating full publication details for each, I have given reference details for the entire set as a 'headline,' followed by the sub-heading '**Comprising**' and a list of shorter-form references for the individual volumes cited, as follows:

Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. Edited by Kathleen Coburn, Princeton University Press, 1971-2001. 16 vols.

**Comprising:**

- *Marginalia*. Edited by H. J. Jackson and George Whalley, vol. 12, Princeton University Press, 1998.
- *Poetical Works III: Plays*. Edited by J. C. C. Mays, vol. 16, Princeton University Press, 2001.
- *Table Talk*. Edited by Carl Woodring, vol. 14, Princeton University Press, 1990.

## A NOTE ON TEXTS

Some comment on the texts chosen and editions used in this investigation might also be welcome. Coming to the drama of later periods as a Renaissance specialist by training, it is remarkable how little criticism focuses on issues of prosody, metre or dramatic verse form. The neglect of these features in critical work can make it difficult even to map which theatrical texts are primarily in verse or prose. Whereas Martin Wiggins's thorough and ongoing catalogue, *British Drama, 1533-1642*, appends a summary of formal features to the entry for each play in this earlier period, the similarly capacious *The London Stage, 1660-1800* offers no such guidance. Furthermore, stylometric data for verse drama after 1660, of the kind provided within early modern studies by attribution scholars such as Gary Taylor and Gabriel Egan, is in general sorely lacking. As such, where I make claims about the metrical profile of any given author in this survey, the task necessarily remains of proving this hypothesis analytically at greater length.

Sustained analyses of the formal qualities of any individual writers are also rare. In the period from 1660 to 1789, surveyed in Chapter Three, for instance, such comments appear mostly in single-play introductions: for example, Aline Mackenzie Taylor's notes on Otway's *The Orphan*, or P. F. Vernon's introduction to Nathaniel Lee's *The Rival Queens*. I have yet to find a more comprehensive overview of variant prosodic styles in any period after 1660 than that given on Dryden, Otway, Southerne, Rowe and Addison by Bonamy Dobrée in the ten-page introduction to *Five Restoration Tragedies* (1928).

In large part, therefore, I have been guided throughout this thesis by generic considerations. More tragedies than comedies, from the Restoration to the present day, appear to use verse, for reasons I will address in the body of the thesis. Beyond this, in

the limited space available to me in this study I have orientated myself according to the current critical canon in each period as detailed in the works of such historians as Richard W. Bevis and Allardyce Nicoll, along with its noteworthy expansions in projects such as the *Eighteenth-Century Women Playwrights* series.

In general, the availability of older texts constitutes a significant barrier to a study of verse drama throughout history. While many plays from the Restoration, and by well-known Romantic poets, are widely available in older critical editions and introductory anthologies, many of the texts I discuss in the following pages have yet to receive any modern editorial attention. As such, where modern scholarly editions are unavailable, I have been reliant on the versions collected in the Chadwyck-Healey *English Verse Drama* database, supplemented by reference to the early printed editions gathered in databases such as *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, for my pre-20<sup>th</sup> century chapters.

All references to works attributed to Shakespeare, in whole or part, are taken from the Modern Critical Edition of *The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, edited by Gary Taylor, John Jowett, Terri Bourus, and Gabriel Egan (Oxford University Press, 2016.) In accordance with the practices of this edition, Renaissance texts are cited in modern spelling throughout. Silent emendations have been made to old-spelling editions.

In Chapter Six, I quote extensively from my own creative work. The three plays I discuss – *Free for All*, *Sanctuary*, and *The Vetting of Kit Shaughnessy* – are not included as appendices, but are available to consult in full, in their most recent drafts, at <https://richardobrien.co.uk/verse-plays/>.

## INTRODUCTION

‘Verse drama. There’s an effective way to shed a thousand readers at a stroke.’

– Glyn Maxwell, ‘The rhythm.’

In 1993, the poet Glyn Maxwell staged the premiere of his second verse play, *Gnyss the Magnificent*, in the back garden of his parents’ house in Welwyn Garden City. The journalist Daisy Goodwin was in the audience. Interviewing Maxwell, she asserts – as if stating an acknowledged truism – that his ‘attempts to find a publisher for his plays met with all the resistance that only the words *verse drama* can muster.’ The resistance of the literary community to the author’s chosen form is presented as striking, though not surprising: ‘I would ring up agents, who would shudder at the ideas of my plays, on the way out the door to see *Macbeth*.’

In this comment, Maxwell is identifying a deep fracture within literary and theatrical culture which has received remarkably little critical attention. *Macbeth* is a verse play – a play with prose interjections and with passages in variant meters, but nonetheless a play in which a significant proportion of the texture of the characters’ experience is conveyed in iambic pentameter. For a period leading up to and including the greatest historical flourishing of English-language theatre, and the works of its most famous proponent, William Shakespeare, verse drama such as this was the predominant form in which plays were written, heard and understood. Conceiving of early modern English theatre without the presence of blank verse is like imagining the politics of the period without religion. In 1993, however, when a successful young English poet proposes a play in verse to a literary

agent, the natural reaction (Goodwin implies) is scorn, suspicion – even horror. Why is this the case? And when did the tide change?

It is impossible to deny that poetry no longer plays the integral role it once did in English theatre, where it was the norm rather than the exception. Yet although contemporary verse no longer holds the stage, one form of verse drama is still deeply embedded in our theatrical landscape, to the point of being hidden in plain sight. The world's most performed, most analysed, most *familiar* playwright – Shakespeare – wrote the majority of his works in verse. In a group of plays which remain the mainstays of our culture, when lovers meet, when kingdoms rise and fall, and when characters resolve to disguise themselves, to murder – even to be or not to be – there is a shared metrical language that they are speaking. We still talk about Shakespeare's poetry in terms of his language, his imagination, and the endurance of his words through time – but we very rarely talk about the sheer oddity of using verse as a building block for theatrical experience. This in itself is a strange state of affairs. Plays used to be in verse all the time, and now they aren't. Why aren't they? And why have contemporary critics, theatre audiences, and practitioners largely turned away from the question?

What follows is a partial attempt to provide an answer to how this singular situation arose, in the course of the four hundred years since Shakespeare's death. It will argue that Shakespeare, at least in English culture, is uniquely important to understanding the development of verse drama and the widespread suspicion with which it is currently greeted. More unusually, it will also approach what Harley Granville-Barker described as the contemporary 'divorce' between poetry and drama from the perspective of someone with a strong vested interest in their reconciliation (3). I am embarking on this

investigation not only as a critic but as a creative practitioner. As a practising poet and playwright, I cannot ignore the fact that two of the genres in which I work no longer align in the way that, for centuries of creative practice, they were expected to do. I am also, therefore, especially well-placed to confront head-on the question raised in 1920 by T. S. Eliot: what is the possibility (or possibilities) of a poetic drama today ('Possibility' 50)?

A growing recent trend in Shakespeare criticism — represented, for example, in the work of Graham Holderness, Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey, and scholars including Mary Baine Campbell and Kavita Mudan Finn in their contributions to 'Critical Creative Shakespeares,' a special issue of *Critical Survey* edited by Rob Conkie and Scott Maisano — has explored 'how creative modes of writing might facilitate new or different types of critical engagement with Shakespeare' (Conkie and Maisano 3). As Conkie and Maisano put it, 'What if knowing *why* Shakespeare made use of [a wide range of familiar dramaturgic features] as he did depended on learning *how* (or at least trying) to do it ourselves?' (4-5)

In my work — critical and creative — I am interested not only in how Shakespeare did what he did, but in how subsequent writers of verse drama have shouldered the weight of Shakespearean influence. In this context, it is intellectually honest to admit that I am one of them. My work is not distinct from what Paul Edmondson and Peter Holbrook have called 'Shakespeare's Creative Legacies': legacies to which this thesis is in part a response. As a practitioner facing similar questions and challenges to the authors discussed in each of the subsequent chapters 'from the inside,' I believe this perspective enables me to support my critical insights into the paths taken by those Shakespeare-influenced authors from a position of creative recognition.

Where this hybrid status prompts particular reflections in the main body of my argument – five surveys of the verse drama of Shakespeare and of successive historical periods – I will acknowledge the contribution it has made. The final chapter will then recount aspects of my own intellectual and creative journey as a practitioner engaging in the writing of verse drama, a process in turn informed by my critical explorations. As such, the thesis as a whole explores not only what contributions critical reading can make to creative writing but, within the broad church of Shakespeare studies, takes up Conkie and Maisano’s prompt to demonstrate ‘what kinds of critical insights are made possible only or especially via creative strategies’ (3). It aims, nonetheless, to do so with an acute awareness of the kinds of justifiable challenge which might accrue to an essentially formalist reading of the practice and influence of one canonical white male author by a contemporary white male practitioner, himself working in a formalist tradition freighted with centuries of cultural privilege.

It is therefore incumbent upon me, as I address some of the questions above and as I pursue my own practice, to reflect critically on the ‘politics of citation’ Sara Ahmed characterises as ‘a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies’: that is to say, white male bodies, and the process by which white men replicate existing power structures by only citing other white men. I will also, however, make a positive case for the progressive political challenge I believe verse drama can sometimes offer to the unreflective reproduction of traditions, not least in the forms of resistance its very constriction makes possible. In Chapter Six, I will expand further on the ethical considerations these issues imply for my project, and on how they have shaped my own practice in turn. But first, before further describing the contours of my argument, I will demonstrate the central issue to be addressed: the current critical suspicion with which

contemporary verse drama is viewed by the theatre-reviewing establishment, even as – to borrow Maxwell’s comparison – ticket sales for productions of *Macbeth* remain undiminished.

The *Guardian* theatre critic Lyn Gardner emphasises the singularity of a situation where Shakespeare thrives but contemporary verse dramatists are condemned. In a 2014 column, she asks readers ‘Would you attend a play written in blank verse?’ before responding for them: ‘Of course you would; every day thousands of people go to see Shakespeare and a significant proportion probably don’t even clock that it’s poetry’ (‘Why the fuss’). Nonetheless, when considering modern British theatre, Gardner suggests,

although audiences like theatre that is poetic, we prefer it if it isn’t actually written in verse – unless, of course, it’s by Shakespeare. One poet in the national drama is, it seems, quite enough, even though, prior to the Restoration, verse was the natural medium for playwrights . . . (‘Rhyme’)

Gardner’s wry evocation of this curiously limited attitude to verse is borne out by contemporary reviewing culture. Glyn Maxwell’s experience, once again, provides anecdotal insight. By 2008, the poet’s stage work had a professional platform: at the heart, in fact, of the Shakespearean theatrical community from which he had previously felt himself sidelined. August 31<sup>st</sup> 2008 saw the first preview of his play, *Liberty*, at Shakespeare’s Globe, an opportunity which the verse dramatist who once told Goodwin, “I’ve stopped comparing myself to Shakespeare ... it’s too dangerous,” now greeted with childish glee and self-assurance:



Sometimes I feel twelve years old, the beneficiary of some fabulous treat.  
My play at Shakespeare's Globe. I made it as a poet. I made it as a  
playwright. I look at the fast-moving clouds and say my little weather-  
prayers. (Maxwell, *Untitled*)

Soon after this, an onslaught of 'awful, awful' reviews from the broadsheet press turns the diary Maxwell has been keeping for the website *Untitled Books* into a record of 'the worst week of [his] professional life' and sends him into a terrifying downward spiral, expressed with brutal honesty:

Whatever I thought would happen, I feel the play is very strong, original, ambitious, different, and the production beautiful. And it's been torn to shreds. I walk along Upper Street, drop into pubs, nod for a while, shake my head for a while, hit the street again, take up smoking again. I spend the afternoon in a high-class dungeon with a new friend and do so much amyl nitrate my nose bleeds ...

The nadir of the playwright's self-doubt comes three days later: 'Somewhere around the Blackwall Tunnel I wonder if perhaps everything I have ever written is worthless.'

We don't need to engage with Maxwell's specific anxieties to understand his fears about the relative worth of his entire artistic project. As Shakespeareans and theatre-goers, we do, however, have to look closely at what trends underlie the critical ignominy visited upon an author who dared to use what we now largely view as a Shakespearean form, in a venue fraught with Shakespearean history, where audiences regularly stand for three hours to see verse drama by its namesake.

One simple answer, of course, might be to conclude that Shakespeare is simply *better* than Glyn Maxwell. We might then decide that the widespread rejection of verse drama which I demonstrate throughout this introduction is due to nothing more complex than a gradual decline in quality among the form's proponents: that, as Eliot wrote, 'after the erection of the Chinese Wall of Milton, blank verse has suffered not only arrest but retrogression' ('Notes' 73). This would, however, require us to generalise in a series of ways which are, to say the least, academically irresponsible — though many critics of verse drama over the last century have done just that.

More profitably, we might seize hold of the question introduced by Gardner, and ask seriously if the dominance of Shakespeare is in some sense to blame — fairly or unfairly — for the comparative critical and public failure of a great number of contemporary verse plays. Although Shakespeare is rarely mentioned by name in the negative notices that *Liberty* received, the pitch of criticism aimed at the use of verse, in a venue *created primarily for the speaking of verse*, makes these reviews a worthwhile place to begin our scrutiny of the current landscape.

Not all of the unfavourable reviews of *Liberty* mention its verse form, but references abound to its length and its stylised formality: critics described it as 'a punishing, mostly incomprehensible verse play' (Coveney), 'turgid, lifeless' (Shenton), 'clever-clever' and 'oddly stiff' (Letts) and a 'terminal snorer' (Spencer). They castigated its 'verbosity' (Marlowe) and 'the dustiness of a script, which places artistic elegance higher than theatrical excitement' (Letts). Where verse was directly referred to, it was a stick with which to beat the play: Charles Spencer concedes that 'Maxwell may be an acclaimed poet,' before complaining that 'there is a musty worthiness and schoolmasterly humour

about the writing here that make for a leaden evening,’ and Michael Coveney outright damns the ‘limp and turgid verse ... There is no discernible metre, nor any fizz, bounce or beat to the relentless triviality of the dull lines.’

A number of concepts recur here which are persistently brought to bear in reviews of contemporary verse drama. The following observations, about Maxwell’s play and others, are a representative selection, distilled from wider patterns observed in data I collected in a simple database search of reviews and articles over roughly the last thirty years. To begin with, critics do not, as a group, refute the form entirely: Coveney, for instance, seems to bemoan the decadence of flexibility, implying the need for a return to iambic building-blocks. Nonetheless, the word-cloud of negativity constellates around a few key critiques: verse drama is inflexible, pedantic, outdated, tedious, and artistically elitist; it takes too long to say anything, and it’s hard to understand it when it does. Many reviews of other productions from the period under scrutiny are happy to state these assumptions outright. Andrzej Lukowski, for example, feels comfortable proclaiming in *Time Out* that a ‘Shakespearean-styled historical drama, written in blank verse and iambic pentameter’ about the royal family in 2014 (Mike Bartlett’s *King Charles III*, later a West End hit) ‘[o]bviously ... sounds like a terrible idea.’

Along with putting audiences to sleep (Spencer’s ‘terminal snorer’), a common trend across these reviews is the rhetoric of life and death. Productions of mid-century verse plays startle critics by ‘breathing life into’ them; modern verse dramatists like Peter Oswald are pitied for allotting themselves ‘the thankless task of keeping verse drama going as a living theatrical form’ (Thornber; Curtis). For the *Glasgow Herald* in 1994, reviewing a Royal Shakespeare Company – hereafter RSC – outing for Eliot’s *Murder in the*

*Cathedral*, Carol Woddis has no qualms in starting by reminding us that ‘General consensus has it that verse drama tends to be dramatically lifeless.’ (Shakespeare, is presumably, immune to or outside of any general consensus.) And Jeremy Kingston, reviewing a 1992 revival of Christopher Fry’s *Venus Observed*, begins posthumously: ‘Because English theatre burst into being in verse the belief that this was the proper vehicle for drama took centuries to die.’

Indeed, much of what is written about verse drama today is implicitly informed by the critical turn against the work of these two mid-century authors: Eliot and Fry. Reviewing culture therefore channels the sentiments of Kenneth Tynan — provocatively phrased, considering these two authors’ avowed Christian beliefs — in 1954, and does not always explore far beyond them: ‘If they, [Eliot and Fry] the foremost heretics, can be persuaded off their crosses, away from their martyrdom in a lost cause, the theatre would immediately benefit’ (73). In Chapter Five, I will attempt to uncouple Eliot and Fry, arguing that the pervasive association reviewers make between them does the latter a great disservice and obscures much that is effective and, indeed, Shakespearean about Fry’s particular method. Nonetheless, as Irene Morra notes in *Verse Drama in England, 1900-2015*, the knock-on effect of this religiously-motivated dyad on perceptions of verse drama has been immeasurable: ‘the contemporary critical fate of verse drama in England can be attributed in no small part to the association of its very renaissance or dawn with Christian drama’ (11).

Contemporary verse dramatists therefore find themselves faced with a somewhat Sisyphean task to gain critical approval. Many of the reviewers quoted above, having first aired their misgivings, actually liked the specific play they were sent to review: in one

representative example, Lyn Gardner finds herself admitting ‘the real surprise is that the verse,’ in a 2002 production of Fry’s *The Lady’s Not for Burning*, ‘turns out to be such an affable and accessible form and that the language is so exciting’ (‘Samuel West’s’).

However, none of these unexpectedly positive experiences seem to have made any impact on what, in the public consciousness, verse drama is, does, and means. Joseph Lloyd, in *City A.M.*, describes Mike Bartlett’s 2014 *King Charles III* as ‘the most persuasive argument for a verse drama revival in years’ – but the revival never really materialises. The critics continue to consider verse drama as sceptically as they did before. The body on the table doesn’t move.

As such, the story of modern verse drama is at least in part the story of the pervasive and apparently invincible assumptions made about modern verse drama. Chief among these is the fact that the form has become ‘associated with an elitism inherently at odds with a modern English national drama that is socially progressive’ (Morra 15). This assumption rarely considers the popularity of rhymed dialogue in pantomime theatre – an example much favoured by verse dramatist Tony Harrison – or, more pertinently, of Shakespeare. It prevails despite an obvious historical counterargument against such reductive readings of an entire method of composition: T. S. Eliot describes the uniquely broad-based ‘Elizabethan audience’ as one ‘to whose ears both prose and verse came naturally’ (‘Poetry’ 133). The large, varied Elizabethan audience was undeniably well-accustomed to hearing the apparently elitist medium of blank verse – since described by Robert Winder in a 1992 *Independent* review of Harrison’s work as ‘English poetry’s most aristocratic form’ (‘Mirrors’). Yet the commonplace that Shakespeare’s verse plays, despite the difficulty of his language, can and did speak to such a wide social sweep has apparently

done nothing to counteract the prevailing impression that verse drama as a whole is suited only to address an educated coterie.

Eliot's view of the breadth of the initial audience which listened to Shakespeare's verse has currency into the present day: the editors of the 2016 *New Oxford Shakespeare*, for instance, assert that the plays were targeted towards 'Europe's first mass-entertainment industry' (Taylor and Bourus 21). It is therefore extremely strange that a form indelibly associated with Shakespeare, and with his wide popular appeal, should now be expected to have an effect, in the hands of contemporary playwrights, which is opposite to that traditionally ascribed to its assumed master and his imagined mass audience. The use of verse is the major, obvious factor that makes Shakespeare tangibly, structurally different to the vast majority of practising dramatists today. Based on the assessments above, it is also exactly what reviewers and commentators seem not to want those dramatists to do.

How, then, does Shakespeare fit into this picture? How did his verse address this wide community – and how can it continue to do so, somewhat exempt from the trend whereby the verse used by other dramatists is characterised as addressing a restricted elite? What does Shakespeare's poetry do that makes it self-sufficiently enjoyable and workable theatre, which the verse used by contemporary dramatists apparently fails to do? Or to consider the problem from another angle: how might Shakespeare's prominence in our theatrical culture have led to the present low esteem of the form with which he is most associated?

In response to these questions, this thesis offers an account of how, between the theatre of the early seventeenth century and the present day, verse drama and the conversation about verse drama came to be the way they are today. It argues, firstly, that verse drama in

each of the periods under consideration here has articulated itself directly in response to an evolving understanding of what Shakespeare's practice as a verse dramatist might mean and represent. As Shakespeare has been differently explained and understood, verse drama in England has in turn altered its form either to cleave more closely to or to break away from the 'Shakespearean' model proposed in any given period. This might seem to present a paradox: the work of verse dramatists in England since Shakespeare, and especially those operating in the present moment, has been continually, detrimentally shadowed by comparisons to Shakespeare – either implicit or, as we shall see in the next chapter, explicitly acknowledged by the playwrights themselves. Considering four hundred years of verse plays specifically through the lens of Shakespeare therefore risks replicating the entire process by which the varied practices of the authors considered have been over-determined and ultimately sidelined.

It is, however, near-impossible not to do so, because the great majority of verse dramatists under discussion, since Dryden, have directly invoked Shakespeare as a comparison point, even if his presence in the discussion is primarily a spur to seek alternative models. This search is necessitated, in Dryden's own terms, by the belief that Shakespeare could 'perform so much that in a manner he has left no praise for any who come after him' (18). It is further vindicated by an almost identical comment three hundred years later, in which Christopher Fry – the most acclaimed verse dramatist of the mid-twentieth century – describes 'the staggering blow inflicted by Shakespeare's genius, which stunned all possible future poet-dramatists before they had even been conceived' as a primary reason for 'the flight of poetry from the theatre' (92). As such, generations since the dramatist's death have joined Ben Jonson in the appeal made to Shakespeare, in his prefatory poem to the 1623 First Folio, to 'chide or cheer the drooping stage.'

Adding to this sense of reliance, Harold Bloom asserts, in *The Anxiety of Influence*, that we are now ‘so influenced by [Shakespeare] that we cannot get outside of him,’ and indeed Dryden’s situation – of belatedness, of being unambiguously overshadowed – persists into the present day for those artists using what has become ‘his’ medium (xxvii). As Wayne and Karey Kirkpatrick write in the Broadway musical *Something Rotten*, Shakespeare has become the man who ‘puts the “I am” in “iambic pentameter”’ (Borle). In fact, the implication of much modern writing about verse drama is that Shakespeare is an exceptional case, given *carte blanche* to use this form of expression where other attempts at the same are held strictly to account.

This includes plays by his contemporaries, where accusations of defective verse abound in recent reviews: John Ford’s verse, for example, is declared ‘turgid’ and distinguished by its ‘relative paucity’ in comparison to Shakespeare’s in reviews of two recent revivals of his work (Hitchings; Cavendish, ‘Second-rate’). Comments like Charles Spencer’s, on actors in Joanna Laurens’s *Five Gold Rings* ‘delivering their lines as if they were by Shakespeare rather than the theatrical equivalent of William McGonagall,’ make amply clear that the temerity of attempting anything like Shakespeare’s form does not – cannot – sink out of notice (‘You should fear’). The fact of Shakespeare’s overdetermining influence on what Bloom calls the entire ‘western literary canon,’ as I will explore in each succeeding chapter, has been keenly felt by verse dramatists working for the English stage over the last four centuries, and thus accounts for the (sometimes frustrating) necessity of Shakespearean return across my thesis (*Anxiety* xxviii).

Pursuing this influence has also, however, made my work to some extent complicit in a wider practice: namely the under-representation of women and people of colour in



literary and cultural history. Though verse drama today remains male-dominated, subsequent chapters foreground a number of female writers and critics of verse drama. Nonetheless, those working in the tradition I have identified as beginning in the seventeenth century – that is, those determining their own practice as writers for the English stage via their use, or as in Chapter Five, explicitly theorized rejection of pentameter, in direct conversation with Shakespeare – have been largely elite and entirely white. This limited perspective therefore highlights how there remains a need for alternative studies of verse drama, focusing, for example, on the contemporary poetic stagecraft of such women of colour as Kristiana Rae Colón, Zinnie Harris, and Ntozake Shange – US-based authors whose practise leans less heavily on Shakespearean meter, specifically, as the formal fountainhead of English stage verse.<sup>1</sup>

The second main thread of my argument concerns the relationship between verse drama and the idea of the community. This relationship has a central political importance because, as Ewan Fernie argues with reference to the work of Jürgen Habermas on Shakespeare's broad audience and the public sphere, 'Shakespeare's plays convene an audience in the theatre to watch a community on stage constitute itself in terms of the struggle for freedom' (57). This thesis will argue that Shakespeare's own drama, and the work of many of the verse dramatists who followed in his wake, is concerned with exploring the interaction between freedom and community, on and off-stage, in a manner which is directly shaped by the particularities of verse drama as an expressive resource.

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<sup>1</sup> Colón, for instance, discusses her poetics in an interview with Seraphima Kennedy for Magma Poetry magazine, listed below in the Works Cited.

I alluded above to Eliot's and the *New Oxford Shakespeare* editors' conception of Shakespeare writing for a mass audience, but it is also true that Shakespeare is assumed to have written *about* the widest possible range of experience – to have been, in Coleridge's terms, 'myriad-minded' (216), in Bloom's, to have 'thought all thoughts, for all of us' (*Anxiety* xxviii), and in Kiernan Ryan's more egalitarian emphasis, to have 'share[d] the right of speech democratically between the diverse dramatis personae with scant regard for the customary proprieties' (91). Shakespeare is also, however, bound up (as Bloom's own *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* attests) in concepts of individuality: he has been repeatedly presented as a creator of characters who, as individual beings, are exceptionally profound.

As such, the relationship between individual and community – the ability to convey the needs and concerns of both in equal measure – is part of the composite picture of what makes Shakespeare so significant an example to later verse dramatists. As Fernie puts it, these plays are uniquely

able to dramatise the interplay between personal and political freedom because of (1) their uncontested breakthrough into richer, more realised characterisation, which is (2) nevertheless always forged in relation to other characters and their freedoms. This dialectic between the individual and collective is fundamental to drama as interaction ... (66)

In the main historical section of this thesis, I argue that each period's reformulation of what verse drama can, or should do, in relation to Shakespeare, is also an attempt to engage with, and recalibrate, this tension between individuals and communities. I also propose – with direct reference to Shakespeare's practice, to later authors', and finally to

my own – that the medium of verse whose metre is shared between speaking characters is a uniquely effective site in which to explore this very tension, and that doing so can be politically significant in ways which criticism has thus far largely ignored.

Previous critics, including Eliot as we shall see in Chapter Five, have however repeatedly invoked the importance of a broad – and contemporary – audience for verse drama, often in relation to a desired dramatic renewal. George Steiner, for example, in his 1961 work *The Death of Tragedy* – which remains the last sustained attempt to account for the decline in the prominence of verse drama – presumes such an audience when arguing that ‘[a]fter the seventeenth century the audience ceased to be an organic community to which [spiritual] ideas and their attendant habits of figurative language would be natural or immediately familiar’ (197). As such, the prose novel became the ‘literary form exactly appropriate to the fragmented audience of modern urban culture’ (195-6). In order to challenge this seductively simple narrative of atomisation and decline (leaving aside for now Steiner’s highly generalised view of seventeenth-century England, to which I will return at length), this thesis offers a more nuanced picture of the various ways in which verse dramatists over time have – partly in response to Shakespeare – addressed the relationship between communities and individuals.

Chapter One begins in the present because it is the contemporary situation which has prompted this investigation. As a practitioner as well as a critic working today, I believe a thorough survey of the current landscape is necessary before its historical roots can be usefully explored. In offering a brief snapshot of the verse drama being written today and the self-perception of its authors in relation to Shakespeare, this chapter demonstrates a constant, sometimes explicit, process of negotiation which is ongoing in the present day.

Drawing on interview quotes with a range of practitioners including Tony Harrison, Peter Oswald and Glyn Maxwell, it traces an outline of the particular anxieties of Shakespearean influence and offers close readings of passages from contemporary plays which manifest an anxiety over the place of poetry today. It concludes with an examination of Mike Bartlett's 2014 *King Charles III*, the most critically and commercially successful verse play of recent years, which establishes the process by which verse dramatists define their practice around what they believe Shakespearean verse drama to be.

Chapter Two offers my own, similarly provisional, account of Shakespeare's practice. It argues that throughout much contemporary Shakespeare criticism, the central fact that its subject is a dramatic *poet* has been largely ignored, and that refocusing our attention on this will – far from being a retreat into conservative formalism – allow us to see that Shakespeare's manipulation of the resources of form has profound political implications. The chapter connects the work of influential prosodic scholars, including George T Wright, Russ MacDonald and Marina Tarlinskaja, with the utopian and agonistic political readings offered by, respectively, Kiernan Ryan and Richard Wilson. It then deploys a series of close readings to make the case for Shakespeare's use of verse form as a dialectic between freedom and constraint, where ideas of repression, resistance, individuality and community are inflected differently in different dramatic situations.

Chapters Three and Four explore how the Shakespearean model of verse drama was framed and then responded to in the Restoration and eighteenth century, and then the nineteenth. First, his comparative metrical flexibility and, relatedly, his wide social sweep of characters, came to be considered undesirable. Attempts to find a non-Shakespearean

path forward through verse drama which restricted these specific elements led into Dryden's formally-restricted couplet verse drama, which channelled aesthetic and wider social concerns about the imposition of order and the restriction of rebellion. Though the plays of Otway offer a powerful alternative model, a general trend across the eighteenth century leads to a less flexible and less heteroglossic verse form after these experiments, and also sees the disappearance of comedy as a generic venue for dramatic verse as an increasing focus on high tragedy as the only place dramatic verse could occupy led to a further restriction of its breadth and possibility.

Chapter Four, however, identifies a hitherto overlooked potential for renewal in the nineteenth-century expansion of the social, linguistic and metrical scope of verse drama, which co-exists with the increased importance of the individual psyche in verse plays of the Romantic era. In doing so, it offers a forceful political rebuke to the hierarchical view of verse encoded in Steiner's sweeping and ambitious *The Death of Tragedy*. Indeed, verse plays in this period drew much of their rejuvenating energy from aiming to copy some aspects of the more democratic Shakespearean model. The chapter therefore looks for the (partly political) potential for theatrical renewal often overlooked in plays by Joanna Baillie, Byron, Shelley, and Thomas Lovell Beddoes, which I offer as representative of the changes taking place in verse drama over this period.

Chapter Five begins with an overview of the verse drama written in the early years of the twentieth century, where writers including John Drinkwater and Stephen Phillips articulated their own work around a rejection of Shakespeare. These readings draw on Irene Morra's *Verse Drama in England, 1900-2015* to indicate that twentieth-century verse drama underwent multiple, more or less successful revivals, including the religiously

informed movement centred on T. S. Eliot. Eliot's critical prose explicitly calls for verse drama to forge a new spiritually-inclined community, comparable to the social sweep of Shakespeare's initial audience as he presented it. This chapter offers readings of Anne Ridler's and, especially, Christopher Fry's work through the lens of this communitarian impulse, which it argues — for Fry — is Shakespearean in character, despite the absence of the Shakespearean formal resource of shared metre. Finally, it contextualises the collapse of the verse drama movement as commonly understood in 1956, as the pendulum swung away from spirituality and back towards theatrical naturalism.

The final chapter segues from Fry's own account of the difficulties of working in the form today, to a more personal account of the evolution of my own practice as a verse dramatist. It outlines the writing process of three plays, and traces the developing insight provided by creative practice into how shared-metre verse drama affords a range of dramatic and political possibilities, based on the interrelation between the community and the individual. Drawing on my own scripts and on a substantial audience response survey, collected during the Midlands3Cities-funded tour of my play *Free for All*, it sketches a preliminary account of how contemporary audiences might receive and engage with dramatic verse, and what actors discover in working with this particular kind of text. The thesis closes by arguing both for the role of verse in contemporary theatre, and for the vital role of informed verse-speaking in bringing across its dramatic possibilities to an audience — whether the text is by Shakespeare or a present-day verse dramatist.

The conclusions I draw in this study will be of interest not only for Shakespeare scholars and theatre historians, but also for contemporary practitioners in the fields of both poetry and drama. Within the Shakespearean academic community, while much important work

has been done on the form of Shakespeare's verse, on his influence on later authors, and on the political conversations in which his work engages and allows us to engage, there has been remarkably little overlap between the first and the latter two areas of study. George T. Wright, whose 1988 *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* remains a magisterial guide to the author's prosody, speaks of 'an ethic of mutual dependence and obligation ... deeply inscribed in Shakespeare's drama' which implies a communitarian political system, but does not do so in any dialogue with any particular strand of political criticism (258); Marina Tarlinskaja's fine-grained attention to metrical variation illuminates its aesthetic impact, but is less concerned with the often politically charged interrelation between individuals within any given play.

Critics such as Alan Sinfield and Kiernan Ryan challenge the conventional alignment of Shakespeare with the apparatus of conservative political systems, but do not actively consider how Shakespeare's own use of a restrictive system – metrical verse form – might contribute to his engagement with questions of authority and agency. While that opposition, in the Foucauldian guise of subversion and containment, is central to New Historicist readings, this approach has conventionally had little to say on formal matters except (as indicated by, for example, Anthony Easthope's essay 'Problematizing the Pentameter,' discussed in Chapter Three) where it argues for their role in encoding and enshrining power.

Finally, scholars of influence, including Bloom and Jonathan Bate, do not often draw on the granularity of prosodic close reading to support their broader narratives about imitation and adaptation (the 'imitation' of Shakespeare in Nicholas Rowe's eighteenth century *Jane Shore*, for example, can be rigorously challenged on formal grounds). For

Shakespeareans other than Tarlinskaja, it remains largely true that, as Eliot noted a century ago, '[t]he comparative study of English versification at various periods is a large tract of unwritten history' ('Notes' 72). This study therefore makes a provisional attempt to bridge those gaps between schools of Shakespeare criticism, by insisting on the political importance of attending to form as a lens through which to view the evolving conflict between individual and community, and between self and other.

It also aims to encourage dialogue between specialists in different periods of theatrical history, and to propose a particular chain of narrative links between them. Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy*, though immensely wide-ranging and forcefully argued, is over fifty years old, and contains many significant oversights and omissions, not least on the grounds of gender. Its view of the early modern period is at best distorted, and its cultural gatekeeping overtly excludes large sections of the population from access to poetry.

Without such overarching histories, however, it is difficult for scholars of different periods to participate in a common conversation — for those interested in Romantic-era theatre, for example, to look forward to the 1920s or backwards to the 1680s, and see the signposts of a single, recognisable critical narrative. For that reason alone a more up-to-date account of the development of verse drama across a broad historical sweep is long overdue.

It is especially clear to me as a Shakespearean that in the current climate, very few critics interested in Shakespeare are also writing professionally about the Shakespeare-influenced verse drama of later periods, meaning that a number of potentially illuminating conversations are not being had. One notable exception with a foot in both camps is the author of *Shakespearean Verse Speaking*, Abigail Rokison: a classically trained actor and



scholar with a particular investment in contemporary practice, whose work is discussed below. To date, however, a search of the *World Shakespeare Bibliography* for the major contemporary names mentioned in the next chapter returns no results for Peter Oswald, Mike Bartlett, Tony Harrison, or Sean O'Brien. Glyn Maxwell appears only as a reviewer of Shakespeare, and Christopher Fry is paired with Shakespeare in two articles, both dating from the 1960s. The sole exception is T. S. Eliot, though his poetry and dramatic criticism of Shakespeare appear far more popular as subjects of discussion than does his own dramatic verse. The popular critical appetite for comparing contemporary verse dramatists to Shakespeare has thus hardly even filtered into the section of academia concerned with the world's best-known poet-playwright. Many life-long experts on a significant corpus of verse drama are no longer paying attention to present-day incarnations of the medium.

Last but not least, the project addresses contemporary poets, dramatists, actors and directors. It offers insights, from history and from current practice, into what combinations of dramaturgical and poetic resources have over time been considered theatrically engaging, and it makes a positive case for what unique effects can be accessed by combining the two. If it inspires a poet to consider the value of writing verse plays with a greater awareness of what might or might not work theatrically, or a playwright to experiment with verse in the knowledge of how the resources of metre and form can support dramaturgical objectives, it will therefore have made a contribution which is creatively as well as critically useful. My hope is that it might also prompt actors and directors to reflect on the ways in which their practice can best serve the theatrical resources verse makes available, not least in the contemporary performance of

Shakespeare, where attention to verse is all too often spuriously aligned with a wider-reaching cultural conservatism – a theme to which I will return in the final chapter.

These are broad ambitions, and some will inevitably take precedence over others. To serve the primary purpose of a contribution to Shakespeare studies, my choice of subjects for this expansive project has in some areas needed to be ruthlessly selective. In the periods with which I am less familiar I have therefore been guided in my reading by the current critical canon – with additions, in Chapters Three and Four particularly, suggested by the vital recuperative work of feminist scholars.<sup>2</sup> Relevance to the development of a tradition articulating itself in response to Shakespeare has been the primary consideration, and has allowed me to prioritise some texts over others for detailed close reading. As a practitioner, I have also naturally been drawn to the authors whose practice I personally find the most creatively engaging. In terms of methodology, the overall result is a historically-minded, formalist, text-centred study which aims to proceed with an awareness of the kinds of ideological exclusions these forms of criticism often mask.

Having established the parameters of the thesis, readers might welcome some comment on the assumptions underlying what I consider valuable about its subject. The brief hypotheses below outline what, at its best, I believe verse drama should be able to do, and what resources a poetic basis for dramatic writing makes available to practitioners. These hypotheses define what Caroline Levine, with whose work on form I engage at length in Chapter Two, would describe as the ‘affordances’ of verse drama. Drawn from design

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<sup>2</sup> More information on this selection process can be found in the preliminary ‘Note on Texts.’

theory, ‘affordances’ as a term refers to ‘the potential uses or actions latent in materials or designs’ (6) which ‘point us both to what all forms are capable of — to the range of uses each could be put to, even if no one has yet taken advantage of those possibilities — and also to their limits, the restrictions intrinsic to particular materials and organizing principles’ (10-11).

The ‘affordances’ I identify, in line with the historical texts I have considered, relate most precisely to verse plays using fairly clear, repeated metrical patterns, or comparable formal strictures. They draw freely on Wright’s *Shakespeare’s Metrical Art*, on the writings of recent verse dramatists, and the analysis of historical verse speaking styles offered by Abigail Rokison, whose study of Shakespearean verse speaking concludes that ‘the dramatic significance of internal short lines, metrically continuous delivery of shared lines, inserting a pause at line endings and observing punctuation ... are supported by historical evidence relating to Renaissance writing and acting’ (179). My hypotheses do, however, come with the caveat that there are many reasons why the possibilities they propose might not be communicated to a theatre audience. The most obvious stumbling block here is the verse speaking of any individual production: if the vocal techniques used make verse sound indistinguishable from naturalistic prose, obscuring lineation, metre, or non-naturalistic elements of language use, then much of what I suggest verse can do may not be audible or apparent.

Firstly, I suggest that because shared-metre verse worlds mean that all members of an onstage community speak in a common metrical ‘language,’ the use of verse creates a stylised ‘natural order.’ Uninterrupted verse in this context can offer a powerful sense of smoothness and authority. As completed lines accumulate — particularly regular lines,

unbroken by punctuation or disruptive rhythmic variation – they can consolidate authority in a speech and its speaker. This applies more to dialogue than monologue, and especially to public situations where a group of other characters with the potential to interrupt are being addressed (Mark Antony’s funeral oration for Caesar, for instance.)

Conversely, because this kind of fluency works by showing control of the medium, the interruption of a line – by another speaker’s verse, or by prose – will be audibly disruptive to the sense of order established within any onstage community. Once an audience begins to hear and understand (explicitly or intuitively) that individual verse lines are the basic units of characters’ dialogue, any split, broken or interrupted line is alive with a new charge and energy. Any prose line, whether a sentence or a paragraph, can continue indefinitely – interruptions in prose do not therefore assault the foundations of a character’s speech. If an audience is expecting a verse-speaking character’s line to last for five beats, however, and the line is taken up by a different character after only three or four, a struggle for power is enacted at a microcosmic level which might have implications on the macro- level of the whole work.

Similarly, the use of the verse line as a relatively inflexible shared medium draws attention to minute variations by individuals. If a character speaks only in monosyllables, this is easy to ‘pick up’ against the background of the metre; if, like Macbeth or Leontes, a character uses a high amount of mid-line caesuras, rhythmic variations, and hyper- or hypometric lines, elements of that character are experienced by the audience through comparison to a known departure point. If everyone else on stage speaks verse ‘correctly’ (according to an established pattern), when someone varies that pattern the difference of that individual from their surrounding community is dramatically apparent. Though

Fernie's comment that a 'freedom to be otherwise is hard-wired into the very technology of the form that Shakespeare works in' refers specifically to the role-playing of the actor, it applies equally to these moments of metrical departure and resistance (5). As such, verse provides its own inbuilt toolkit for differentiating characters by their language alone.

Prose dramatists have a number of strategies for distinguishing characters from one another. In a play which mixes prose and verse, however, the use of the latter allows for further and more drastic distinction. Managing the shifts between prose and verse in the speech of one character, or in dialogue or a group scene, allows dramatists to communicate the formality or otherwise of a situation, the social standing of characters with regard to one another and to their wider community, and the attitudes of characters to the situation they find themselves in. A key Shakespearean example would be Prince John in the *Henry IV* plays, who continues speaking high formal verse even when Falstaff responds solely in demotic prose, or the case of Jaques, who actively denounces blank verse and yet speaks it where necessary in the presence of high status characters such as the Duke. A scene where characters negotiate whether to speak prose or verse is loaded with tensions relating to, among other things, class, hierarchy, aspiration and resistance. A switch to prose might signal chumminess, relaxation, intimacy; a switch to verse might entail one-upmanship, power-play, or deference. The meanings of each form are fluid and shifting, but the transitions between them give shape and nuance to equally fluid, shifting situations.

Lastly, in announcing itself – however quietly – as non-naturalistic language, verse dialogue is freer than prose to move away from the concerns of contemporary naturalism. The very constructedness of verse means that the form creates a kind of contract with the

audience which supports non-naturalistic, verbal ‘world-building’: telling us that it is night when it is day, for instance, or that Oberon is invisible. T. S. Eliot writes ironically about mythological and historical settings allowing characters to be ‘licensed to talk in verse’ (‘Poetry’ 139), but argues that even in a contemporary context, verse permits or encourages a kind of spiritual exploration which cannot be accessed in prose:

It seems to me that beyond the nameable, classifiable emotions and motives of our conscious life when directed towards action – the part of life which prose drama is wholly adequate to express – there is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus; of feeling of which we are only aware in a kind of temporary detachment from action ... This peculiar range of sensibility can be expressed by dramatic poetry, at its moments of greatest intensity. (‘Poetry’ 145)

Once a character is speaking in a way which we recognise as fundamentally extraordinary – and even if the words put into the verse structure are derived from ordinary diction, the structure itself might preserve an incantatory, even ritualistic quality – why should it strike us as any stranger for them to speak of extraordinary things, on a different plane from everyday materialistic existence? If the means by which they speak to an audience is inherently artificial, why should that audience expect the playworld they inhabit to be mimetically ‘natural’?

Indeed, Tony Harrison introduces the printed text of his play *Square Rounds* by stressing his difficulties in finding an approach which would allow him to ‘rescue the actor and text from the suffocation of naturalism’ (170). Harrison here expresses his desire to ‘create a

new poetic theatre that drew from the past, but which looked straight into the depths and disturbances of our own times' (170), but has commented elsewhere that it is difficult to do so in the present climate because 'we've got hooked on realism, and I hate realism' (Winder, 'Interview'). Against realism, Harrison opposes his conviction that 'the great tradition is all poets . . . And it's not just a question of poetry – it's metricality. People don't realise what its power is' (Winder, 'Interview').

Part of its power is, I argue, political. While much contemporary drama has shied away from rhetorical speech-making and playworlds populated solely by high status characters, the net result has been a number of plays which rest dramatically on characters' inarticulacy and on difficulties in communication. Verse can also convey these attributes, but as a formal medium with some degree of artificial abstraction from contemporary reality, it also creates a space for eloquence, articulacy, and language that goes beyond the bounds of everyday speech. It thus allows figures rarely given a voice, or whose voices are rarely allowed to be eloquent or articulate within the bounds of supposed realism, to speak with a measure of gravitas and beauty: the gardeners in *Richard II* exemplify how a hierarchical social order within a play-world need not limit the ability of characters of any social status to express themselves fluently and powerfully.

To my mind, these possibilities are more than enough to encourage a renewed exploration of the resources of verse drama by contemporary practitioners. Nonetheless, the reluctance of many theatres to put verse drama centre stage has deep roots, and it is clear that verse dramatists working today are themselves significantly affected by the climate of hostility into which their plays inevitably enter. It is still worth considering the

provocation put forward by Eliot about the place verse drama could occupy in the modern world, and how this might be achieved:

What we have to do is to bring poetry into the world in which the audience lives and to which it returns when it leaves the theatre; not to transport the audience into some imaginary world totally unlike its own, an unreal world in which poetry is tolerated. ('Poetry' 141)

Eliot's desired revival, despite his own limited success, has not come to pass, and the experiences of contemporary verse dramatists are testament to the psychological impact of that fact. This introduction has outlined some recurring patterns in the negative reviews that contemporary verse drama receives; it is now time to consider what kinds of plays modern verse dramatists are actually writing, how they feel about them, and to what extent their perception of their own practice is influenced, as I have argued above, by a sense of inhibition in regard to Shakespeare. In doing so, the first chapter will begin the task of confronting what – despite these authors' valiant efforts – has been lost in the decline of a creative approach which once was and, in a limited sense, still is absolutely vital to our national artistic culture.



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## CHAPTER ONE

### 'OUR AGE IS WHAT COMES AFTER POETRY': VERSE DRAMA TODAY

The feeling of being inhibited – even crushed – by comparison to Shakespeare is evident across a wide range of press interviews given, and articles written, by some of the leading verse dramatists of the last twenty-five years. Rarely is it more explicitly staged in the plays themselves, however, than in Sean O'Brien's *Keepers of the Flame* (2003). This is perhaps not least because the play, while it considers larger political questions through this lens, is partly about the uses of poetry. Bonneville, an Oxford English tutor in 1926, declares to his precocious student, the young poet Richard Jameson: 'Poetry / Is finished, Richard. Surely you know that' (22).

The don's explanation comes in the form of a paradox: the post-mortem of poetry is conducted poetically. The cause of death is implied in lines which reference the prime suspect, echoing Harold Bloom's assertion that 'poetry in our tradition, when it dies, will be self-slain, murdered by its own past strength' (10). In acknowledging the characters' (and the writer's) own belatedness and inhibition, these lines nonetheless attempt to play Shakespeare at his own game:

JAMESON. But poetry is England.

BONNEVILLE. England? *When?*

Like Classics, it's a language of the dead,

A world we study when the action's done –

.....

There's no dishonour tending to the grave.

Our age is what comes after poetry.

That's why we study English, after all.

We come on stage long after Fortinbras

Has bid the soldiers shoot. We sniff the smoke.

We count the syllables. We thank the dead.

Finished, Richard, yes? Unlike your essay.

(22)

In thanking the dead, O'Brien creates a living artwork, and one which syllable-counters will find in this instance scans immaculately: all lines of the argument expressed in this speech, except the last, which reintroduces a certain narrative tension, fall into perfect iambic pentameter. It's a powerful demonstration of how the blank verse line can fluently capture, in an only lightly stylised form, a wholly contemporary state of mind, even in the aftermath of a war which raised questions about the validity of poetry itself. But the feeling it expresses is the sense of an ambivalent but unshakeable debt to Shakespeare which turns us all into mere followers. It simultaneously raises a possibility and cancels it out.

Furthermore, this discussion evokes, and then immediately challenges, the idea that there was ever a time when poetic expression could bind together and speak for a national community ('England? *When?*') This is a theme explored throughout the play. In the 1930s, Jameson's poetry turns to the service of fascist propaganda with the intent of

nurturing a sense of English identity: ‘Without a song, how can the people live?’ (76). Later, less high-minded scenes revolve around Jameson as an old man in 1987 and a working-class handyman, Steve, who becomes his minder and appreciates his work: ‘The songs belong to us!’ (43). Steve appears drawn to nationalism out of a sense of social decline – ‘Well, look around. The pits have gone. The yards / Have shut. There’s fuck all happening’ (60) – and his partner Lisa describes him engaging in racially-motivated violence:

And you go off to Newcastle and then

Come back with half your bloody teeth knocked out.

From scrapping with the Pakistanis up

In Fenham ... (61)

Though he may not have imagined it quite in such terms, Steve’s ‘You’re fucking doing as you’re fucking tell!’ (62) is an explicit demonstration of T. S. Eliot’s wish ‘that the audience should find, at the moment of awareness that it is hearing poetry, that it is saying to itself: “I could talk in poetry too!”’ (‘Poetry’ 141). The fact that O’Brien’s blank verse can stretch both to channelling *Hamlet* and to Geordie demotic captures something of the capaciousness of the medium: implicitly, despite what Bonneville claims, poetry can speak to and for these contemporary English people. O’Brien establishes a clear link between the ideals of verse and community-building – most openly in Steve’s response to Jameson’s ambitions – and, in the characters’ racial politics, warns of the forms of exclusion this might entail. *Keepers of the Flame* therefore offers a window into the



complex negotiations between Shakespeare, contemporary verse drama, and the social scope of the community it can both stage and address.

It has never been entirely true that, as E. Martin Browne – founder of the Pilgrim Players, and the foremost director of Eliot’s verse plays – claimed in 1976, ‘the whole verse-drama movement, as we spent our lives on it, has come to an end’ (Wahl 68). Nonetheless, despite the intermittent success in the later twentieth century of plays in verse by authors ranging from John Arden to Caryl Churchill (*Serious Money*), and Tony Harrison’s classical translations, it is clear that a ‘movement’ of the kind that sustained Browne’s favoured authors, including Eliot and Christopher Fry, no longer has much cultural momentum.

Verse dramatists today have instead been characterised by their isolation. Lyn Gardner describes Peter Oswald, who was commissioned by artistic director Mark Rylance to write three verse plays for The Globe, including its first original play, *Augustine’s Oak*, in 1999, as a solo operator, the ‘geek in the corner of British theatre, plugging away at a type of drama that everyone believed had expired sometime in the late 1950s’ – if not the 1650s (‘Rhyme’). It is therefore unsurprising that many recent writers of verse drama frequently evoke the fraught emotional experience of writing in the face of extreme hostility, and of continuous, damaging comparison to Shakespeare.

Fry himself, late in life, appeared to one interviewer ‘mystified rather than resentful at the way he was first built up, then knocked down’ (Cavendish, ‘The giant’). Describing to the *Daily Telegraph’s* Dominic Cavendish one of the most crucial reasons for his decline and his loss of faith in his own work, he commented: “It was terribly damaging, horrifying

really, to be compared to Shakespeare. It made everything so overwrought.” Oswald also questioned the critical insistence on viewing verse drama through just this filter:

I do sometimes feel that there is a deep-rooted unwillingness to really engage with [verse drama] in British theatre. People often seem to think that what I am trying to do is re-create Shakespeare, which would be the worst thing imaginable. I am not. I am trying to write contemporary plays that use iambic pentameter because to me it seems like the most natural form to use. (Gardner, ‘Rhyme’)

At the Globe, Oswald experienced a very site-specific frustration:

Shakespeare just dominated the place and all the thinking about it so much that you couldn’t have a script discussion without everything being compared to Shakespeare in some way or another which is really, for a writer, very atrophying and very hard. (Fallow 93)

Catriona Fallow’s research implies that the programme material the Globe provided for audiences didn’t make things any easier. Oswald’s individuality was underserved by paratextual documents which ‘explicitly and implicitly situate[d] each of Oswald’s works as part of a theatrical tradition stretching back to Shakespeare and Elizabethan theatre practice,’ and thus functioned ‘not as an affirmation of Oswald’s own work in the present but rather as a reaffirmation of the dominance of Shakespeare and Elizabethan theatre’ (93). In response to this dispiriting situation, Oswald flippantly suggested to journalist Brian Logan that “there ought to be a 10-year moratorium on Shakespeare at the Globe; that the theatre should be thrown open to living playwrights, to see what they could make

of the space.” This provocation is a necessary one when even a largely sympathetic interviewer seems to be hearing what they want to hear. Criticising *Augustine’s Oak* for reinforcing the idea that ‘verse drama is old-fashioned, its backward-looking historical narratives set in some distant olde worlde England where everyone rants in rhyming couplets,’ Gardner seems to overlook the fact that there is only such couplet in the text of the entire play (‘Rhyme’).

The recent controversy over Emma Rice’s brief tenure as artistic director of the Globe indicates how conflict between contemporary practice and theatrical tradition continues regularly to arise in this particular space. The confused reception engendered by debuting modern verse drama in the Globe auditorium might nonetheless seem a reasonable trade-off for career advancement. But many of Oswald’s comments in interviews suggest this association has done nothing to improve his precarious professional situation: ‘all of my nine years at the Globe I consider as a mostly pretty desperate and grinding apprenticeship which apprenticed me to write plays that no other theatre wants to stage’ (Fallow 94). Even the Globe has only produced four verse plays in its seventeen-year existence, and only one of these – Glyn Maxwell’s *Liberty* – since the departure of Rylance. The Globe’s producers, in 1998, formally ‘listed seven key artistic strategies that were deemed essential to Rylance’s vision for the Globe in the coming years’: seventh on the list was a commitment ‘[t]o experiment with new verse writing’ (Fallow 91). But under Rice and Dominic Dromgoole, this experimentation has no longer been a priority.

Maxwell’s dispiriting experience of staging *Liberty* at the Globe, discussed in the previous chapter, indicates how he too has suffered through direct comparison to Shakespeare in

the venue bearing his name. Throughout his career, Maxwell has reflected on the challenge of this comparison, not least when it becomes internalised:

I took Shakespeare as my model and made the same mistakes as the Victorians and the Romantics. All my characters were equally articulate. The search now is to render a contemporary sound, however inarticulate, within a verse framework. (Cavendish, 'Why is everyone')

Although following Shakespeare here leads to inevitable error, Maxwell nonetheless uses his example to justify the medium as a whole: 'People who don't think verse can survive on the stage now are saying Shakespeare can't survive now' (Potts). Ultimately, in his experience, for a verse dramatist working today it is necessary to engage with Shakespeare in one way or another, simply because of his established dominance in the form.

Considering whether Shakespeare represents '[i]nspiration or intimidation,' Maxwell asks

If a child who loves football watches film of Pele in action, does he say, "what the hell, forget it, I'll get a job at McDonald's," or does he say, "oh I want to be him, I want to do that"? Only the English find this presumptuous. ('Glyn Maxwell on... Revolution')

Compelled to write, in some measure, by Shakespeare's example, Maxwell nonetheless resists any firm conclusions which arise from his decision to use verse. An Author's Note appended to his *Plays Two* protests the very idea of a larger purpose:

Words and lines and spaces come where they come for a reason, as in a musical score. There is nothing poetic about these plays aside from that one principle of their construction. They are written in verse not for

reasons of aesthetics or culture or nostalgia, but because poets write in verse and a poet wrote these.

Here Maxwell is engaging with a question Eliot deemed it necessary for a verse dramatist to consider, given the overdetermined state in which the form found itself even before his own interventions. Rather than continuing as if versified speech were the natural method for drama, Eliot insisted that verse ‘must justify itself dramatically, and not merely be fine poetry shaped into a dramatic form. From this it follows that no play should be written in verse for which prose is *dramatically* adequate’ (‘Poetry’ 132).

Tony Harrison’s firm declaration to Robert Winder – ‘We’ve got hooked on realism, and I hate realism’ – illustrates more combatively than most how many verse playwrights today, in paratextual material and within their own work, take up Eliot’s challenge of self-justification. Yet even for Harrison, who writes in rhymed couplets which in practice often fall into a version of the ‘fourteener’ rhythm popular in the 1580s, an anti-realist position leads inevitably to being viewed through the filter of Shakespeare’s very different poetic dramaturgy. Nicholas Wroe, interviewing Richard Eyre in the *Guardian*, summarises the director’s belief that ‘Harrison has not been yoked to the usual list of great British dramatists because he has chosen to write exclusively in verse.’ In doing so, he avoids the wider issue, that Harrison’s use of verse is problematised precisely because of its belated position with regard to this ‘list.’

Eyre comments that this form “ironically is the great British tradition,” and that for Harrison “here is a medium, verse drama, which has incredible vigour, which uses the source of rhythmic language to distil and provide a pulse for dramatic action. It is a conscious choice for him as it was for Shakespeare.” He does not acknowledge that

Harrison's 'conscious choice' has a fundamentally different character when taken (as Shakespeare's, of course, could not have been) in the shadow of Shakespearean influence. Shakespeare's prevalence generates, in Harrison's case, a tendency towards both false comparisons and critical suspicion, and in response, the playwright finds himself having to validate, if not excuse, his dramaturgical form. In the Introduction to *Square Rounds*, he discusses his work as a translator of 'dramas whose poetic qualities could not be avoided' as the apprenticeship through which he 'first cleared a space for my own poetic plays' (152). But when composing a wholly original work, even Harrison's pedigree translating poetic sources does not seem enough: 'defensive as even I am about "verse drama," I had to find a reason for the verse' of *Square Rounds* (Introduction 152).

Essentially a series of pantomimic skits taking the audience through the development of twentieth-century weaponry, the play is populated with characters who had themselves written poetry. Harrison emphasised the 'theatrical bluff' and 'verbal creativity' of figures like Hiram Maxim, inventor of the machine gun, as the traits which 'gave me the licence to conceive the whole enterprise in verse' (Introduction 156). In the play itself, after an opening monologue in demotic prose, the pioneer of nitrogen fixation Fritz Haber shares his own fixation with both his interlocutor and the audience: a passion for poetry, meaning that the presence of verse on stage is a clear formal choice into which we are all consciously being strong-armed.

FRITZ HABER. What you've been saying may be very fine

but you must obey the rules...

SWEEPER MAWES. Whose rules?

FRITZ HABER.

Mine!

Which means you have a rhyme on every line.

.....

So my first condition for appearing on this show's

to stamp a strict *verboden* on all prose.

(185-6)

Rising to the occasion, Mawes demonstrates his own command of verse in a speech which appropriates Shakespeare as a standard-bearer for patriotic pride. The sweeper suggests that the British poetic tradition is part of our national DNA, a birthright which should be available to all members of the national community:

No Bosch defeats heirs of Byron and Keats

Shakespeare makes us all Prosperos.

So square up for rounds of metrical sounds —

How about that? That's not prose!

(187)

The reference Harrison chooses, however — to an ageing, late-career figure who elegiacally drowns his book and breaks and buries the staff which allows him to create 'heavenly music,' his charms 'all o'erthrown' — is not necessarily a ringing endorsement

(5.1.52; Epilogue 1). In his previous work, *The Trackers of Oxyrynchus*, a reconstructed satyr play in which defiantly working-class satyrs ask to be allowed to play Apollo's lyre and find themselves sternly rebuked, Harrison made Prospero the avatar of an aesthetic and cultural imperialism. The satyrs' leader Silenus draws on the internal dynamics of *The Tempest* to explore the elitism of high art, presented here as an attitude arising in the aftermath of the satyrs' frustrated request: 'It confounds their categories of high and low / when your Caliban outplays your Prospero' (*Trackers* 137). Harrison even links the familiar Caliban/Prospero dichotomy to the flaying of Marsyas, who is portrayed as being punished by the gods for the hubris of aspiring to an elite art-form: 'They ripped off his skin / and all he ever wanted was to join in' (*Trackers* 136).

In contrast to this violently exclusionary binary, Morra argues that the play itself, in its 'elision of satyr and classical drama, time and place, advocates for a more cohesive, inclusive definition of society and culture built upon a perpetual openness to art' – an advocacy motivated by Harrison's own 'strong social politics [and] ... self-confessed need to validate the role of the poet and to (re)connect' (207, 211). In this context, his identification with the satyrs and with Caliban seems to underpin Harrison's aggressively un-Shakespearean verse form, situating his loose couplets in a wider quest to establish an alternative tradition, carved out of aspects included in, but nonetheless denigrated by, the old one.

Anti-elitism here, however, can feed not only into cultural inclusiveness, but also into a resurgent nationalism where one community is defined in opposition to another. Sweeper Mawes's anti-German lines in *Square Rounds* resonate uncomfortably beyond the context of the two World Wars as Harrison takes a step away from the contested territory of



classical verse drama, making the case for the use of verse in a different, vibrant and more populist context which also functions as a vehicle for xenophobic insults:

Every Brit can do his bit

in ballad or monologue bouts.

We hear verse all the time in pantomime

and we don't need no lessons from Krauts!

(187)

Peter Oswald's first Globe play, *Augustine's Oak*, similarly distributes the formal resources of verse and prose in order to question who verse belongs to, and in what situations it is appropriate. Its plot concerns the arrival of the Christian bishop Augustine in a politically- and spiritually-fragmented post-Roman Britain. Religious affiliation seems at first to be the prime formal divider. King Ethelbert of Kent, along with his pagan retainers, stubbornly speaks prose to his wife and daughter; the Roman delegation led by Augustine speak only verse, as do the Christian Celts in Wales. Even Bertha, Ethelbert's Christian queen, code-switches to verse when conversing with other Christian characters. The clash of cultures and imperatives that takes place when Ethelbert and Augustine meet is thus presented through a kind of formal incompatibility; like Mortimer and his Welsh wife in *1 Henry IV*, neither is able to speak the other's 'tongue,' until Ethelbert converts and adopts verse. This linguistic shift seems to bring in its wake an attempt at national unification, heralded by a 'thunderstorm / Of baptisms':

BERTHA. Augustine, God is sitting on your shoulder,

If you can spread throughout this fighting island

The light you have set up in one small corner,

You will have saved four peoples from destruction. (52)

Despite being implicitly associated with this unifying impulse, however, Oswald's use of verse also suggests more divisive discourses. Prose here represents the 'pagan' tongue of the ancient Britons, and verse the formal Latin of the 'civilised' Roman visitors, which the Celtic Christians have retained. Given the play's general progress towards 'Christ's throne' and the triumph of Christianity, there is an implicit association between prose and barbarism, with verse as the bright new hope which will save the backward Britons from their bad old ways (95). And yet this transitional moment does not read as simply progressive. The agents of change arrive speaking a form the audience is predisposed to hear as dated, inviting the question of whether, politically and socially, we might sometimes need to look back in order to go forward.

Verse also arrives as a foreign imposition on Ethelbert's Anglo-Saxon kingdom. In one key scene of translation, Oswald seems to mock the high-handed prolixity of this imported language:

ETHELBERT. Why have you come here? What do you want to talk about? Speak plainly.

OSBERT. What is the reason for your presence here?

What are the teachings you have brought to us?

Feel free to speak directly, we are folk

Who understand unhampered language best. (25)

Verse here threatens not only a sense of regional insularity, but also the ‘plain’ prose style in which it is expressed: to fill up the metre, the language of the outsider seems to demand a verbose *indirectness* which is potentially politically suspect. As the language of Rome, it carries with it the threat of elitism and imperialism. Seventeen years before the Brexit referendum, Osbert’s strained speech implies that European influence ‘hampers’ the island community with a stuffy formality which the locals’ responses comically puncture.

Later in the scene, however, Oswald reverses the process in defence of poetry, showing the spiritual insight and articulacy which his characters are forced to sacrifice in the paraphrase from verse into prose:

AUGUSTINE. We do not say that your beliefs are evil,

But that they are a sieve through which the spirit

Leaks away slowly to be lost in darkness.

.....

OSBERT. He commiserates with our beliefs, King. He says they are not

wicked, but utterly useless and that we are lost. (27)

Oswald's third Globe commission, *The Storm*, repeats the association between godlessness, fragmentation and isolation, and the deeper connection possible through faith:

DAEMONES. I was an almost-atheist, a barrel

Of emptiness, a cracked and leaking ocean.

Now I am wine in a gold cup reflecting

The kindness of the sky and of the sea. (77)

As in Eliot's plays, verse carries the promise of a deeper, spiritual unity which can be understood and developed in interpersonal communication. It seems to bring with it the imperative felt towards the end of *Augustine's Oak* by the young King Edwin, a prince tipped for greatness, who opens a conversation about Christianity with his wife by stating 'So we must try to speak to one another' (93). Though occasionally mocked for its pomposity, verse for Oswald's characters seems to present the conduit to greater human connection in a fallen world. Nonetheless, freedom from the spiritual resonance it carries might occasionally still come as a blessed relief: 'Oh good, I'm back to prose again,' notes the briefly versified Sceparnio in *The Storm* (91).

This strand of Oswald's humour suggests that verse drama cannot be written today without some degree of potentially destabilising self-reflection. The attitude of Jaques — 'Nay then, God b' wi' you, an you talk in blank verse' (*As You Like It* 4.1.24) — reminds us that such self-awareness is not a new development, but the reviews and interviews quoted above nonetheless demonstrate forcefully that one effect of Shakespeare's cultural

dominance has been a widespread sympathy for Jaques's position among the modern critical and commercial audience. Perhaps inevitably, the stigma attached to 'verse drama' as a category has led to a certain fear of the term. Even Fry once told the *Times* he had "never liked the term 'verse drama' ... It sounds terribly stuffy, doesn't it?" (Lewis). Maxwell also chooses to avoid the label, noting that 'verse drama' is 'the one phrase I beg producers of my plays to omit from the publicity material' ('The rhythm').

This evasion also informed the Almeida Theatre's marketing strategy when promoting Mike Bartlett's *King Charles III*. And indeed, a sustained examination of the attitudes expressed in relation to the use of verse in Bartlett's play offers a vivid insight into how modern verse drama is articulated in response to Shakespeare. Mentions of verse were notably absent from the production information on the Almeida website in 2014, which referred to Bartlett's work only as a 'future history play' ('King'); the printed text's back cover fudges the issue, identifying only 'the style and structure of a Shakespearean history play.' Regardless of this reticence, *King Charles III* went on to be the most critically and commercially successful verse play of recent years, with a bankable West End transfer to the Wyndham's doing nothing to dent its crop of five-star reviews.

Joseph Lloyd's review did raise questions about the verse itself, noting that it 'is not Shakespearean: it is too literal, too glib, too exterior-minded. Its attempts at lyricism sometimes shade into cliché.' Most appraisals, however, were remarkably uncritical of any of Bartlett's language choices, including the decision to write in verse. Indeed, the reception of *King Charles III* as a powerfully and essentially *dramatic* piece seems to belie one of Eliot's major arguments about the future of verse on stage:

It seems to me that if we are to have a poetic drama, it is more likely to come from poets learning how to write plays, than from skilful prose dramatists learning to write poetry. That some poets can learn how to write plays, and write good ones, may only be a hope, but I believe a not unreasonable hope; but that a man who has started by writing successful prose plays should then learn how to write good poetry, seems to me extremely unlikely. ('Poetry' 145)

Even those readers unconvinced by the suggestion that Mike Bartlett, successful prose playwright though he may be, has succeeded in writing good poetry, must nonetheless concede that it is from a theatrical rather than a poetic background that the most notable triumph of dramatic verse for a long time has arisen. On the page, the compressions, inversions and elisions of Bartlett's first attempt at verse do indeed sit less easily than in the theatre. Shifts in register have a disorientating effect:

CHARLES. In every second since my mother passed

I'm trapped by meetings, all these people ask

Me questions, talking, fussing, what to do,

Expect I'll have opinion there, all good

To go, like Findus ready meals for one,

Pre-wrapped and frozen, 'This is what I think.'

.....

My life has been a ling'ring for the throne.

Sometimes I do confess I 'maged if

My mother hap'd to die before her time ...

(16-17)

Onstage, these cod-evocations of early modern language gave the impression of a family whose lives in the modern world were wholly circumscribed by the conventions of the stylised past, effectively still living in a history play. Rupert Goold's production made even the least fluent writing feel arch rather than archaic. In the printed script, however, some of the more grammatically unorthodox passages risk reading as technical deficiencies rather than post-modern hijinks. From this perspective it is interesting to note that the published text's most direct Shakespearean allusion – the climactic 'God save King William, unking'd Charles says, / And send him many years of sunshine days!' – was cut in performance (128). Its inclusion steers the play more firmly towards pastiche, and its removal might suggest a desire to avoid the particular elitism implied by embedding direct citations for those audience members with the most cultural capital to recognise.

Deleting the line in performance would also, however, have given reviewers already presumed to be suspicious of verse drama one fewer reason to draw, as Lloyd does, direct linguistic comparisons to Bartlett's Shakespearean model. This would certainly align with some of the playwright's comments in a *Guardian* article on the composition process. Expressing a certain uneasiness with his chosen medium (for what he acknowledges is potentially the only verse play he will ever write), the author describes how he settled on his eventual form:

An epic royal family drama, dealing with power and national constitution, was the content, and therefore the form had surely to be Shakespearean. It would need five acts, quite possibly a comic subplot, but most worryingly, the majority of it would have to be in verse. ('Game')

The sense that certain subjects are appropriate for what is here called a 'Shakespearean' form (and, implicitly, that others are not) unconsciously echoes Eliot's summary of public perceptions of verse drama back in 1951, whereby only distant historical characters are considered 'licensed to talk in verse' ('Poetry' 139). I have noted that Bartlett's royals do indeed seem similarly distant. Nonetheless, despite his many accolades as an established prose playwright, Bartlett finds the idea of emulating 'Shakespearean' form inherently deeply inhibiting: it is 'terrifying' to contemplate writing in 'a form of verse drama that would lay this play alongside the greatest literature in the English language' ('Game').

Director Rupert Goold's preconceptions may not have helped to dispel this terror: elsewhere he is on record as expecting to be 'resistant to a new play in verse,' dismissively assuming such work is 'the type of thing written by "retired majors or strange little women in the home counties"' (Heyman).

More striking even than Bartlett's fears, though, are his attempts to actively conceal his art. He even sees positives in audiences not realising the text is in verse:

At first I thought this was a shame, but I quickly understood that it meant they were enjoying it for all the right reasons – meaning, imagery, character – rather than worrying about the technical aspects. Surely this is true in every element of theatre. The audience wants the lighting to enhance the mood and atmosphere of the scene – not to wonder how the



lanterns are attached or wired. The mechanics of verse drama should happen behind the scenes, allowing the audience to experience the characters and story.

Bartlett's apparent success in the form does not alter his sense that verse writing should be discreet, subordinate, even hidden from view. His characterisation of the audience experience raises a telling question. Why should an audience come to the theatre and find itself 'worrying about the technical aspects' of the writing? Disdainful, yes; dissatisfied, maybe; but worried? Something of the anxiety produced by working in verse appears to be projected onto the listening audience, from whom Bartlett apparently wants to hide his formal construction. But why shouldn't audiences 'experience' his linguistic artistry along with 'the characters and story'? Why should 'the mechanics of verse drama' happen behind the scenes when, in a literal sense, they *are* the scenes? And if we believe that the use of metred verse is at least partially a mnemonic system, should the failure of the audience to notice that any lines of the play were in verse be cause for concern, either on behalf of the playwright or his actors?

Bartlett's approval of his verse passing unnoticed again returns to Eliot, who wrote 'we have to accustom our audiences to verse to the point at which they will cease to be conscious of it' ('Poetry' 134). In fact, he seems to have gone out of his way while writing to prevent such a consciousness: 'I also had to avoid lines with monosyllabic words, because, spoken out loud, they expose the rhythm too much' ('Game'). The word 'expose' conjures up images of something dirty or culturally shameful, which needs as much as possible to be kept out of sight. There is a logic to this — an entire play in thudding monosyllables might weary audiences — but such 'exposed' lines abound in

Shakespeare. When Richard II, the Shakespearean character closest to Charles in Bartlett's play, greets his impending death with the line 'I wasted time, and now doth time waste me' (5.5.49), it is hard to imagine the author of the line wringing his hands at the clearly audible pentameter structure. Exposing the rhythm here, as a man — once a king — confronts the now quite clearly metred span of his existence, is manifestly part of the point. Bartlett's Charles uses monosyllables himself, in his own comparable abdication of the crown, which slow the pace and underline the gravity of the moment:

And from the side, bejewelled, it looks so rich

But turn it thus, and this is what you see

Nothing.

(127-8)

These lines derive their power from a combination of their form and content, to which an awareness of rhythm, in the speaker and the hearer, adds clarity and depth. The paranoia Bartlett expresses about his use of a traditional verse rhythm being found out by audiences speaks for itself, however. Working in a form thus overdetermined, he is uncomfortable simply letting iambic rhythms be heard.

But as we shall see in the third, fourth and fifth chapters of this thesis, playwrights in every previous time period under consideration have similarly agonised over how to approach their own use of verse and rhythm with direct reference to the Shakespearean model: a model which has been differently understood and engaged with in each of those periods. In the next chapter, I will therefore attempt to give a more objective account of what

Shakespearean verse drama is and does, before exploring in greater depth what trends of interpretation and response have led to the cultural position in which Bartlett and his fellow verse dramatists find themselves today.

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## CHAPTER TWO

### WHAT IS SHAKESPEAREAN VERSE DRAMA?

Coleridge famously declared of *Julius Caesar* 4.2 that ‘I know no part of Shakespeare that more impresses on me the belief of his genius being superhuman, than this scene’ (16). This chapter seeks to demonstrate that close scrutiny of this scene (the quarrel between Brutus and Cassius) and others like it on the grounds of how they work as verse drama – how they work metrically as well as, and as a way of, working politically – is crucial to understanding how the very idea of Shakespeare’s ‘genius’ has emerged. As the previous chapter makes clear, reckoning with what Shakespearean verse drama is, does and means remains a pressing concern for verse dramatists in the present day. Coleridge’s comments indicate how the course of verse drama has been definitively shaped by subsequent dramatists’ engagement with the question of what makes them consider Shakespeare ‘superhuman’: or to put it in Shakespeare’s own language,

What is your substance, whereof are you made,

That millions of strange shadows on you tend?

(Sonnet 53)

As many of the arguments about what verse drama, at its best, can or should be, circle around different conceptualisations of Shakespeare’s practice, attempting to describe what is distinctive and particular about Shakespeare’s use of verse drama is also, from a critical standpoint, one way of explaining why his work has endured – why, more than any verse dramatist before or since, even including his classical forebears, his plays remain uniquely widely performed, read and respected.

My own partial and provisional attempt to answer that question begins with *Julius Caesar* 4.2 partly because of its long-standing popularity: the quarrel scene was first praised for ‘ravish[ing]’ audiences by the seventeenth-century poet Leonard Digges (quoted in Daniell 95). More practically, the scene demonstrates comprehensively, under controlled conditions, the sorts of things Shakespeare is doing with one of the key features of poetic dramaturgy: his exploitation of the dramatic resources of split lines (antilabe) and stichomythia. From the very beginning, the characters’ conflict is presented in metrical terms:

CASSIUS. Brutus, this sober form of yours hides wrongs,

And when you do them —

BRUTUS. Cassius, be content.

Speak your griefs softly. I do know you well.

(4.2.38-40)

This acknowledgement of connectedness does not take away from the scene’s tally of ‘wrongs,’ ‘griefs,’ ‘faults,’ and condemnations, but it is through the interplay of shared and solo lines that the pair will eventually reach a final truce in harmony rather than misprision. That the line confirming their reconciliation shares nearly the exact metrical pattern of their first split line (except the initial trochee, but including the appeal to a proper name) testifies to the flexibility of this particular formal technique:

CASSIUS. Never come such division ‘tween our souls.



Let it not, Brutus.

BRUTUS.                    Everything is well.

(4.2.282-3)

Many of the types of stichomythia identified in ancient Greek drama by the classicist R. B. Rutherford are present in the exchanges which lead to this point. Firstly, we find attempts ‘to impart or extract information’ (169), as in this tetchy exchange which, in the metrical stumble beginning line 59, suggests an impatience to deliver criticism which outpaces the preceding formal niceties:

CASSIUS. You have condemned and noted Lucius Pella

For taking bribes here of the Sardians,

Wherein my letters praying on his side,

Because I knew the man, was slighted off.

BRUTUS. You wronged yourself to write in such a case.

CASSIUS. In such a time as this it is not meet

That every nice offence should bear his comment.

BRUTUS. Let me tell you, Cassius, you yourself

Are much condemned to have an itching palm . . .

(4.2.51-60)

There is exemplary evidence of Rutherford's 'conflict-stichomythia,' wherein 'alternating utterances provide the ideal vehicle for escalating tension or increasing hostility' (170).

Here, the argument seems to strike at the very root of individual identity, and the extent to which two friends bound together in a common action can recognise one another's essence and intentions:

BRUTUS. Go to. You are not Cassius.

CASSIUS. I am.

BRUTUS. I say you are not.

CASSIUS. Urge me no more, I shall forget myself.

Have mind upon your health. Tempt me no farther.

BRUTUS. Away, slight man.

CASSIUS. Is't possible?

BRUTUS. Hear me, for I will speak.

(4.2.83-88)

Short lines contribute to the somatic sense of unease when hearing this exchange. The way full lines complete each other might suggest some kind of overarching reassurance, however, as the scene also amply demonstrates Rutherford's 'progress towards recognition' (169):

BRUTUS. O Cassius, you are yokèd with a lamb



(4.2.243-246)

Interchanging these devices, or rather these variant uses of the same devices, Shakespeare's orchestration of the lines between the two generals is, as Cassius would have his ideal army, 'full of rest, defence, and nimbleness' (4.2.249). It is also a case study in how shared metre can track the fractious, sniping, cajoling, and ultimately conciliatory ways human beings can relate to one another: a microcosm of conflict and resolution, magnified by the artificially heightened bonds placed on Brutus's and Cassius's speech, which help to formally articulate the shifts in their conduct. This argument and its metrical management has not only personal, but also political import: they are disputing not only what kinds of people they should be, but what kind of nation-state such people should represent:

BRUTUS. I had rather be a dog and bay the moon

Than such a Roman.

CASSIUS. Brutus, bait not me.

(4.2.77-8)

CASSIUS. There is my dagger,

And here my naked breast; within, a heart

Dearer than Pluto's mine, richer than gold.

If that thou beest a Roman, take it forth.

(4.2.149-52)

How then, should a Roman sound? Implicitly, such a person should avoid the signs of anger, the eruptions of ‘grief and blood ill-tempered’ (4.2.164) and ‘rash choler’ (4.2.89) which enable much of the scene’s personal and metrical division. In one of the scene’s most famous passages, Brutus calmly proposes going with the political current:

Our legions are brim-full, our cause is ripe.

The enemy increaseth every day;

We at the height are ready to decline.

There is a tide in the affairs of men

Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;

Omitted, all the voyage of their life

Is bound in shallows and in miseries.

On such a full sea are we now afloat,

And we must take the current when it serves,

Or lose our ventures.

(4.2.262-271)

Although they contain, in the New Oxford edition of the text, two instances of enjambment, these lines are not themselves significantly free-flowing — they also feature

seven examples of end-stopping. ‘We at | the height’ opens line 264 with a trochee, and ‘On such | a full | **sea** are | we now | afloat’ has an inversion in the middle of the line, but nothing unsettles the lines entirely: there is a perceptible balance between floating and checking. A Roman, Cassius implies, should not trap or limit another Roman – ‘You forget yourself / To hedge me in’ (4.2.79-80). But here Brutus, famously Stoic, hedges *himself* in while calling for motion, for action. This balancing act is crucial for understanding not only how Shakespeare deploys the resources of shared metre to convey tension between individuals – their struggles themselves representative of larger political alignments – but also within single characters who might stand for, or against, the interests and concerns of their stage community.

In the rest of this chapter, I will track how that tension between individuals, and between those individuals and their communities, plays out in different contexts across the Shakespearean dramatic canon. Firstly, however, I will argue for the necessity of attending to specifically formal features, as I am doing, in beginning to understand how Shakespeare, rather than one of his contemporaries, achieved such unparalleled global significance. In doing so, I note the comparative paucity of specific formal awareness in our cultural conversation about Shakespeare and, with reference to the pioneering work of George T. Wright, Abigail Rokison and Caroline Levine, make a positive case for the vital practical and political importance of reading formally. The second half of the chapter is given over to four more sustained close readings which support my account of the particular value and potential of Shakespearean poetic dramaturgy.

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The endurance of Shakespeare has long been bound up in his continued *singularity* in the imagination of readers and authors, seemingly undented by the great mass of evidence for Shakespeare as collaborative author, Shakespeare as inveterate borrower of plots and sources, and Shakespeare as one cog in the wheel of printing house and editorial processes which, in their concatenation of different agencies, make even the first printed collection of his plays, in Louis MacNeice's words, 'incorrigibly plural' ('Snow'). The early documents from which editors work bear multiple marks of their 'age,' their own historical situatedness; the plays they transmit nonetheless move, in some abstracted sense, towards the horizon of 'all time,' in Ben Jonson's dedicatory poem, in a way that Jonson's themselves have rarely been described as doing. Despite both men working largely in the same medium — shared-metre verse drama — what Jonathan Bate calls 'the Shakespeare Effect' has indisputably, over the course of literary history, 'been greater than the Jonson Effect' (322).

Understanding why this is — and, as a result of this cultural preference, which ways of writing dramatic verse have been valorised, and which have fallen from favour — would greatly assist us in making sense of the subsequent history of verse drama in English. Although Wolfgang Clemen has stressed the caution with which we should proceed — 'Shakespeare has always defied theories about what is possible and permissible in the theatre, and anyone who has tried to establish the derivation of his art from certain basic principles and rules has soon got into difficulties' (210-11) — Russ McDonald insists that '[h]aving admitted the impossibility of the task, we must nevertheless persist in an attempt to define the nature of Shakespeare's particular gift for language' (*Arts* 30).

McDonald's own comparative study of the two men's styles demonstrates that, as Bate suggests, Jonson's work makes for a valuable comparison point on a number of counts when we consider how Shakespeare's art is constituted. Starting from broadly similar positions, in education and family background, the disparity in reverence paid to the apparent achievements of each author is remarkable. A formalist approach can, nonetheless, partially help us to understand the unique position Shakespeare has come to enjoy – not least because Jonson's very different practice and the theories supporting it have repeatedly been constructed by subsequent authors as the negatively-inflected double, or indeed, strange shadow, of those attributed to Shakespeare.<sup>3</sup>

The main dividing line McDonald identifies between the two men's poetic practice is that 'Shakespeare's verse is metrically balanced, whereas Jonson's is aggressively asymmetrical' ('Jonson' 109). Both sides of this comparison are heavily contextualised within the development of each writer's career, but as a generalisation,

Even when characters speak the most tortured and irregular poetry, the unruliness of the rhythm declares itself as an aberration, a temporary and exceptional violation of the normally balanced blank verse. A major source of the foundational stability audible in his poetry is Shakespeare's instinctive devotion to antithetical structures. ('Jonson' 109)

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<sup>3</sup> For much of the seventeenth century, Jonson was also in many respects more favourably received than Shakespeare. Although I do not have space to outline the changing historical courses of their reputations here, that argument, explored by Bate and made most forcefully by G. E. Bentley (*Shakespeare and Jonson: Their Reputations in the Seventeenth Century Compared*), is considered comprehensively in O'Brien, "Put not / Beyond the sphere of your activity": The Fictional Afterlives of Ben Jonson,' in the *Ben Jonson Journal*, vol. 23, issue 2.



This makes more sense when we think of the ‘stability’ McDonald claims for Shakespeare as existing somewhere on a continuum. Earlier writers, such as Marlowe, exhibit far more metronomic regularity in their use of metre; Shakespeare’s prosody is more flexible than Marlowe’s, but Jonson goes still further in unbalancing the line. His verse shows a heavy use of spondees, ‘grammatical gaps ... staccato phrases,’ and ‘rarely develops rhythmic momentum,’ creating a ‘poetic style marked by shifts in direction, emotional flashes, surprising turns, short stops’ (Jonson’ 115-6). Comparative tables on pause patterning compiled by Ants Oras allow McDonald to suggestively demonstrate the scale of this difference:

Shakespeare employs the comma, the semicolon, the colon, and the period deliberately, often for a particular dramatic end such as pointing up a contrast, whereas Jonson stops promiscuously, sometimes two or three times in the course of a single line, occasionally even more. In absolute terms, the number of midline pauses in Jonson’s verse plays is vastly greater than in Shakespeare’s. *The Alchemist*, for example, contains over 5000 stops in about 3000 lines of verse, and while that total is the highest, each of Jonson’s major verse plays contain over 4000 pauses. For Shakespeare, on the other hand, the highest number of stops occurs in *Cymbeline*, about 3100 stops in 2600 lines of verse. And in most of the plays, even the late, prosodically complex romances, the numbers don’t even approach the Jonsonian average. As for the location of stops, Jonson does not discriminate, stopping wherever it suits him, sometimes even after the first and before the last syllable in the line. (Jonson’ 116-7)

Similar disparities are in play when considering the use of split lines, a feature I identified above as uniquely significant to the political dynamics of the shared-metre verse play: the highest count of such prosodic features in Shakespeare is 433, in *Antony and Cleopatra*, as compared to 933 in *The Alchemist*. This observation goes some way towards explaining why, although Jonson's respect for the unities made his practice more appealing on a macro-level to the emerging neoclassical tendency later in the century, no Dryden verse play *sounds* like a play by Jonson: on the level of the line Jonson is anything but regular, and the numbers present Shakespeare as considerably less free and wild. His verse demonstrates variety and flexibility within certain limits, and the comparative smoothness of his work stands out in contrast to the more aggressive and acerbic Jonson.

In this vein, McDonald points out that 'although stylistic study mostly confirms our familiar construction of the differences between Shakespeare and Jonson, it is uncommonly useful in its capacity to make us understand why we think what we think' (118). If English theatrical culture seems to prefer Shakespearean balance and complementarity to Jonsonian aggregation and attack, it seems fair to suggest that the comparative poise and fluency of Shakespeare's metre and rhythm over Jonson's might play a part in this. Would a Shakespeare play be weakened if, metrically, it conformed to the profile of a typical Jonson play? Ultimately, this thought experiment raises the spectre of an unworkable separation of form from content. But fairly or not, the Shakespearean style has exercised a more lasting influence upon English theatre than Jonson's – even as subsequent generations of dramatists did not fully embody its potential – and in prosodic terms it is inherently a more conservative way of writing. Indeed, as Marina Tarlinskaja notes in a broader sense,

Shakespeare's "metrical idiolect" stays well within the norm of his epoch. Actually, in some respects his verse form is less loose than that of his contemporaries, and in many ways resembles the more rigid form of post-Restoration poets (338).

Though Tarlinskaja's analysis demonstrates that Shakespeare outgoes many contemporaries in his use of enjambment and participates in the general trend across the period of his career whereby midline breaks drift from around the fourth syllable to much later in the line, he is not unique in these innovations. He exploits fully some deviations from the earlier Elizabethan line, but not others. Unlike Fletcher and Webster, whose lines are frequently more highly varied with more regular late breaks, Tarlinskaja finds that Shakespeare rarely employs 'rhythmical italics' lasting for more than four syllables, and heavy feminine endings trailing two unstressed syllables are also rarely found even in Shakespeare's latest, most flexible works. By eschewing such techniques, 'features of Shakespeare's rhythmical style mark it as more "conservative" than his contemporaries and add more smoothness to his verse rhythm' (350). Even in his most 'lively' text, *Timon of Athens*, he does not approach the metrical looseness of *The Duchess of Malfi*: his verse remains closer to an earlier norm.

It is possible, then, on stylistic grounds, to articulate some of what makes Shakespeare different from Jonson and other authors, even if this alone does not explain how a single individual could end up so prioritised, so elevated. Shakespeare now stands, like Caesar in the play which bears his name, dangerously, and to many incomprehensibly, above his own culture: 'Caesar and Brutus: what should be in that Brutus? / Why should his name be sounded more than yours?' (1.2.143-4). In the speech which introduces this idea, two

trochaic proper names – Brutus and Cassius – repeatedly destabilise what could otherwise be a neutral, democratic expressive resource: the shared iambic pentameter line. Their metrical similarity means that an alternative arrangement would be equally possible: ‘Caesar and Brutus: what should be in that Brutus?’ Or indeed: ‘Jonson and Shakespeare: what should be in that Shakespeare?’ The handy-dandy exchanges of names in the original speech suggest how easy a reversal, in my pastiche, might seem. And yet, in the judgement of subsequent literary history, ‘this man [Shakespeare] / Is now become a god’ (117-8) and in many popular accounts of the period is imagined to ‘bear the palm alone’ (133), towering menacingly over his contemporaries and, indeed, subsequent writers:

Why, man, he doth bestride the narrow world

Like a Colossus, and we petty men

Walk under his huge legs, and peep about

To find ourselves dishonourable graves.

(1.2.136-9)

The colossal scale of the Shakespeare Effect therefore risks replicating a dynamic which Richard Wilson argues *Julius Caesar* itself – in its presentation of the fallible humanity of Caesar-as-colossus, who is brought low underneath the dominating Romanizing columns that cut across the Globe stage – is invested in subversively unpicking:

Caesar’s claim to statuesque immobility reveals more urgently how

Shakespeare perceived his theatre might *itself* collude in the triumphal

march of absolutism, if the open sightlines of its circular auditorium led eyes only towards the ‘marble constancy’ of some imperial arch, which, to create the illusion of centralizing timelessness, could only ever be viewed the same way. (*Free Will* 150)

In other words, the subsequent godlike elevation of Shakespeare and the homage paid him by subsequent playwrights – up to and including myself – encourages ‘base spaniel fawning’ of the kind offered Caesar, and our recurrent approach to these plays ‘continues to serve the mystery cult of charismatic sovereignty’ (*Free Will* 148). The elevation of Shakespeare to sovereign status means the effects of his own work as verse drama have themselves become occluded and mystified. Douglas Bruster notes that Shakespeare has become ‘a figure in whom the precedents of his craft and the efforts of his contemporaries have been collapsed’ (187). Shakespeare has come to stand solely for verse drama, rather than being encountered as one among many practitioners – the only verse plays most casual theatre-goers see are by Shakespeare. As such, paying attention to their distinctive stylistic features becomes all the harder when they exist, as they do today, in the curious half-light of exception.

This was not always the case, and is not necessarily even due to Shakespeare’s supposed Romantic affiliations (see Bate 160-2). Editors and critics throughout history – including and beyond the period we now term Romantic – paid detailed attention to Shakespeare’s metre, from the reforming revisions of Pope in the eighteenth century to the following comment by Coleridge which, in its very totalising nature, indicates the close attention its author felt Shakespeare’s prosody deserved in every syllable of his work: ‘Shakespeare

never introduces a catalectic line without intending an equivalent to the foot omitted, in the pauses, or the dwelling emphasis, or the diffused retardation' (22).

This syllabic scrutiny is now, however, far from the mainstream of contemporary discussion of Shakespeare's art. While academic criticism today often grounds Shakespeare in the context of his grammar school education, after which the student would be expected to know 'by heart, familiarly, up to a hundred figures, by their right names,' theatre reviewing continues to endorse Shakespeare's 'exceptional' status while paying little attention to the deliberate acquisition and deployment of the tools of artifice (Vickers 86). And the comparative disregard with which the dramatist's use of verse (a figure of everything that separates him from modern psychological naturalism) is considered by reviewers has profound consequences for our understanding of that verse itself.

In a study I undertook of the reviews collected in *Theatre Record* from December 2014 to December 2015, for instance, taking the example of a single play, 34 separate reviews of three distinct productions of *The Merchant of Venice* made no discernible reference of any kind to the versified nature of much of the dialogue on which the actors were embarking, nor to the effects of any transitions between prose and different kinds of verse in the text. In a high-profile *Hamlet*, Benedict Cumberbatch was praised for speaking soliloquies with 'lovely, fluent ease' (Hemming), for 'speaking the verse wonderfully' (Lukowski), for 'crystal clarity' (Nathan): the verse here exists on a purely abstract level, as a box to check. Three reviews, all by the *Observer's* Susannah Clapp, illustrate what happens when the specifics of metre are invoked: each conveyed a version of the

sentiment that ‘however rapid the speech ... the beat was hit’ (see ‘Hamlet,’ ‘Merchant,’ ‘As You Like It’).

In all of these cases, we do not move beyond a recognition of the presence of verse, and a general air of vagueness hangs over the majority of the notices in my sample set. This vagueness has a deleterious effect not only on our cultural understanding of Shakespeare’s work, but also the way theatre critics frequently read other early modern playwrights as deficient against a falsely ‘exemplary’ and ill-defined Shakespearean standard. Scholars therefore need publicly to make the case for the very different models by which other dramatists – Marlowe, Jonson and Ford, for instance, all represented in the reviews in my sample – ought more thoughtfully to be considered, and for what makes Shakespeare’s dramatic verse itself distinctive.

Painstaking prosodic work has been done on Shakespeare in the past forty years by McDonald, Wright, Rokison, and Tarlinskaja, all of whom my argument for Shakespeare’s particularity draws upon at length. There is still, however, something helpfully provocative in Coburn Freer’s 1981 diagnosis of ‘our general reluctance – one hesitates to say inability – to hear the verse of this drama’ (11), and in Frank Kermode’s comment twenty years later that ‘[e]very other aspect of Shakespeare is studied almost to death, but the fact that he was a poet has somehow dropped out of consideration’ (vii). But why, in a critical climate (and an increasingly polarised and totalitarian wider world) where pressing political concerns proliferate, should something as technical, as apparently un-contemporary, and above all, as potentially elitist, luxuriously apolitical, and smacking as strongly of the ivory tower as ‘the fact that [Shakespeare] was a poet’ be brought into the centre of the academic conversation today?

Here, I argue that form in Shakespeare's dramatic verse is worth talking about more often than much criticism tends to do for three intersecting reasons. Firstly, as Freer points out, 'events in these plays occur in a manner naturally related to things that happen in the verse. The poetic structures are not just pretty but also have intrinsic meanings: the verse is, in short, a means of direct exposition' (xiv). If the events of the plays – collisions between characters, ideologies, gendered and racialised groups – interest us in terms of what they can reveal philosophically, politically and ethically, Freer reminds us that a close study of verse can only bring us nearer to an appreciation of Shakespeare's exploration of those events and relationships: 'the verse is *the* text, not a buried or latent set of meanings. Neither *sub* nor *infra*, it is our only means of getting to *any* meanings, apart from those in gesture and costume' (23).

Of course, it stands to reason that the prose fulfils the same function in Shakespeare's prose scenes: but this is an evasion of the central difference of verse, the factor which makes Shakespeare ontologically, tangibly different to the vast majority of playwrights whose work is performed in the English language today. It is essential, therefore, that we consider Shakespeare not only as a dramatic poet in a vague, generalised sense, but in the sense of someone working with and against the inherited and highly formalised resources of line and metre. Freer contends that although 'the presence of rhetoric or imagery does not by itself mean that we have poetic drama,' 'most modern studies of the poetry of Shakespeare's plays or the poetry of Elizabethan drama are in fact studies of figurative language alone' (8). As such, we should always bear in mind that formal, structured, artificial verse is the one body of material which is tangibly in front of us when we



analytically read any speech or scene in Shakespeare. It is what we talk about when we talk about Shakespeare.<sup>4</sup>

Secondly, verse is also the thing with which actors, who co-create the versions of Shakespeare audiences right now are experiencing around the world, have to engage. They have to contend on a daily basis with the model Simon Palfrey describes, whereby ‘the fact of verse is animate with the stuff of the drama — embodying it, moving with it, rather than merely a line-length container for articulating it’ (133). Palfrey and Tiffany Stern argue jointly for more experientially engaged readings of cues, rhyme, mid-line pauses and so on as these provide charged, generative moments for the responsive actor. *Shakespeare in Parts* emphasises the *a priori* importance of reading for prosody, because ‘[p]erhaps before semantic referents, certainly before any play with or off others, prosody embodies emotion and directs performance: it lets the actor feel or intuit a characterized body to go along with the words’ (391). Looking at a part-script, this recognition, importantly,

will be typological and generic, drawing upon allusions to or expectations of familiar precedents ... The result is a character that seems ineffably to precede — and that will survive — the particular meaning of the words spoken. In other words, prosody furnishes the actor with his character’s grounds of being ... For the actor, prosody and ontology become one.

(391)

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<sup>4</sup> David Ruitter, paraphrasing Raymond Carver, offered this formulation in his 2015 lecture ‘The White Guy in the Room: Shakespeare and Me at the Edge of Texas/Justice.’

With this in mind, it is particularly important that as academics we offer actors a useful way of getting something practicable out of the particular formal structure of the Shakespearean text. What, then, can performers learn from prosody? Abigail Rokison, in *Shakespearean Verse Speaking*, argues that actors have often been misled about the role of metrical form both by practitioners' inflexible 'rules' and by the competing priorities inherent in editorial decisions over time. She advocates 'for an open approach to the verse-structure, within an informed framework' (146). In terms of the practical guidance this approach might offer the actor, Rokison observes that 'there is variation in the use of structures across the timespan, genres and dramatic context of Shakespeare's writing' to the extent that 'fixed "rules" about required delivery and dramatic function of particular metrical structures are ... untenable' (167). She does, nonetheless, reach a number of conclusions which support the need for actors to read verse sensitively.

For Rokison, recognising the centrality of verse to meaning-making constitutes a kind of original practice: '[a]ctors accustomed to performing blank verse and audiences accustomed to hearing it are likely to have been more attuned to the pentameter line than is the case in the modern theatre' (123). Nonetheless, recommendations made by some modern practitioners relating to 'the dramatic significance of internal short lines, metrically continuous delivery of shared lines, inserting a pause at line endings and observing punctuation ... are supported by historical evidence relating to Renaissance writing and acting' (179). *Shakespearean Verse Speaking* makes clear that Shakespeare's contemporaries perceived verse lines as forming phrasal units, and argues that there could, for a Renaissance audience, be a form of naturalism in observing metre and line-ending pauses: in this context, 'metrical adherence and lifelike portrayal are not mutually

exclusive ... poetry and stylised delivery could be conceived as lifelike' (87-89). For example,

[i]n performance, the ungrammatical pause or hesitation created by observing the line-ending with a slight break has the effect of placing added emphasis on to the word which begins the following line, and may give the impression of a character's difficulty in expressing him or herself. When enjambment is accompanied by an absence of internal punctuation the impression created may be of increased momentum – a stream of uninterrupted speech. (181)

Though she is cautious not to generalise about what modern performers should do with this kind of information, Rokison clearly establishes that actors must be aware that when approaching these texts they are engaging with poetic resources as well as dramatic ones. These resources have well-documented historical uses and effects which can still be activated if the overall structure is intelligently observed. As such, our role in communicating the presence of these resources and effects can be of central importance to informing contemporary practice with regard to the possibilities these texts contain: '[t]here are great benefits to be had in the closer interaction between practical theatre and academic research in consideration of Shakespearean verse speaking' (183).

There are a number of justified objections to a formalist, text-centred account of how we encounter Shakespeare, as Rokison's exploration of editorial choices makes clear. The text as we receive it today is modified as a material document by the hands of scribes, composers and editors. Nonetheless, this mediated engagement was also the case for generations of actors and verse dramatists who responded to this work (including those,

like Coleridge and Nicholas Rowe, who themselves worked to emend it editorially.)

Margreta De Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, in an influential essay on ‘the materiality of the Shakespearean text,’ quite reasonably take issue with ‘[f]ormalists [who] call for exacting attention to the minutiae of literary language without giving thought to the printing-house practices that have in modern editions produced them’ (256). Over time many creative agents, like Coleridge, gave thought to both and nonetheless continued to pronounce, in a holistic sense, on what a Shakespearean use of metre might entail.

Given the historical sweep of the present project, and the plethora of editions used by the subsequent dramatists I study, working out who was reading, and thus responding to, which version of the Shakespearean source-text, would necessitate sustained analysis for which there is not space here. In the interests of the bigger picture, I am therefore proceeding, as does Rokison in her prosodic commentaries, with an awareness that ‘[t]he texts are inevitably at various removes from the original, and may have been subject to varying degrees of external emendation and error’ (126). This recognition means that many of my arguments might later be helpfully challenged on a more fine-grained level by other researchers, not least if the status of a particular text at a particular point in time throws the wider reception history, and patterns of influence, I am proposing into doubt.

Areas for further inquiry which build on my arguments here might include asking: how might competing editorial choices in the lineation of Shakespeare’s text over time (not least the common choice to align consecutive, metrical short lines with the left-hand margin) impact upon the assertions made in the readings offered in this chapter?<sup>5</sup> What

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Eric Griffiths’s arguments for the significance of attending to which editions nineteenth-century poets read (136).

difference — if any — would an analysis based only on those quarto editions of certain plays considered closest to acting versions make to large-scale measurements of Shakespeare's prosody? Would the metrical profile of the author which emerged be more or less lively, more or less conservative, than if we based these calculations on the Folio texts, or on later edited versions, which often incorporate some degree of metrical intervention? Would these variations be statistically significant?

In a culture where Shakespeare can still, as Kiernan Ryan reminds us, be co-opted by 'forces intent on fabricating from his art a powerful apology for leaving the world as it is,' I believe the absence from this thesis of firm answers to these questions cannot entirely limit its licence to make arguments which are engaged in the fight for what these plays — their narratives, their characters, their language — represent (*Shakespeare*, 2). The third, related reason to pay close attention to Shakespeare's dramatic form is, therefore, that form is itself political.

This is not least because, as Caroline Levine argues, politics is formal: 'if the political is a matter of imposing and enforcing boundaries, temporal patterns, and hierarchies on experience, then there is no politics without form,' and acknowledging 'that forms are everywhere structuring and patterning experience ... carries serious implications for understanding political communities' and how power operates within them (x). One of Levine's central contentions, drawn from design theory, is that forms have 'affordances': beginning with this 'term to describe the potential uses or actions latent in materials or designs,' she asks 'What is a walled enclosure or a rhyming couplet *capable* of doing?' Each shape or pattern, social or literary, lays claim to a limited range of potentialities' (6).

Though each form arises in particular historical circumstances, '[p]recisely because they are abstract organizing principles, shapes and patterns are iterable – portable' (7).

Her focus on future potential, on 'the range of uses each [form] could be put to, even if no one has yet taken advantage of those possibilities' (10-11), seems applicable not only to what Eliot speculatively called 'the possibility of a poetic drama,' but also to the work of two major Shakespearean critics, Stephen Greenblatt and Kiernan Ryan (50). The pessimistic futurism of Greenblatt's assertion that the doubts raised and contained in *Henry IV Part One* 'are real enough, but they are deferred – deferred until after Essex's campaign in Ireland, after Elizabeth's reign, after the monarchy itself as a significant political institution' (43) might be countered with Ryan's suggestion that Shakespeare's dramaturgy appeals to the 'anticipated future perspective of a genuinely universal human community' (10).

Though Levine herself never directly references verse drama, or even Shakespeare, she offers a powerful critique of Greenblatt's influential perspective. Noting 'Invisible Bullets' as part of a tendency for critics to 'read literary forms as attempts to contain social clashes and contradictions,' (4) she connects his Foucauldian model of subversion and containment to the feminist critiques of Luce Irigaray, for whom

the trouble with form is precisely its embrace of unified wholeness: its willingness to impose boundaries, to imprison, to create inclusions and exclusions. The valuing of aesthetic unity implies a broader desire to regulate and control – to dominate the plurality and heterogeneity of experience. (25)

For Levine, however, this is a one-sidedly conservative description of how ‘bounded wholeness’ (25) – for example, that of a rhymed couplet, a nation state, or, I suggest, a dramatic script governed by set metrical rules – can operate. If, as she notes with reference to Cleanth Brooks, a poem can have ‘qualities both of spatial form and dramatic conflict’ (30), how much more might a play drawing on the resources of poetry be able to harness and exploit this tension? Although valuing the collapse of conflict into unity, rather than an embrace of ‘sheer difference,’ clearly carries the dangers of assimilationism, Levine argues, in opposition to Greenblatt’s model, that the interrelation of different forms, aesthetic and political, can unsettle a paradigm of mutually-reinforcing containment, even where the forms might seem to be parallel.

Here she echoes Richard Wilson in *Worldly Shakespeare*, who notes that the agonistic form of Shakespeare’s texts works against this reading: ‘rather than irreconcilable difference being contained’ in Shakespeare’s drama, play, and *the* play, ‘becomes the arena in which that difference is *acted out*’ (100). Levine argues specifically that some boundaries can ‘be put to use to disrupt the controlling power of other bounded shapes, the encounters themselves providing opportunities for new and emancipatory social formations’ (45). Ewan Fernie discovers such encounters throughout Shakespeare’s plays, but complicates the value of this projected emancipation: ‘there are tensions between subjective, familial, national and larger political identifications as alternative spheres of freedom, and these are tensions which sometimes tear apart the lives of individuals, families and nations’ (7).

To take one clear Shakespearean example, Lear's realisation of the poverty in which so many of his subjects live references a number of bounded shapes – loops, windows, sides, and houses – only to call attention to their emptiness and absence.

Poor naked wretches, wheresoe'er you are,  
That bide the pelting of this pitiless night,  
How shall your houseless heads and unfed sides,  
Your looped and windowed raggedness, defend you  
From seasons such as these? O I have ta'en  
Too little care of this! Take physic, pomp;  
Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel ...

(3.4.25-31)

His description of this abjection is confined by the iambic pentameter, which here might seem to provide an aloof self-containment to which the 'wretches' (who might, like Poor Tom, speak prose) cannot aspire, if it were not for the King's own visible exposure. Its relative security when the metre is unchallenged, however, allows Lear to project a single, expansive unity in which he and they will participate on equal terms: 'Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel.' All of this takes place within not only the artificial container of the metre, but the wider enclosure of the Globe theatre. Wilson suggests in *Worldly Shakespeare* that 'ducdame,' Jaques's famous 'Greek invocation to call fools into a circle' (2.5.52) is slyly referencing its own venue as a playing space of 'inclusive roundness,' an 'agonistic yet ever-widening "universal theatre"' which has the 'paradoxically liberating' effect of 'turning enclosure inside out' (113-5); the gathering together of otherwise-



unconnected fools (and kings) within the Greek-derived enclosure of the pentameter achieves something similar.

Aware of and playing against these wider enclosures, Lear's speech counterposes wholes and holes, exposure and containment, to concretize in memorably rhythmic lines the fragility of both the individual body and the nation state. Lear approaches a transcendence in this acknowledgement of limitation, a process similar to that identified in 1951 by Christopher Fry, whose own Shakespearean practice is described at length in Chapter Five:

Let us imagine a stage. It is a limited area within another limited area, the theatre building. But the stage itself is again limited by the set, which represents – shall we say? – an interior. The interior has windows through which we can see the sky. So we have come through a series of limitations to a consideration of space, implying infinity. (152-5)

In a more general sense, challenges to bounded wholes are offered by the formal structures Levine refers to as 'rhythm' and 'network' – both indubitably present in Shakespeare's shared-metre play-worlds. Rhythm has its own doubleness: it can 'produce communal solidarity and bodily pleasure,' but also 'operate as a powerful means of control and subjugation' (49). It is also inherently unstable, in social as well as aesthetic contexts: 'the fact that the temporal forms of institutions involve patterns of practice that must be repeatedly re-enacted for an institution to endure creates a certain weakness – a repeated opportunity for breaks and transformations' (67). Levine notes the resistance of many political critics to prosodic reading as linked to the fact that 'meter has often been likened to imprisonment and containment,' (74) but rhythm's very susceptibility to

breakage and disruption allows it to be a powerful tool for displaying the contingency of not only its own patterns, but also the claims to permanence of bounded wholes.

Rhythm helps us to pose the question ‘what if the organizing forms of the world do not – cannot – unify experience?’ (80). Consider, for example, the spiritual crisis foregrounded by the rhythmic breaks to which Rokison’s historical research alerts us in Macbeth’s line-ending pauses. His wife’s first, hypermetrical, response wholly fails to complete a reassuring whole; her second falls into place like an inescapable prophecy.

MACBETH. List’ning their fear, I could not say “Amen”

When they did say “God bless us.”

LADY. Consider it not so deeply.

MACBETH. But wherefore could I not pronounce “Amen”?

I had most need of blessing, and “Amen”

Stuck in my throat.

LADY. These deeds must not be thought

After these ways. So, it will make us mad.

(2.2.26-31)

Finally, Levine’s description of the network gestures to the potential for verse drama to stage constant, productive clashes between overlapping forms: ‘[a]ll networks afford connectivity; all create links between disconnected nodes’ (114). That characters with as

dissimilar statuses, perspectives and experiences as the Prince and the Nurse in *Romeo and Juliet* share not only the same connected world but the same medium of expression – could, if brought together, share lines – can profoundly unsettle the hierarchy (Levine’s fourth main formal category) on which their social relationship, such as it is, rests. This *availability* links to Wilson’s reading of Derrida: the form of blank verse ‘opens or is in advance open to someone who is neither expected nor invited,’ and is as such deeply appealing to the open-borders Shakespeare Wilson paints who ‘repeatedly initiates plots with the mumming gambit of shipwreck, exile, or migration of an alien in an alien land’ (*Shakespeare in French Theory* 254).

Levine points out that networks in and of themselves are

neither consistently emancipatory – freeing us from a fixed or dominant order – nor always threatening – trouncing sovereignty or dissolving protective boundaries. Their power to organize depends on the particular patterns of each network and the ways that its arrangements collide with other networks and other forms. (115)

Though she is sceptical of what she calls the New Historicist model of a ‘self-enclosed culture’ in political life, she notes that ‘many networks are limited. Some operate as deliberately closed systems,’ and ‘[e]ven networks that do expand can be governed by strict rules’ (116-7). We might note that texts can impose a somewhat greater degree of control on the networks within them than political entities, and that an assumption about who belongs to what closed networks underpins some traditional truisms about who gets to speak stage verse. In response, I contend that the extension of that resource to nodes in the Venetian network including Shylock and Othello has a clear possibility of

disrupting its political boundaries. Once ‘our princes speak like porters,’ as a horrified Voltaire lamented of Shakespeare’s open dramaturgy (quoted in Wilson, *Shakespeare in French Theory* 242), what else might happen? The network-forming possibilities of the shared line, while happening within a formal enclosure, demonstrate a ‘capacity to trouble or crack open bounded totalities’ (117):

BRUTUS. What means this shouting? I do fear the people

Choose Caesar for their king.

CASSIUS. Ay, do you fear it?

Then must I think you would not have it so.

*(Julius Caesar 1.2.81-3)*

The response of the Roman Senate and people to the conspiracy – a new network within the play’s wider world – is a working out of precisely the questions Levine poses: ‘Which networks can jeopardize, stabilize, or reroute bounded unities, and how exactly do they do so? Which enclosures successfully contain networks, and why?’ (119-20). *Julius Caesar* is therefore a suggestive testing ground for what happens when ‘these forms run up against each other and the consequences their encounters bring into the world’ (120).

Following Levine’s argument, I have proposed that one of the specific ‘affordances’ of the shared, dramatic iambic pentameter as a form is its ability to explore the tensions between self and other, between the individual and the community. Sharing the same metrical basis, verse-speaking characters are intimately interlinked, nodes in a network. While variations and resistance are possible and, indeed, individuating, these still function within

a system of widely-distributed eloquence which, while it can be repressively homogenising, can also dissolve conflict into communion, or form new clusters of resistance. As Wright puts it, 'departure is character' (*Metrical Art* 282), and life inheres in some degree of resistance:

iambic pentameter in the Renaissance symbolizes a cosmic order that limits human aspiration; human experience can be heard in the counter-rhythm; together, the two compose a system of creative departures from metrical authority. (*Metrical Art* 262)

Fernie summarises the potential political importance of the resistance Wright identifies: 'at the most basic, indeed mechanical level, life in the plays is constantly struggling for freedom within several dimensions that at once express, enable and delimit that struggle' (55). But Wright also offers a more positive inflection of this cosmic order which, perhaps, counters the hierarchical containment 'metrical authority' implies with a more communitarian ethos. When characters complete half lines spoken by others, for example, the effect can be (though is not always) 'to recall the outburst to its metrical connections and, by implication, to its social and affectional ties'; as such, 'the shared line only realizes more intently that condition of being bound together in a common action that the play as a whole affirms' (*Metrical Art* 138). The shared metre of a whole play suggests that the characters also share their world, and in the broadest sense, responsibility for its stewardship:

an aesthetic and an ethic of mutual dependence and obligation are deeply inscribed in Shakespeare's drama ... [t]he intensity of its system of internal obligations mirrors the intensity of relations within and

between people and between people and the divine order, between the aspirations of flawed individuals and the principle of universal mortality. Not only the normal iambic pentameter line but all its departures and deviations help to imply a world-view of continuing reciprocal engagement and mutual responsibility. (*Metrical Art* 258-9)

The effective communication of this worldview does, however, depend to a large degree on a shared somatic awareness of how the verse is working, both within the onstage community of actors and within the audience. Wright argues that an Elizabethan audience was primed to register its effects in a way that we may not be: '[r]hyme and meter belonged to the class of rhetorical devices they expected to meet in public places' (*Metrical Art* 95).

The few direct references in Shakespeare's texts to blank verse do suggest just such an awareness of regularity and its deviations: Benedick in *Much Ado* refers to how many famous classical names, including that of Troilus, 'yet run smoothly in the even road of a blank verse,' implying a shared understanding of such smoothness and evenness (5.2.32-3). Jaques, of course, violently rejects Orlando for daring to 'talk in blank verse,' despite having spoken it himself before (4.1.29-30), and elsewhere in that play, Rosalind chides Orlando's verses for their halting feet, which must therefore have been audible.

We can assume, then, that Shakespeare's texts anticipated some degree of somatic awareness of metre on the part of their first auditors, including an awareness of the energetic clash between the powerful competing forms of phrase and line. Wright further asserts that 'if the actors will keep the meter, our nervous systems can register the

continuing metrical pattern,' a point which stands at some utopian distance from much contemporary practice (*Metrical Art* 92).

In truth, Wright's 'if' gestures towards a rather difficult practical experiment, given that, as Peter Hall commented in 2003 in terms that seem as true today:

These are difficult times for the classical actor because there is little technical consistency. I have worked in a theatre where the director before me urged the actor to run on from one line to the next, speak the text like prose, and to take breaths whenever they felt like it. He wanted them, he said, to be "real." They were; but they weren't comprehensible. (11)

While challenging many of Hall's own strictures, Rokison – in assessing his claims in regard to line-ending pauses alongside the mutually exclusive 'rules' handed down by Patsy Rodenburg and Cicely Berry, for example – identifies precisely the problem for actors of a lack of technical consistency. In Chapter Six, I explore what might be learnt when actors move away from prosaic realism towards the kind of comprehensible stylisation suggested by Hall and Wright in my own experimental practice. Here, I note only that these techniques are considerably more significant to the production of Shakespeare's plays because, for Wright as well as McDonald, Shakespeare's use of blank verse for drama is so powerful because it consummately realises certain possibilities, or affordances, inherent in the medium.

Shakespeare's plays avail themselves of the unique opportunity afforded by iambic pentameter dialogue to explore individuality, mutability, disruption and discord within an

ultimately shared and ordered world defined by a sense of innate symmetry and proportion. But if Shakespeare has traditionally been read – though often not in such explicit terms – as exploiting the resources of shared-metre prosody more effectively than any other dramatist, then introducing political criticism to (or at least, drawing attention to its presence within) the formalist conversation allows us to better perceive what ideologies the ‘ethic of mutual dependence and obligation’ (Wright, *Metrical Art* 258) embedded in shared-metre verse drama might serve.

The idea of Shakespeare’s universality – his ability to speak to and for a uniquely wide sweep of human experience – has often had a paternalistic quality, as in Harold Bloom’s assertion that Shakespeare has already, magnanimously, ‘thought all thoughts, for all of us’ (xxviii); it has also been used, not least by Dryden who declared him to have ‘the largest and most comprehensive soul’ of any modern poet, to reify Shakespeare’s own colossal singularity *above* all other human beings (55). The breadth of Shakespeare’s art has, nonetheless, throughout the history of reception been claimed as a means towards more democratic ends. Fernie argues that ‘taken together, the vivid range of Shakespeare’s characters stand for the variegated but unitary truth of freedom’ (38).

This is so not least because ‘even his most splendid characters can only secure their freedom by interacting with others,’ a tension between sociality and conflict which ‘lends Shakespearean drama an inherent political suggestiveness’ (7). With reference to the Shakespearean writings of the Chartist leader Thomas Cooper, Fernie posits the depth and range of Shakespeare’s characterisation itself ‘as both a lively inspiration and an existential mandate for a pluralist politics’ (135). And in France, Wilson reminds us, ‘Shakespeare occupies an oppositional place as *the man of the mob*, in contrast to his



establishment as a *man of the monarchy* in the Anglo-Saxon world' (*Shakespeare in French Theory* 4).

Indeed, Wilson has demonstrated how the diversity of his *dramatis personae*, in Enlightenment-era French culture, made him 'the object of racist contempt' (242). Noting how Voltaire declared Shakespeare a 'savage whose sparks shine in a horrible night' on the basis that 'his stage accommodated so many different races, conditions, and types,' Wilson observes that 'to the philosopher of *tolerance* Shakespeare tested toleration because his theatre was peopled by "savages and monsters"' (243). Margaret Cavendish felt in 1664 that so 'Well [Shakespeare] hath Express'd in his Playes all Sorts of Persons, as one would think he had been Transformed into every one of those Persons he hath Described,' from clowns to kings (177). There is a therefore powerful truth in Voltaire's sardonic comment that in Shakespeare's plays 'we show cobblers with mandarins and gravediggers with princes, to remind men of their original equality' (quoted in Wilson 242).

Wilson wonders: 'if Shakespeare was, as American critics assert, complicit in the discrimination that produced the slave-trade and ethnic cleansing, how can that be squared with those French thinkers who thought him too *indiscriminate* towards "the extravagant and wheeling stranger"?' (*Shakespeare in French Theory* 245; *Othello* 1.1.132). And three centuries after Cavendish, the deeply politicised African-American writer James Baldwin commented, in an essay on 'Why I Stopped Hating Shakespeare' that, having previously seen its subject as 'one of the authors and architects of my oppression,' he came to feel that Shakespeare spoke not only to him, but for an interconnected humanity in its broadest sense:

The greatest poet in the English language found his poetry where poetry is found: in the lives of the people. He could have done this only through love — by knowing, which is not the same thing as understanding, that whatever was happening to anyone was happening to him. (21)

Perhaps the most sustained recent argument for a progressive, communitarian, even utopian worldview modelled by ‘Shakespeare’s universality’ is that given in the book of the same name by Kiernan Ryan. Ryan sees Shakespeare’s characters as being ‘dramatized from the perspective of “common humanity” — from the anticipated future perspective of a genuinely universal human community no longer crippled by division and domination’ (*Universality* 10). In Ryan’s imagined potential community,

We behold the immediate, intransigent actuality of the social order that still prevailed in Shakespeare’s day, but within the wider, longer perspective produced by the disclosure of unrealized human potentiality pressing against the irrational constraints of that order. (*Universality* 77)

Ryan does not explicitly state that the constraints of any order are irrational, but this image of potentiality bursting its bounds has clear kinship with Wright’s model of ‘creative departures from metrical authority’ — a model that is uniquely well-served by the strictures of shared-metre verse drama (*Metrical Art* 262). What Ryan and Wright are both, from different perspectives, identifying in Shakespeare is a superlative ability to exploit the affordances of a form which works analogically to depict and enact these

tensions; Levine's work contributes the perspective that political and aesthetic forms might be working in tension rather than in parallel.

Ryan identifies the communitarian potential embedded in Shakespeare's use of dramatic form when he notes how 'Shakespeare pushes the polyphonic possibilities of Elizabethan drama to the limit, sharing the right of speech democratically between the diverse *dramatis personae* with scant regard for the customary proprieties' (*Universality* 91). He cites a number of individuals from divergent backgrounds who are brought together by the circumstances of their particular plays, but as the examples Ryan chooses often involve some collision of verse and prose, it is worth briefly noting how democratic Shakespeare's verse can be: it is a form of eloquence available to Juliet's defiantly demotic Nurse, to abused servants such as the two Dromios in *The Comedy of Errors*, to *Richard III's* gardeners, and to representatives of stigmatized and racialized groups including Shylock, Othello, Aaron and Caliban. Indeed, the distribution of metrical resources is one way of approaching Gloucester's vision of equality in *Lear* 4.1.66-7, wherein 'each man [should] have enough,' linguistically; of course, many other contemporary playwrights, not least the authors of domestic tragedies, went further still in associating verse with specifically working-class articulacy.

This democratic sharing of speech is not, however, what Wilson in *Worldly Shakespeare* critiques as 'the false universality of the global shopping arcade' (15). Complicating Ryan's utopian reading, Wilson defines Shakespeare's as a world of 'incommensurable difference, an agonistic rather than therapeutic regime, that acknowledges the adversarial struggle of divided subjects as its condition of existence' (3-4). Starting from 'a recognition that ... universality is an impossibility' (5), and opposing 'liberal humanist accounts

[whereby] a plurivocal or “Protean” Shakespeare can be made to presage the normative rationality of deliberative democracy’ (7), Wilson posits a Shakespearean dramaturgy where ‘implacable enemies’ can only reach a ‘conflicted consensus’ based specifically on this agonistic ‘agreement to differ’ (16-7). Fernie clarifies how this relates to the clash of individual freedom with collective goals: Shakespeare’s is, in this view, ‘a political vision whereby society’s own proper functioning must all the time be measured against, and even recalibrated, according to the needs and desires of the selves that make it up’ (72).

Recent philosophical readings support this agonistic approach. Following Spinoza, Michael Witmore describes the ‘dramaturgical monism’ (3) of Shakespeare’s world order as one in which all actions and their environment are ‘part of a larger unity that is metaphysically one but internally diversified,’ and defined dynamically by the ceaseless struggle between individual agents (93). There are therefore compelling reasons, drawn from political and philosophical criticism, to attend closely to the dynamic interrelatedness between human agents which Wright’s formalist work reminds us is especially well-articulated through the resource of shared-metre verse drama as employed by Shakespeare. In the remainder of the chapter, I will focus on how the models offered by Wright, Rokison, Ryan, Wilson and Levine allow us to understand Shakespeare’s particular exploitation of the formal resources of shared-metre verse drama, by offering close-readings of passages from four more of his plays.

\*

One of Shakespeare’s earliest comedies, *The Comedy of Errors* is particularly concerned with the boundaries of the individual. It is therefore an apt site to explore something of what is at stake in shared-metre dramaturgy. Many of the play’s scenes of character

confusion stage rejection as a kind of heightened self-possession. Expressing a refusal to have one's own needs or projects compromised by the contrary desires of another, the locked-down line endings of these stichomythic exchanges reinforce the sense of exclusionary incomprehension:

DROMIO OF EPHESUS. Why, sir, I gave the money for the rope.

ANTIPHOLUS OF EPHESUS. Five hundred ducats, villain, for a rope?

DROMIO OF EPHESUS. I'll serve you, sir, five hundred at the rate.

ANTIPHOLUS OF EPHESUS. To what end did I bid thee hie thee home?

DROMIO OF EPHESUS. To a rope's end, sir, and to that end am I returned.

ANTIPHOLUS OF EPHESUS. And to that end, sir, I will welcome you.

*[He beats Dromio]*

(4.4.12-17)

Here we can see in its purest form what Witmore refers to in calling individuality 'a characteristic state of motion defined interactively with respect to other individuals' (108) who themselves push back: 'the boundary of every individual includes that individual's struggle against other individuals whose conative powers either augment or diminish the first individual's motive being' (105). Fernie summarises what this means in more explicitly dramaturgical terms: 'Shakespearean character is always made in interaction, as

well as before an audience' (65). And indeed, after delivering the above message of rejection, Dromio is himself rejected in terms which he takes as insisting on his own physical self-containment as a character:

Am I so round with you as you with me,

That like a football you do spurn me thus?

You spurn me hence, and he will spurn me hither.

If I last in this service, you must case me in leather.

(2.1.80-3)

The fact that Dromio is constantly threatening to burst out of the verse structure, either into prose or, as in line 83, into the more demotically jingling couplets of 1580s comic drama, might suggest the character stretching to an individuality beyond servile iambic limits. But these too can repel contact, reinforcing walls and frontiers, notably those of the Ephesian home the Syracusans have occupied:

**DROMIO OF EPHEBUS.** What patch is made our porter? My master stays in the street!

**DROMIO OF SYRACUSE** [*within*]. Let him walk from whence he came, lest he catch cold on's feet.

(3.1.36-7)

Wright notes with reference to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that

[i]n couplets the rhyme seems again and again to affirm the form, and the form of the world, whereas in blank verse that absence of corresponding sounds at the ends of successive or alternate lines implies an openness in the universe we are visiting. Rhyme — especially rhymed couplets — gives that world a surer foundation, a frame on which the audience, if not the characters, can count, so that when the lovers explore their confusions about the causes and the condition of love, their rhyming helps to assure the audience that the dangers are under control, that magic herbs and our sense of the fitness of things will straighten out these amusing mix-ups sooner or later. ('Scanned' 63)

Rhyme, then, speaks to embodied conflict between apparently self-propelling agents, but also to a sense of wider control in which boundaries are precise, known, and governed by an essential symmetry. By contrast, what Wright identifies as the domain of blank verse can be most clearly seen in Adriana's metaphysical provocation to her supposed husband:

Ah, do not tear away thy self from me

For know, my love, as easy mayst thou fall

A drop of water in the breaking gulf,

And take unmingled thence that drop again

Without addition or diminishing,

As take from me thyself, and not me too.

As Wright comments, blank verse lines in this play ‘are almost always endstopped’ (‘Scanned,’ 61). Contextually, then, the presence of multiple unrhymed, enjambed lines here suggests a flow, an openness, which has been notably lacking in the previous heavily-rhymed scene, where Adriana and her sister spar in rebarbative couplets as she winds herself tight in frustration over her husband’s unchecked ‘liberty’ (2.1.10). Coming on the heels of such binary opposition, Adriana’s speech does evoke the rhetoric of separation, culminating in a hypothetical ‘deep-divorcing vow’ (2.2.135). But it also, strikingly, dissolves the lines between people, not least in its comic ironies: ‘I am not Adriana, nor thy wife’ (2.2.109) is a half-true statement, spoken in jest, which casts some epistemological doubt on the first clause, and the statement that she and Antipholus of Syracuse are ‘undividable, incorporate’ (2.2.119) is deeply believed and unknowingly adulterous. Here, the freer-flowing blank verse mimics the water it describes in bringing two people who, as it happens, have nothing at all to do with one another, into an image of inseparable intimacy. The ‘breaking gulf’ that surrounds them suggests a far wider communion, even as each part of the noun phrase itself insists on separation.

Shakespeare eloquently conjures a tension between separate individuals pulling apart and collapsing into unity, and does so in a form which encodes not, like rhyme, echoes and parallels, but participation in a diversified mutuality. Rhyme, as Palfrey writes, can be other-directed but also, within speeches, convey an ‘intense excluding of others’ (205). Opening out in blank verse to a sense of inherent connectedness, Adriana’s lines are proleptic of the fifth act’s concatenation of reunions, from which the equivalences, false or otherwise, of rhyme are largely absent. Wright observes that blank verse ‘lends itself to



suggestions of fuller and deeper meanings than rhymed couplets can usually carry' ('Scanned' 63), and once it has receded from the play it is hard indeed to see how rhyme could convey anything like the dissolution, and the renewal of flow within loosened limits, that the Abbess promises in the final twist:

Whoever bound him, I will loose his bonds,

And gain a husband by his liberty.

(5.1.340-1)

Shakespeare's verse can also, however, communicate division, conflict and one-upmanship. Something of its power to do so can be seen in 3.1 of *1 Henry IV*, when the rebels meet to divide up the country they have not yet conquered. At first, as the peace-making Mortimer declares in two even, balanced lines, everything seems to be going smoothly:

These promises are fair, the parties sure,

And our induction full of prosperous hope.

(3.1.1-2)

But the brewing tension between his two headstrong interlocutors, Hotspur and Glyndwr, can be deduced from what Rokison refers to as the 'amphibious connection' (174) between the following lines, which the New Oxford Shakespeare, quoted below, lays out entirely differently to its 1986 forerunner:

**HOTSPUR.** Lord Mortimer, and cousin Glyndwr, will you sit down?

And Uncle Worcester? A plague upon it,

I have forgot the map.

GLYNDWR.

No, here it is.

Formerly, Hotspur's 'A plague upon it, I have forgot the map,' formed a complete Oxford line. This textual crux draws attention to the crisis points in the rest of the scene, over precedence, authority and interruption. If Glyndwr does indeed sweep in, in midline, to correct Hotspur's defect and complete his sentence in the process, this would indeed set the tone for the two following interruptions of his own speech by the Northern lord:

GLYNDWR. His cheek looks pale, and with a rising sigh,

He wisheth you in heaven.

HOTSPUR.

And you in hell,

As oft as he hears Owain Glyndwr spoke of.

GLYNDWR. I cannot blame him. At my nativity

The front of heaven was full of fiery shapes,

Of burning cressets; and at my birth

The frame and huge foundation of the earth

Shaked like a coward.



And cuts me from the best of all my land  
A huge half-moon, a monstrous cantle, out.  
I'll have the current in this place dammed up,  
And here the smug and silver Trent shall run  
In a new channel fair and evenly.  
It shall not wind with such a deep indent,  
To rob me of so rich a bottom here.

(3.1.94-101)

As if carried away by his own imagined watercourse, after the mimetically disruptive stresses of 'dammed up' Hotspur's own lines run largely 'fair and evenly.' Glyndwr, demonstrating that water and, with it, political power, cannot be diverted so easily, offers a dammed-up riposte where syntactic breaks function as stumbling blocks: 'Not wind? It shall, it must; you see it doth' (3.1.102). And Mortimer's response, with its flustered, hypermetrical first line, has the air of one scrambling to fix a desperate situation, and in the process makes clear that this dispute is built around fantasies of patriarchal control:

Yea, but mark how he bears his course, and runs me up  
With like advantage on the other side,  
**Gelding** the opposed continent as much

As on the other side it takes from you.

(3.1.103-6; my emphasis)

Eventually, the build-up of conflicting claims, even though each seems largely metrically fluid, seems to undo line structure altogether:

GLYNDWR. I'll not have it altered.

HOTSPUR. Will not you?

GLYNDWR. No, nor you shall not.

HOTSPUR. Who shall say me nay?

GLYNDWR. Why, that will I.

HOTSPUR. Let me not understand you then: speak it in Welsh.

(3.1.111-6)

Passages such as this call attention to the need for rehearsal texts 'indicating areas of metrical ambiguity' while making 'apparent the amphibious metrical connection between [multiple] lines' for which Rokison advocates (183). They also strongly indicate how, when questions of political organization are at stake, the conflict over and within lines between speakers sharing the same metrical basis merits close attention as a window into those questions. In this context, Hotspur's 'And you in hell' (3.1.9) is itself a kind of cranking in, even a verbal gelding.

The contrast between these two men — one solemn, one mocking — is heightened by the fact that their very different modes of speaking are supported by parallel formal structures: it is part of Shakespeare's commitment to antithesis, to making each argument evenly matched. That so much of this scene is about rivers and their banks indicates how metrical form can help us to understand the play's oppositions between individuals seeking to govern a wider community as fundamentally an issue of flow and control (with Falstaff, it must be noted, the most free-flowing, individualistic, ungovernable presence of them all).

Macbeth goes even further than the tempestuous rebels in taking the reins of political governance into his own hands. He is perhaps Shakespeare's most emblematic example of an individual acting demonstrably against the good of the society which (as King) he is supposed to represent. Much has been written on the Scottish King's metre, and the following observations are deeply indebted to Simon Palfrey's intensive commentary in *Doing Shakespeare* which concludes '[i]f the iambic pentameter is often in Shakespeare a measure of ease and decorum, for Macbeth ... it is [often] an awkward barrier to trip upon or stutter over' (198). Palfrey understands this stuttering as an indication of the relationship between the individual and the community: verse is 'a communal rather than individual construct,' and '[o]ther momentums than the speaker's are always working through it,' but here the speaker's own wayward, disruptive momentum is what is foregrounded (202).

Macbeth's fractured verse might be 'another sign of his wilfulness, his overreaching or his violence,' or indeed 'his helplessness ... a sign of his failure to rest easy in the modes he

would appropriate' (203). His uneasiness corresponds metonymically with the disruption of his country, and its systems of hierarchy and natural rhythm:

By th'clock 'tis day,

And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp ...

(2.4.6-7)

'Tis unnatural,

Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last

A falcon, tow'ring in her pride of place,

Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed.

(2.4.10-13)

One of the most resonant images of chaos undermining order has a spatial analogue in the breaking open of an apparently fixed boundary, which itself threatens the frontier between animal and human. Duncan's horses

Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,

Contending 'gainst obedience as they would

Make war with mankind.

OLD MAN. 'Tis said they ate each other.

(2.4.16-8)

This, then, is the context in which the tyrannical Macbeth, even as he attempts to enforce state power, is unable — as Maria requests of the prosaically sprawling Toby Belch — to ‘confine [him]self within the modest limits of order’ (*Twelfth Night* 1.3.6). The indecorous stuttering Palfrey identifies can be heard in what Lady Macbeth calls his ‘flaws and starts’ (3.4.61), in his reaction to the appearance of Banquo’s ghost; to his influential reading, I will only add that each nervous fluctuation further deepens the sense of Macbeth’s intense and haunted individuality, at the precise moment when he is supposed to speak for and address the entirety of ‘our country’s honour’ (3.4.39). Trochees (‘Blood hath,’ ‘Ay, and,’ ‘murders’), hiccupping compressions (‘i’th’ olden time,’ ‘Too terrible’) and insinuating line-breaks (‘murders have been performed...’) combine to suggest that Macbeth’s internal turmoil is making him ill at ease with the normal ordering of both place and time:

Blood hath been shed ere now, i’th’ olden time

Ere humane statue purged the gentle weal —

Ay, and since, too, murders have been performed

Too terrible for the ear. The time has been

That when the brains were out the man would die,

And there an end; but now they rise again

With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,



And push us from our stools. This is more strange

Than such a murder is.

(3.4.73-81)

Banquo's horrifying recurrence gives gory form to the play's wider thematic insistence, concentrated in the person of Macbeth, that things are not done when they are done. There is a queasily false certainty when his lines do fall into place, not least when they seem to summon the ghost of lost metrical harmony. 'The last syllable of recorded time' (5.5.20) calls our attention to how uneasy is Macbeth's relationship with the patterned structure which records his thoughts. Elsewhere, the hastiness implied in the following couplet finds its formal analogue in the character's broken speech (the *Oxford English Dictionary* – hereafter *OED* – gives 1398 as the earliest use of the verb 'to scan' referring to metrical analysis):

Strange things I have in head that will to hand,

Which must be acted ere they may be scanned.

(3.4.137-8)

To some extent, Macbeth's 'most admired disorder' (3.4.108) is a feature of the play as much as of the character. Nonetheless, the ending of the tragedy, once its titular tyrant has been dispatched, returns explicitly to a harmony which takes precedence even over individual loss in its apparent sure-footedness:

MALCOLM. I would the friends we miss were safe arrived.

SIWARD. Some must go off; and yet by these I see

So great a day as this is cheaply bought.

MALCOLM. MacDuff is missing, and your noble son.

ROSS. Your son, my lord, has paid a soldier's debt.

He only lived but till he was a man

.....

SIWARD. Had I as many sons as I have hairs,

I would not wish them to a fairer death;

And so his knell is knolled.

MALCOLM.                      He's worth more sorrow,

And that I'll spend for him.

SIWARD.                      He's worth no more.

They say he parted well and paid his score ...

(5.11.1-18)

There is an almost unfathomable regularity to the revelation and reception of Young Siward's death; its brisk neatness contrasts starkly with the strange dilations of the 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' speech. In its drawn-out vowels, consonant



– this, and what needful else

That calls upon us, by the grace of grace

We will perform in measure, time, and place.

(5.11.20-39)

Time and place, at the end of *Macbeth*, have returned to what seems like their normal succession, as has the Scottish monarchy. The apparent certainties of this scene are reinforced when ‘measure,’ metrical order, follows accordingly, as regularly as a ‘knell is knolled’ (5.11.16). Scotland is indeed ‘planted newly’ on a firmer basis now that the distorting influence of this most unsettled of rulers has been rooted out. Though the regular rhythms of the new king might, as Levine suggests, ‘operate as a powerful means of control and subjugation,’ they imply a new correspondence – however potentially coercive – between social harmony and metrical balance (49). Crucial to this reestablishment might be the fact that most of the major characters are still alive and a clear line of royal succession is restored. *Hamlet*, with its final bloodbath and rapid introduction of a foreign ruler, ends uneasily with a half-line and a distinct lack of settlement: ‘Go bid the soldiers shoot’ (5.2.362). Malcolm, by contrast, in reaching out to ‘all at once, and to each one,’ (5.11.40) grounds his restored commonwealth in an explicit call for what he, at least, frames as mutual responsibility and participation.

In the latter period of Shakespeare’s work, some obvious pitfalls greet those who would make broad claims about the function of such features as metrical variation and shared lines. Rokison cites, and responds to, one key objection:

McDonald claims that in the later plays metrical variation “threatens to efface the pentameter altogether,” and that “it is not necessary to seek out passages in which a character suffers emotional pressure ... and is therefore inclined to speak rough or distorted verse” to experience the “characteristic” enjambment and broken lines of the late plays. However, an examination of speeches from the post-1608 plays shows substantial variation in the levels of end-stopping and enjambment, and in fluid and broken lines. (163)

Rokison finds that the play between norm and variation is still evident in late plays ‘depending on the mood and tone of a speech’ (168):

Public orations and considered summaries show a high incidence of end-stopping, giving the impression of controlled, well-measured dialogue. End-stopping is often accompanied by the absence of mid-line breaks, or a single break after the fourth, fifth or sixth syllable, and by a high number of masculine endings, adding to the sense of authoritative speech. By contrast, highly emotional, troubled or analytical speeches show a comparatively high degree of enjambment, combined with more frequent and varied internal breaks, giving the impression of fractured, unstructured speech. (168-9)

I will conclude by tracing some of these patterns in the famously fractured *Coriolanus*, a play which begins with an exhortation specifically to consider – and critically assess – the meanings of mutual participation (with which *Macbeth*, perhaps too neatly, closes) in a shared social and political context. Menenius’s fable of the belly is an attempt to evoke

the sense that all Romans belong to ‘the commonality’ towards which one citizen calls Caius Martius ‘a very dog’ (1.1.21). The belly is accused of remaining

I’th’midst o’th’body, idle and unactive,

Still cupboarding the viand, never bearing

Like labour with the rest; where th’other instruments

Did see, and hear, devise, instruct, walk, feel,

And, mutually participate, did minister

Unto the appetite and affection common

Of the whole body.

(1.1.81-87)

This accusation is itself, however, busy and unsettled, even cluttered, with thronging contractions, dangling eleventh syllables, and syntactic breaks which divide up the multiple verbs of bodily function competing for attention and primacy, even as they claim to be working together. Menenius’s response, in the character of the belly, aligns it with a claim to natural right and order which is also far more metrically stable:

Your most grave belly was deliberate,

Not rash like his accusers, and thus answered:

“True is it, my incorporate friends,” quoth he,

“That I receive the general food at first

Which you do live upon; and fit it is,

Because I am the storehouse and the shop

Of the whole body ...

(1.1.110-6)

Menenius’s comparative prosodic regularity in this passage seems designed to reinforce the argument that ‘fit it is,’ that the distribution of resources which centralises the senators and their claims to paternalistic benevolence is natural and normal. The Second Citizen, however, emphasises not dependency but something closer to a provisional harmony of equals, asking why, rather than a more balanced system,

The kingly-crownèd head, the vigilant eye,

The counsellor heart, the arm our soldier,

Our steed the leg, the tongue our trumpeter,

With other muniments and petty helps,

In this our fabric

.....

Should by the cormorant belly be restrained,

Who is the sink o'th'body ...

(1.1.97-104)

This debate over what kind of understanding of Roman social interrelations should take precedence is explored partly in formal terms. The Second Citizen's list of roles and their contributions, breaking each line into two slightly uneven hemistiches, maintains a rhetorical balance lacking in the Jonsonian aggregation of Menenius's 'devise, instruct, walk, feel.' David G. Hale sees this opposition as part of a more general conceptual battle over what the Aesopic fable should mean. Having traced its variant applications in a number of sources, Hale finds that in *Coriolanus* it is 'inadequate to maintain political stability,' attributing the Second Citizen's unwillingness to accept the model to the fact that 'the fable has not convinced him that the Senate is in fact performing its nutritional function' (382-3).

Shakespeare here stages and questions the usefulness of representation by analogy, implicitly asking whether Menenius's belly-knows-best conservatism or the Second Citizen's slightly more agitated, but more genuinely mutual, model of an assemblage of active 'agents' (1.1.105) who will not be 'restrained' is a more desirable form for the Roman state. Both of these organic models in their own way, however, presuppose some form of community – but as Hale notes, 'in the long run, the analogy itself does not work, mostly because it cannot cope with Coriolanus' (384). In Wilson's reading, the title character's governing attitude is an 'idolatrous canonization of *himself*' which 'looks like the ultimate perversion of the Renaissance cult of artistic absolutism' (*Free Will* 393) – an aesthetic ideology which disdains 'the proprietary authority of an emerging public that was ready to pay the price for its pleasure' (*Free Will* 384).





The city is well stored.

CAIUS MARTIUS.            Hang 'em! They say?

They'll sit by th' fire and presume to know

What's done i'th'Capitol: who's like to rise,

Who thrives, and who declines, side factions, and give out

Conjectural marriages, making parties strong,

And feebling such as stand not in their liking

Below their cobbled shoes. They say there's grain enough?

(1.1.166-78)

The character's anger plunges beyond the edges of the line, suggesting a barely-contained animus against 'they' and all that 'they' represent. Wilson suggests this verse is Jonsonian not only in style, but also in implicit reference: in refusing to display himself, Coriolanus displays 'aggression towards the public' as a 'measure of *distinction*,' a virulent form of 'antitheatrical prejudice [which] makes him look increasingly like Shakespeare's response to ... Jonson himself' (*Free Will* 388-9). Later it seems he might be able to keep this haughty spleen in check, if only the Citizens can maintain their own proper decorum:

Bid them wash their faces

And keep their teeth clean. So, here comes a brace.

(2.3.50-1)

The new-minted Coriolanus, even when alone, adopts what sounds like more of a public declamatory mode to sustain him through the undesired exhibition of his wounds. Even as the lines largely fit the expected mould, however, the rhymes he employs imply a suffering through gritted teeth that turns uncomfortably inward, just as Palfrey describes (205):

Better it is to die, better to starve,  
  
Than crave the hire which first we do deserve.  
  
Why, in this woolish toge should I stand here  
  
To beg of Hob and Dick that does appear  
  
Their needless vouches? Custom calls me to't.  
  
.....

Rather than fool it so,  
  
Let the high office and the honour go  
  
To one that would do thus. I am half through.  
  
The one part suffered, the other will I do.

(2.3.93-104)

As soon as three more representatives of the citizenry enter, however, breaking upon his solitude (to paraphrase Theodore Roethke's 'Silence'), the forbearance to which Coriolanus's self-talk has been guiding him immediately breaks down. So does the line, into multiple agitated sections:

Here come more voices.

Your voices? For your voices I have fought,

Watched for your voices; for your voices bear

Of wounds, two dozen odd; battles thrice six

I have seen and heard of. For your voices, have

Done many things, some less, some more. Your voices!

(2.3.105-110)

Ultimately Coriolanus does not want, and is unable, to live in a world where multiple voices can make demands upon him. As in *Macbeth*, his desire to be separate from the 'herd' infects the political and thus metrical climate of the whole play, which is riven with conflict, sudden changes and reversals:

COMINIUS. Hath he not passed the noble, and the commons?

BRUTUS. Cominius, no.

CORIOLANUS. Have I had children's voices?

SENATOR. Tribunes, give way, he shall to th' market-place.

BRUTUS. The people are incensed against him.

SICINIUS. Stop,

Or all will fall in broil.

CORIOLANUS. Are these your herd?

Must these have voices that can yield them now,

And straight disclaim their tongues? What are your offices?

You being their mouths, why rule you not their teeth?

Have you not set them on?

MENENIUS. Be calm, be calm.

(3.1.29-37)

There is perhaps no clearer example of the way that, as Wright asserts, the line can call a speaker back to his 'social and affectional ties' than the split line above – or, indeed, of the ability for a stolen line to do quite the opposite (*Metrical Art* 138). Sicinius's 'Stop' has the punctuating force of the same word in a telegram: it marks a desperate attempt to establish a formal pause and a bulwark against 'broil.' Coriolanus's reply, however, though it completes the line, sneers at the very prospect of Sicinius sharing in a common action with the wider populace, and wrenches back control for another splenetic rant which Menenius tries to metrically contain. Metre in this play varies widely, but its furious

inversions and convolutions in Coriolanus's own speech communicate especially effectively his desire not to be bound by a system which encourages, in whatever form, a mutual and 'fit' circulation between 'incorporate friends' (1.1.112). In *The Comedy of Errors*, the word 'incorporate' was associated, albeit mistakenly, with transcendent romantic union; here, it stands for the forms of political coercion which the play's plebeian *and* patrician characters variously seek to throw off.

Responding to Sicinius's accusation that he would make 'Yourself into a power tyrannical' (3.3.64), Coriolanus seems to entirely reject both the people and the very idea of representative government in favour of a single free voice which, in its late breaks and jumpy trochees, resists shared patterns. The final three half-lines below, which following Wright and Rokison's models I have relinedated as 'amphibious,' indicate how quickly the political temperature has shifted. This proposed lineation would raise the question for performers of whether Coriolanus ends his speech with a defiant solo statement, or whether Sicinius instantly reclaims him within the metrical network:

CORIOLANUS. The fires i'th'lowest hell fold in the people!

Call me their traitor, thou injurious tribune?

Within thine eyes sat twenty thousand deaths,

In thy hands clutched as many millions, in

Thy lying tongue both numbers, I would say

'Thou liest' unto thee with a voice as free

As I do pray the gods.

SICINIUS. Mark you this, people?

CITIZENS. To'th'rock! To'th' rock with him!

(3.3.67-75)

This opposition between the singular, self-determining 'I' and the undifferentiated mass of 'the people,' 'you,' can be clearly seen in one of Coriolanus's best-known speeches, and – within such a frenetic metrical landscape – the surprisingly neat lines which follow:

CORIOLANUS. You common cry of curs, whose breath I hate

As reek o'th' rotten fens, whose loves I prize

As the dead carcasses of unburied men

That do corrupt my air: I banish you!

.....

AEDILES. The people's enemy is gone, is gone!

CITIZENS. Our enemy is banished, he is gone! Hoo-oo!

SICINIUS. Go see him out at gates, and follow him

As he hath followed you, with all despite.

Give him deserved vexation. Let a guard

Attend us through the city.

(3.3120-141)

This opposition recurs in the final scene. In the splenetic speech of the warrior who, in defiantly girding himself to die 'alone' knows he will thereafter be dismembered by a great mass of others, the form reinforces his wish to let one reminder of his unsullied separateness, his 'I,' stand starkly forth:

Cut me to pieces, Volsces; men and lads,  
Stain all your edges on me. "Boy!" False hound,  
If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there,  
That, like an eagle in a dovecote, I  
Fluttered your Volscians in Corioles.  
Alone I did it. "Boy!"

(5.6.112-7)

And as Rokison notes with reference to the closing speech (95), the movement of the scene after Coriolanus's death is towards something closer to the end-stopped resolution, however tentative, of many of the earlier plays:

AUFIDIUS.            Please it your honours

To call me to your senate, I'll deliver



Myself your loyal servant, or endure

Your heaviest censure.

**FIRST LORD.**            Bear from hence his body,

And mourn you for him. Let him be regarded

As the most noble corpse that ever herald

Did follow to his urn.

**SECOND LORD.**        His own impatience

Takes from Aufidius a great part of blame.

Let's make the best of it.

**AUFIDIUS.**            My rage is gone,

And I am struck with sorrow. Take him up.

(5.6.138-47)

Putting aside the 'impatience' and 'rage' that Coriolanus and, to a lesser extent, his rival Aufidius represented, these closing lines recall the solemn praise afforded Hamlet, even though the rebellion which led up to them shares little of the Danish prince's drive to restitution — personal or political — of a genuine wrong. He is killed not within Rome, the city in whose factional conflicts he was embroiled, but in Antium, a double traitor, and his isolation is enhanced by the fact that in this and the previous brief scene, both cities seem

to be closing ranks. The Roman Senator in 5.5 offers to ‘Repeal’ his banishment and accommodate him, but instead he has gone to precisely the one place which will refuse to do so.

Meanwhile, in Rome itself, an array of joyful citizens who welcome the peace accord is conjured up in the offstage description of ‘The trumpets, sackbuts, psalteries, and fires, / Tabors, and cymbals, and the shouting Romans’ (5.4.42-3). Some sense of the breadth of individuals gathered under the banner of the ‘recomforted’ (5.4.41) might be heard in the Senator’s ‘Call all your tribes together, praise the gods’ (5.5.2). Indeed, the last we hear of the Romans onstage in this play is a great musical and communal ‘Welcome’ (5.5.6).

Then again, the hyperbolic elevation of Volumnia to a figure who seems to contain all Romans, and perhaps all in the surrounding provinces — a kind of ambiguously reconstituted body politic — powerfully recalls the danger of Caesar’s colossal absolutism, and the violent tossing aside of the masses which is its corollary:

MENENIUS.                      This Volumnia,  
  
Is worth of consuls, senators, patricians,  
  
A city full; of tributes such as you,  
  
A sea and land full. You have prayed well today.  
  
This morning, for ten thousand of your throats  
  
I’d not have given a doit. Hark, how they joy.

(5.4.46-51)

The champion of the fable of the belly chillingly reveals his cavalier attitude towards the throats of the people's tribunes as this play about the relationship between the populace and their apparent political representatives approaches its conclusion. The regular 'Hark, how they joy' sinisterly folds away the threatening state power his words make briefly visible into an almost-regular aesthetic container. The end of *Coriolanus* therefore offers no clearer argument than its opening for the appropriate relationship between power and the people, or between individuals and communities; nor does it allow for an easy consonance between aesthetic and political order and regularity. If the most regular lines quoted above are those which argue 'fit it is' for the senators to eat while the people starve, the iambic norm can have no reassuring claim to a desirable stability. Instead, *Coriolanus*'s frequently unstable verse assists in creating the sense of the play's turbulent oscillation between the varying centres of power and agency in the divided Roman republic.

Even in this most notoriously prosodically complex play, then, Shakespeare still turns — without direct analogy — to the resources of metrical norm and variation to map and explore the tensions between individuals and communities. This work sits towards the least formally conservative end of Shakespeare's practice, but reactions to Shakespeare's model of verse drama in the following two centuries suggest an implicit assumption that, rather than pursuing an essentially moderate aesthetic within the bounds and norms of his era, Shakespeare's style of writing was consistently, like *Coriolanus*, wild and ungovernable. The political emphasis of such a reading, however, is more reminiscent of *Coriolanus*'s own distaste for the factious Roman populace.

While Shakespeare's metrical line stands 'persistently for the principles of opposition and linkage which are felt everywhere in his work,' and especially for a 'powerful continuing struggle between authority and rebellion, between law and impulse, between divine order and the beauty of particular evasions of it,' Wright argues that by contrast 'most later iambic pentameters are much less inclusive' (*Metrical Art* 260-1). In particular, Wright comments that 'eighteenth-century prosodists came to identify strict observance of metrical propriety with moral probity; in effect, they saw iambic pentameter as a social institution in the contemporary social order' (*Metrical Art* 260). In doing so, they began the process whereby, despite the fact that 'Shakespeare has remained for centuries an extraordinarily influential poet, and many of his metrical maneuvers are among the most impressive in literature ... his metrical devices were never adopted as a system by any formidable later poet' (*Metrical Art* 264).

If it has not been possible to reverse-engineer Shakespeare – to put his devices into use in a different context – this is partly a question of the dominant ideologies in each succeeding period: in each case, Shakespeare has been persistently reframed to serve particular ideological ends. The next chapter will trace how one such vision of Shakespeare informed the very different shapes verse drama took in exploring and imagining the relationships between individuals and communities throughout the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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### CHAPTER THREE

#### 'IRREGULAR MAN'S NE'RE CONSTANT, NEVER CERTAIN': REGULARITY AND RESISTANCE IN VERSE DRAMA, 1660-1789

One of the most popular and subsequently most anthologised verse plays of the eighteenth century, Nicholas Rowe's *Jane Shore* (1714) sought, and received, direct comparison to the work of Shakespeare by its author's contemporaries. Intimately acquainted with Shakespeare's own drama as his first modern editor and biographer, Rowe's play aimed to draw explicitly from a Shakespearean model in order to redirect the course of verse drama. Though *Jane Shore* professed to be 'Written in Imitation of Shakespear's Style,' however, contemporary responses challenged this statement of intent on two grounds. Firstly, Rowe's recent editor, Harry William Pedicord, quotes a series of eighteenth-century critiques which assert that the imitation of Shakespeare is a project of questionable artistic merit. The character Trueman in Charles Gildon's *A New Rehearsal* makes clear the terms of debate:

I think it so far from a recommendation, that it is written in the Stile of Shakespear, that it ought to damn it... the best Stile, is that which arrives to the Perfection of the Language then in Being, such as is that of *Cato*, which is the best Standard of Dramatic Diction which we have in our Tongue (quoted in in Pedicord xxii).

Trueman here identifies a cultural shift in the writing and reception of verse drama by which, despite the efforts of Rowe and his predecessors, a style associated with Shakespeare and to a lesser extent with other early seventeenth-century authors had fallen into popular disfavour. In contrast, the style held up as a cultural gold standard is that

associated with Joseph Addison's *Cato* (1714). Though Trueman specifically addresses its diction as exemplary, *Cato* also differs notably from pre-Civil War verse plays in terms of its restricted prosody: as we shall see later in the chapter, Addison's metre retains as tight a hold over each verse line as the Stoic central character over his emotions.

Nonetheless – and notwithstanding its very different stated intentions – Rowe's use of metre follows broadly similar patterns, and is itself far from recognisably Shakespearean. Indeed, the second critique made by contemporaries in response to Rowe's declared ambition is that his own practice fell far short of the model he explicitly identified, consisting of little more than 'timid paraphrases' of his guiding influence (Pedicord xxiii). Dr Johnson argued that the style of *Jane Shore* is un-Shakespearean in large part because of Rowe's abandonment of its supposed progenitor's prosody: 'The *numbers*, the diction, the sentiments, and the conduct, every thing in which imitation can consist, are remote in the utmost degree from the manner of Shakespeare' (quoted in Pedicord xxiii; my italics). On prosodic grounds, Bonamy Dobrée describes the verse of Rowe's plays as 'precise,' 'polite' and 'not much more than passable' (Introduction, *Tragedies* xvii-xviii). Given the severity of these critical verdicts, it may come as a surprise that the theatre historian Richard W. Bevis declares 'Rowe is frequently termed the premier tragedian of the eighteenth century, although the competition is admittedly sparse' (129).

This chapter will attempt to trace how, in the course of the development of verse drama from the official re-opening of the London theatres to what is conventionally framed as the dawn of Romanticism, 'the premier tragedian of the eighteenth century' came to be writing dramatic verse which was 'not much more than passable.' To do so, it will explore the origins of the prosodic norm noted in *Jane Shore* and *Cato* which – precise, polite,

and predominantly metrically regular – limited the possibilities and political and social scope of verse drama as demonstrated by Shakespeare even in plays which, like Rowe’s, specifically professed to imitate his style and to show their socially-mixed audience ‘sorrows like your own’ (*The Fair Penitent*, Prologue l.18). It will focus primarily not on adaptations of Shakespeare in the sense of plays which revisit and repurpose his plots and characters – a topic on which much has already been written – but on responses to the Shakespearean model of verse drama as understood prosodically.<sup>6</sup>

This trend towards regular prosody first arises in John Dryden’s formally restrictive couplet tragedies, partly in an attempt to differentiate his verse drama from that of Shakespeare and the Renaissance playwrights. This chapter will move from Dryden’s early plays through Aphra Behn and Thomas Otway’s much more irregular uses of metrical form (along with Dryden’s own rapprochement with Shakespearean form in *All for Love*), to the group of prosodically regular, formally homogenous, eighteenth-century plays classed by Derek Hughes as ‘sub-Otwayesque’ (457). Along the way, it will trace a narrative of the diminishment of individual freedom in favour of a more impersonal, collective voice.

It will argue that this evolution over the course of the period in question is linked closely to what one anonymous reviewer in 1714 described as Rowe’s deliberate avoidance of Shakespeare’s ‘ungovernable Flights’ of fancy (quoted in *Pedicord* xxiv). Rowe’s practice is in the tradition of what Bevis calls the Augustan urge to ‘reduce Shakespeare to

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<sup>6</sup> See, for example, W. Moelwyn Merchant’s ‘Shakespeare “Made Fit,”’ in *Restoration Theatre*, edited by John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris. Though I do not have space to discuss it here, Pope’s regularised rewriting of many of Shakespeare’s plays in his 1725 edition is an analogous project in prosodic terms.

symmetry' (129): an aesthetic decision taken in the light of political and philosophical concerns, dating back to Dryden, about what it meant to govern and be governable. Finally, it will conclude by presenting one consequence of this shift, little remarked in scholarship – the conventional allocation of verse to tragedy and prose to comedy which began in this period – as a development with profound political consequences.

The end-point of this chapter in 1789 I have borrowed from Bevis, who admits its arbitrary origin in political, rather than literary, change, while also noting that by this point '[t]ragedy had largely dissolved into melodrama, comedy was moving into new regions, and light novelties were more vigorous than either' (254). The most frequently anthologised and discussed plays of the period in the current critical canon cluster noticeably towards the earlier half of the period before the 1737 Licensing Act, which seems to have inhibited theatrical production. The trend away from tragedy remarked in Bevis seems significant in this respect: 'whole seasons passed in the 1740s, 1750s, and 1760s without a new tragedy appearing,' though the last third of the century apparently saw a slight resurgence (201).

Accounts of the period's distinctive verse drama usually begin with the rhymed heroic play, but blank verse was also present from the very beginning. This survival is unsurprising: while Janet Clare asserts that '[t]he drama which had begun with the output of Kyd, Marlowe and Shakespeare, amongst others, was, when revived at the Restoration, of an altogether different character' in her introduction to *Drama of English Republic, 1649-60*, she also notes the continued performance, in the face of official stricture, of a number of blank verse plays by the likes of Massinger and Fletcher throughout the Protectorate (1). An unrhymed verse comedy, Sir Samuel Tuke's *The Adventures of Five*

*Hours*, notably opens one recent chronological anthology, edited by David Womersley; Aphra Behn's first produced play, *The Forc'd Marriage* (1670) blended blank verse, rhymed verse and prose.

Different formal models co-existed in the years immediately following the Restoration, some of which attempted to pick up where earlier public drama had left off – but the prominence of rhymed heroic tragedy in current critical discourse is largely due to its extensive theoretical justification in the work of John Dryden. Though the heroic form dates back to William Davenant and found its first successes in the works of Roger Boyle, Earl of Orrery, its dramatic legacy has become indelibly associated with Dryden, who worked particularly hard to establish couplet tragedy as an alternative to the problems he found in engaging with the Shakespearean model for verse drama.

From the beginning of his career, Dryden – arguably the most influential playwright of the Restoration era – was what scholars today might call a 'critical-creative practitioner.' Along with writing plays, Dryden staked out his ideas of what drama should and should not be in a series of essays, prefaces, prologues and epilogues. Some elements were shared across a number of these statements: a tempered, but still firm, enthusiasm for Shakespeare; a description of what writers ought to do to make plays fit for this age as opposed to the last; and a centring of that formal difference in the restriction of what Dryden refers to variously as liberty and lawlessness.

His and Davenant's Prologue to their version of *The Tempest* (1667) – a text in which the authors maintain blank verse and prose – honours Shakespeare as a forebear to all the pre-war dramatists who commanded respect in the Restoration (and, of course, to their own work). Shakespeare is also presented as the source of a new creative impulse.

Having for a time gone underground, theatre will now be both connected to and different from his model: 'As when a Tree's cut down the secret root / Lives under ground, and thence new Branches shoot' (10: 6) The authors assert that direct imitation is nonetheless to be discouraged, and do so in terms which suggest not only Shakespeare's inhibiting achievement, but also a political anxiety over the consequences of allowing 'liberty' to the 'vulgar':

*Shakespear's* Magick could not copy'd be,  
  
Within that Circle none durst walk but he.  
  
I must confess 'twas bold, nor would you now,  
  
That liberty to vulgar Wits allow,  
  
Which works by Magick supernatural things:  
  
But *Shakespear's* pow'r is sacred as a King's.

(10: 6-7)

That Shakespeare can be at once kinglike and so vulgar that it was culturally 'bold' to allow him liberty testifies to an uncertainty about where to place this troublesome forebear. Twelve years later, in a prefatory essay to his own version of *Troilus and Cressida*, Dryden sternly asserts that 'union preserves a Common-wealth, and discord destroys it' as the moral of his earlier two-part play *The Conquest of Granada* (13: 234). Here he rails against Shakespeare's linguistic impurity (13: 244) – while nonetheless, in a telling moment of cognitive dissonance, praising the creation of Caliban, whose 'language

is as hobgoblin as his person' (13: 240) – and asserts that in tragedy specifically the Action ought only 'to consist of great Persons,' as opposed to comedy which deals with those of 'inferior rank' (13: 231). It is easy to trace the connection between the fears of political discord, and the insurrectionary potential which comes from allowing vulgar Wits, of inferior rank, liberty.

Dryden himself wrestled to create an aesthetic vessel which would keep what he liked about Shakespearean drama while avoiding the fear of belatedness attendant on using the same formal style as an author who 'perform[ed] so much that in a manner he has left no praise for any who come after him' (13: 18). The model he aimed to create would also honour the political urge towards unity and away from faction. This partly meant, unlike his forebears, eschewing any linguistic reminiscence of the potentially fractious 'ill-bred and Clownish' (13: 215). His solution – the rhymed couplet play – arises partly from an unease about Shakespeare's style which is rooted in his views on liberty and discipline, unity and discord. One of the participants in his conversation piece, *An Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, defends the rhymed couplet (here called simply 'Verse') in terms which verge both on the legalistic and the moralistic:

Judgment is indeed the Master-workman in a Play: but he requires many subordinate hands, many tools to his assistance. And Verse I affirm to be one of these: 'Tis a Rule and line by which he keeps his building compact and even, which otherwise lawless imagination would raise either irregularly or loosely (17: 80).

Rhyme requires and facilitates an author's subordination of the lawless, by making it conform to regularity. As such, it is akin to reason: it 'regulates the Fancy' (8: 101). In

Dryden's rhymed plays, the heroic couplet acts a higher authoritarian force which regulates the passions of inconstant human agents, whose tendency towards disruptive, querulous 'motion' and need to submit to authority was contemporaneously asserted in the philosophy of Hobbes (see *Leviathan*, chapters 6 and 18). The couplet prioritises values of regularity, order and discipline. Though it might not be truly heteroglossic, blank verse drama is polyvocal in the way that a choir is polyvocal – multiple voices blend together to create a larger whole. The keynote of the heroic couplet, however, is polarity rather than polyvocality – the form allows little space for a character's thoughts to range and evolve through successive nuances, as they might do in a blank verse soliloquy, and instead what thinking we do find tends to oscillate violently between two extremes.

These extremes are nonetheless unified by the force of regular, rarely-varied metre and rhyme, which work together to subordinate individual differences to a larger pattern. Over the course of a play, the effect is not to hold multiple perspectives in a balanced harmony – making up the kind of larger, interconnected whole Witmore identified as emblematic of Shakespeare's monism, discussed in the previous chapter – but to collapse binary oppositions into univocal unity. This prosodic and political homogenisation, as well as often excluding lower-class characters who would traditionally speak prose, is a world away from the sense of organic community often attributed to Shakespeare's more eclectic – more irregular, and more lawless – dramaturgical approach.

How this works in practice can be exemplified with reference to *The Conquest of Granada*, Dryden's best-known heroic play. The sudden, shuttlecock-like, bouncing back and forth of thought is evident when the captive Ozymn falls in love with his rival's



daughter Benzayda just as she is about to execute him. Ozymn and Benzayda find their situation – a conflict between love and loyalty to their parents – impossible to resolve.

BENZAYDA. My wishes contradictions must imply;

You must not goe; and yet he must not dye.

Your Reason may, perhaps, th' extremes unite;

But there's a mist of Fate before my sight.

OZMYN. The two Extremes too distant are to close;

And Human Wit can no mid-way propose.

(11: *Part II* 3.2.71-6)

In Part I of *The Conquest of Granada*, the main character Almanzor enters 'betwixt' two opposed 'Factions,' 'as they stand ready to engage' (11: 1.1.*s.d.*), and declares: 'I cannot stay to ask which cause is best; / But this is so to me because opprest' (1.1.128-9).

Although Almanzor throughout the two-part text asserts his independence – 'But know, that I alone am King of me' (*Part I* 1.1.206) – in practice he is always in the service of one side or the other, making and breaking alliances according to the vagaries of personal passion and betrayal, and is eventually clearly attached to the winning side, revealed as the heir to a Spanish Dukedom. In reality, there is no space for an individual, a free agent with an undirected and ungratified desire and energy, within this circumscribed onstage community which must eventually submit, in its last lines, to the 'Conqu'ring Crosses' of 'Great Ferdinand and Isabel of Spain' (*Part II* 5.3.346-8). In such a binary universe it is

hard to see how a ‘mid-way’ between extremes *can* be proposed, because in a couplet as in a factional conflict there is no middle – there is only this, or that.

Other characters claim that Almanzor resists the push and pull of binary, regularising categories: ‘He moves excentrique, like a wandring star; / Whose Motion’s just; though ‘tis not regular’ (*Part I* 5.1.208-9). Prosodically, however, he *is* regular, and does nothing of the kind – unlike, for instance, the truly metrically wild Macbeth, he fits into the same close constraints as his fellow characters. Even the terms in which Almanzor appeals to Fate imply restricted agency, and a regular cosmic mechanism: ‘Fate, now come back; thou canst not farther get; / The bounds of thy libration here are set’ (*Part II* 3.1.191-2).<sup>7</sup> This limitation illustrates the absence of any clear impact of character on metre, or vice versa, under this new formal regime.

One place to look for individuality, however, might be in the prosodic moments of *The Conquest of Granada* which fall outside the restricting couplet. Throughout the saga, short lines, usually of four or six syllables, are occasionally deployed, primarily at moments which embody some kind of dramatic declaration or turn in the action, or which call attention to a character or an event. A few examples will demonstrate the kind of spotlighting these variations are called upon to enact:

‘Th’ undaunted youth——’ (*Part I* 1.1.88)

‘Hold, Sir, for Heav’n sake hold’ (*Part I* 1.1.234)

‘Take this for answer, then——’ (*Part I* 1.1.349)

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<sup>7</sup> In Womersley’s edition, ‘Libration’ is glossed as ‘oscillation; movement to and fro.’

‘Princes are Subjects still’ (*Part I* 2.1.118)

‘I must submit’ (*Part I* 4.2.192)

‘Love, and a Crown!’ (*Part II* 1.2.202)

‘I will with Vestals live’ (*Part II* 5.3.65)

What all these various examples share is that they each set a phrase apart from the common run of things; whether the effect is in the service of dramatic action or to concentrate or focus traits of character, the lines throw the prevailing rhythm and rhyme scheme. If they were set apart in the actors’ delivery as they are on the page – and given the importance of line-breaks to couplet form, this seems likely – they would stand out as particularly worthy of note or attention.

There is, of course, much that is stultifying about the unvaried march of the couplet form. In my own experience as a practitioner, feedback forms collected after the performance of my verse play *Free for All* (see Chapter Six) indicated that the use of rhyme was the aspect of the dramaturgy which many in the audience found least appealing. In performance, my own couplet lines created an atmosphere of expectation for the following rhyme which heightened audience awareness of the play’s artificiality and constructedness far more than did the surrounding blank verse: practically speaking, heavy rhyme in a blank verse context risks calling undue attention to itself.

Where rhyme is itself the norm, however, as for Dryden, it is worth noting that the effect these short lines create is a dramatic possibility available uniquely within this medium.

Short lines in blank verse do not conflict with rhyming patterns, and thus are capable of

far less auditory disruption; but the charged way these lines create and carry meaning derives wholly from their situation within a regular rhymed verse form, where small deviations take on much larger significance than the host of frequent variations on unrhymed pentameter outlined in Shakespeare's plays by George T. Wright. As such, they call attention to the fact that disrupting *any* form of dramatic verse carries with it a loss of some loci of dramatic potential. Dryden seems gradually to have realised their value, because his last rhymed play, *Aureng-Zebe* contains a higher proportion of such lines, standing starkly distinct to the main course of the verbal action.

Despite the effectiveness of this formal trick, however, the very different Shakespearean model continued to haunt Dryden's work. The Prologue to this play declares its author grown 'weary of his long-lov'd Mistris, Rhyme' (12: 159). Having previously raised the idea that 'rhime might be made as natural as blank verse,' or at least present 'Nature wrought up to an higher pitch,' (17: 70, 17: 74) he now acknowledges that its use makes any kind of naturalistic mimesis impossible, even if this was originally part of the point: 'Passion's too fierce to be in Fetters bound, / And Nature flies him like Enchanted Ground' (12: 159). Although Dryden boasts of his prior accomplishments in rhyme, he has still not finished wrestling with one of the problems that turned him away from blank verse in the first place: 'spite of all his pride, a secret shame / Invades his breast at Shakespear's sacred name' (12: 160).

In 1677, Dryden's next play, a version of the Antony and Cleopatra narrative, would engage with this shame — a term which implies a kind of sacrilege or sin in turning away from Shakespeare's example — head on. *All for Love's* Preface indicates that this attempt has been nourishing — 'I hope I may affirm, and without vanity, that by imitating him, I

have excell'd myself' (13: 10) – but anxiety resurfaces when its Prologue declares that the author 'fights this day unarm'd; without his Rhyme' (13: 20). A return to blank verse is imagined as a kind of physical vulnerability: rhyme, which had previously been a dismissively feminised and discarded 'Mistress,' now seems to bear some of the hallmarks of martial masculinity. The dynamics of gender and control in relation to rhymed and blank verse in Dryden's dramaturgy are therefore complex. On more purely aesthetic grounds, Dryden specifically evokes the fear of 'Flocks of Critiques' (13: 20), but when his drama no longer defends its particular territory and worldview with the aid of rhyme, what lawless forces might rush in?

Some fear over this new openness may make its way into the tragedy's opening scene, where the Egyptian priest of Isis, Serapion, recounts a terrible disruptive flood which throws nature out of order, including a sudden, vertiginous elevation of agricultural labourers:

Our fruitful Nile

Flow'd ere the wonted Season, with a Torrent

So unexpected, and so wondrous fierce

That the wild Deluge overtook the haste

Ev'n of the Hinds that watch'd it: Men and Beasts

Were born above the tops of Trees ...

(13: 1.1.2-7)

This portentous event is not in Shakespeare's version of the story, nor in Plutarch's *Life of Antony*. In fact, it stems from a description of the Nile in Herodotus, and seems particularly relevant to Dryden's telling. The river is 'wild,' an adjective Dryden applies elsewhere to the force of imagination, which 'in a Poet is a faculty so Wild and Lawless, that, like an High-ranging Spaniel it must have Cloggs tied to it, least it out-run the Judgment' (8: 101) – much as the deluge overtakes the haste of its spectators. The Shakespeare-affiliated story Dryden uses blank verse to tell begins, then, with a horror of what happens when an uncontrollable force '[o]erflows the measure' (*Antony and Cleopatra* 1.1.2) which is shared not only by his Roman but by his Egyptian characters. Nonetheless, framed in a critical context, Dryden's verse in the opening speech avails itself of the irregularity he had previously found so problematic: it contains multiple trochaic inversions, opens and closes with an eleven-syllable line, and three of its lines have syntactic breaks after the seventh syllable, all markers of a prosody closer to that of Shakespeare than anything Dryden had attempted before.

The subsequent dialogue, between Antony and his General Ventidius, illustrates that Dryden is particularly competent at channelling Shakespeare's ability to split unrhymed pentameter lines, and thus control of a dramatic scene, between speakers. In their discussion of the aftermath of the battle of Actium, the two men manifest both their internal and their interpersonal tensions – and those between their personal and their public roles – in a shared, restricted medium which is nonetheless (unlike rhymed couplets) possible to sustain without rapid entanglement:

VENTIDIUS. Out with it; give it vent.

ANTONY.

Urge not my shame.



As previously noted, however, some authors in the later seventeenth century were using blank verse well before Dryden made peace with the form. One such playwright was the most famous female dramatist of the period, Aphra Behn. Behn wrote only one tragedy, *Abdelazer*, and prose predominates in many of her comedies, but her early work, *The Forc'd Marriage* (1670), is a tragicomic drama which alternates between blank verse and the couplet model Dryden was then developing. Some of its rhymed scenes prefigure the limitations of *The Conquest of Granada*, the first part of which was produced later that same year. The King begins (in blank verse) by asking 'How shall I now divide my Gratitude' between two characters (288), and something of its binary extremities can be gathered from these lines, delivered by Erminia, the unhappy bride of the title, to the Princess Gallatea, who herself loves Erminia's groom:

Ah, would I could that fatal gift deny;  
Without him you; and with him, I must die;  
My Soul your royal Brother does adore,  
And I, all Passion, but from him, abhor ...

(300)

Other passages, however, exploit the resources of blank verse to explore topical ideas of political liberty which are echoed in a looser, livelier prosody. Alcippus, the play's tormented bridegroom, wishes he could simply be ruled by love without the destructive forces his frustrated passion brings in its train. He speaks in terms which evoke both the temptation and the terror of revolution, calling to mind the familiar analogy from *Julius Caesar*: 'the state of man / Like to a little kingdom, suffers then / The nature of an insurrection' (2.1.67-69). Employing trochaic variations and unstressed final syllables, the



metrical profile of this speech supports the theme of individual resistance to monarchical power before an audience for whom the Interregnum was a recent memory:

Ah, that I could remain in this same state,  
And be contented with this Monarchy:  
I would, if my wild multitude of Passions  
Could be appeas'd with it; but they're for Liberty,  
And nothing but a Common-wealth within  
Will satisfy their appetites of Freedom.  
— Pride, Honour, Glory, and Ambition strive  
How to expel this Tyrant from my Soul,  
But all too weak, though Reason should assist them.

(348-9)

Behn's 1676 *Abdelazer* — of which an adaptation by Edward Young, *The Revenge*, 'dominated the repertory of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' (Thomas 1) — pursues the prosodic impact of the 'wild multitude of passions' still further. Behn's blank verse tragedy, produced two years before Dryden's own much-vaunted capitulation to the form, was already looking back to early seventeenth-century theatre practice. The play's editor Maureen Duffy identified not only *Othello* but *The Duchess of Malfi* as one of its 'true antecedents' (x), along with the 1600 play *Lust's Dominion*. That the Websterian aspect of *Abdelazer* might extend to its irregular prosody as well as its themes can be seen in the following speech, after a Spanish prince targeted for assassination has 'fled, in holy Robes':

ABDELAZER. That Case of Sanctity was first ordain'd,

To cheat the honest World:

'Twas an unlucky Chance – but we are idle –

Let's see, how from this Ill, we may advance a good –

'Tis now dead time of Night, when Rapes, and Murders

Are hid beneath the horrid Veil of Darkness –

I'll ring thro all the Court, with doleful Sound

The sad Alarms of Murder – Murder – Zarrack,

Take up thy standing yonder – Osmin, thou

At the Queen's Apartment – cry out, Murder:

Whilst I, like his ill Genius, do awake the King;

Perhaps in this Disorder I may kill him.

(3.1)

Though much of the diction may be conventional, the high proportion of missing and additional stresses at a range of syllabic positions, mid-line changes of thought and address, often signalled by dashes, and enjambment all point to a prosodic system capable of conveying unruly energy and action. While dramatic verse such as Rowe's is commended for its 'smooth, flowing, elegant' quality, Behn's has a rough edge which

corresponds to the sense of minds and political agents in motion, as Abdelazer's highly adaptable pursuit of individual gain threatens the power of the Spanish state (Jenkins 177).

The influence of Behn's more flexible system can be seen in at least two of the female authors who followed her: Mary Delarivier Manley and Mary Pix. Indeed, Pix's career was marked by commentary on her deviation from iambic norms. One commentator, quoted by Anne Kelley, offers a critique which not only shows the continued awareness and importance of metre in literary debate in this period, but also uses the strictures of scansion to support a sense of racial and gender subjugation in a context where most dramatic verse was written by white men: 'her Muse was wont to hobble like a young Negro Wench, that had just learnt to wear Shoes and Stockins; some of her Verses are worse than Prose, she knows not what Scanning means, nor did she ever use her to Ear to judge of their awkward [sic] running' (xiii).

This critique further demonstrates that what Behn regularly referred to as 'Disorder' was a frequent feature in the stage verse of the period: evoking the unpredictable passionate venality of humans which Hobbes identified, such writing constituted a counter-current to Dryden's more restricted style and to the far smoother eighteenth-century model that followed. An examination of one of the period's best-renowned playwrights further indicates the direct link between metrical and political disorder, and the crucial role played by Shakespeare in shaping a verse drama practice which emphasised both.

In the early 1680s, Thomas Otway produced two verse plays — *The Orphan* (1680) and *Venice Preserv'd* (1682) — whose highly variable prosody often goes beyond what Marina Tarlinskaja's work would indicate is the Shakespearean 'golden mean' to something

approaching the more metrically erratic Webster or Middleton, with whose morbid and fallen worlds the content of his plays resonates. Nonetheless, it was Shakespeare to whom he was continually compared: as his biographer R. G. Ham notes, “Shakespeare and Otway” – the names were to be inseparably linked together by the critics of the ensuing century’ (132). We could offer one answer to Ham’s question, ‘What similarity, if any, is there between them?’ by observing Otway’s role in the renewal of a prosodic tradition so different from the rhymed couplet drama (132).

After a series of couplet plays, in 1680 Otway had two works in blank verse produced: *The Orphan*, an original tragedy, and *Caius Marius*, an adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* which held the stage through much of the succeeding century. Ham sees the success of the former as intimately linked to the discoveries Otway made in ‘following the precedent of Shakespeare,’ presumably while composing the latter:

Otway’s verse evidenced greater freedom: the caesura became fluent, substitution more frequent, and an occasional Alexandrine appeared for the sake of variety. His most notable discovery, by reason of the liberation from rhyme, was an entirely individual use of the feminine ending ... His apprenticeship to the couplet had failed to knit his line, and now with blank verse his inclination was in the way of a mellifluous cadence, admirably suited to his purpose, even though at times it should dissolve away to mere formlessness (139).

This new freedom is intrinsically Shakespearean: what Otway praises about the forebear he has started to emulate, in the Prologue to *Caius Marius*, is his ability to write with ‘Fancy unconfin’d,’ and for his ‘luxuriant’ style to inspire ‘succeeding poets’ to be

similarly ‘unbounded’ (A3). Admiration for both free-flowing fancy and luxuriance here demonstrates the great distance between this model and Dryden’s earlier aesthetic strictures: Dryden once held that ‘the great easiness of Blanck Verse, renders the Poet too Luxuriant’ (8: 101). For most of *Caius Marius*, however, closeness to the Shakespearean source material seems to steer Otway merely to ‘humbly glean,’ as his Prologue puts it, from Shakespeare’s own ‘[c]rop’ (A3). The derivative status of this work – and something of the character of tragedy in this period – could aptly be summarised in the fact that the titular character delivers an entire eleven-line speech in blank verse *in his sleep*.

It is Otway’s two original tragedies which channel his attention to Shakespeare in a way that realises the power of his prosody, bearing out Bevis’s seemingly paradoxical observation that, distance themselves as authors might, ‘the best Restoration tragedy was written under the shadow and tutelage of Shakespeare’ (68). Otway’s use of livelier verse in *The Orphan* and *Venice Preserv’d* contributes to the portrayal of characters who are believably complex and erratic, showing these qualities as they chafe violently against the ordered boundaries of their form and their social context.

*The Orphan* repeatedly returns to the shifting line between beast and man, which is crossed partly through the destructive potential of sexual desire: an individualistic force which works against conformity to social norms. In the play the effects of desire find a formal outlet in the disruption of smooth, ordered prosody. Like Alcippus in *The Forc’d Marriage*, Otway’s characters’ desires resonate with a question Ewan Fernie poses in relation to Shakespeare: ‘what scope, moral or otherwise, [can there be] for the singular, amoral and even immoral freedom of the individual in relation to the politics of freedom in general’ (7)? Their speeches also demonstrate how such questions might be given

metrical form. In the following passages, trochaic inversions (my emphases in bold) heighten the auditory impact of the headstrong misogyny expounded on at length by Polydore and Castalio, the two brothers whose sexual rivalry is at the heart of the play:

POLYDORE. The lusty bull **ranges** through all the field,

And from the herd **singling** his female out,

Enjoys her, and abandons her at will.

(1.364-6)

CASTALIO. I know my charter better. I am man,

**Obstinate** man; and will not be enslaved.

(4.121-2)

Under the pressure of these drives towards the unthinking, antisocial pursuit of sexual gratification, metrical structure in the play sometimes buckles entirely. Telling her brother Chamont that she has been unkindly treated by her new husband Castalio, Monimia asks 'But when I've told you, will you keep your fury / Within its bounds?' (4.221-2). His eventual response, however, respects no bounds of any kind, human or metrical, as this fragile group of characters, riven by the effects of a 'bed-trick' rape, tumbles towards its final violent conflict:

CHAMONT.

So may this arm

Throw him to the earth, like a dead dog despised!

Lameness and leprosy, blindness and lunacy,

Poverty, shame, pride, and the name of villain

Light on me, if, Castalio, I forgive thee.

(4.251-5)

The deception and violence of the play's sexual narrative does not, of course, explain every variation in its verse, but Otway demonstrably does not try to contain impulsive individualism in neat, symmetrical prosody. Ironically, for the animal kingdom, an egalitarian social mingling might be conveyed in very loose verse without angst or violence: theirs is a 'delightful / Wildness':

CASTALIO. See where the deer trot after one another:

Male, female, father, daughter, mother, son,

Brother and sister mingled all together.

No discontent they know, but in delightful

Wildness and freedom, pleasant springs, fresh herbage,

Calm harbors, lusty health and innocence

Enjoy their portion.

(5.17-23)

For humans, however, who are supposed to live alongside each other within the bounds of civic, national and religious groupings, the loss of the form holding these together becomes an apocalyptic fear once ‘Confusion and disorder seize the world’ (5.516). Otway’s verse lines expressing this dissolution closely echo the prose of *King Lear* at 2.92-4 and 2.118-23:

In countries, needless fears; in cities, factions;

In states, rebellion; and in churches, schism:

Till form’s dissolved, the chain of causes broken,

And the Originals of Being lost.

(*The Orphan* 5.519-22)

The bonds of verse here call attention to the pressures and constraints of social bonds. But in this world, as opposed to that of the couplet plays, a dissolution from those bonds into primal chaos does at least feel possible, and thus has the quality of a genuine dramatic threat. George Steiner’s contention that ‘in Shakespeare’s England ... the hierarchies of worldly power were stable and manifest,’ though lacking in nuance in its false suggestion these were never challenged in drama, is a reference to the worldview which remains encoded in Otway’s ‘chain of causes’ (194). By presenting that chain as labile and subject to destruction, Otway’s livelier verse – inspired by the models of ‘Shakespeare’s England’ – channels a typically Renaissance sense of the *instability* of worldly power and social ordering, in a way that the ordering rigour of the couplet and the wholly regular verse line could never accomplish.



Otway's best-known play, *Venice Preserv'd*, deals explicitly with the rebellion in states which Castalio fears in his much more domestic tragedy. It engages directly with how large-scale political machinations intersect with inconsistent, vacillating, human individuals, and Otway's prosodic patterning continues to reflect this. The 1682 work deploys split and shared lines as sensitively as its predecessor, to an effect expressed memorably and self-reflexively in *The Orphan*:

MONIMIA. Though they both with earnest vows

Have pressed my heart, if e'er in thought I yielded

To any but Castalio —

CHAMONT.                      But Castalio!

MONIMIA. Still will you cross the line of my discourse!

(2.271-4)

In *Venice Preserv'd* as in the earlier play, the moments where any character interrupts, takes over, or completes the 'line of' any other character's 'discourse' represents in microcosm the battles of will and control which structure the larger narrative. Establishing and disrupting the links between discrete individuals, these dances around the metrical line are a useful correlative for the fractious world of rapidly-shifting allegiances in which the play, and its anti-Senate plot, take shape. Split lines can add speed and indicate the mutual convergence of two separate intelligences, as we can see when the conspirators, Pierre and Jaffair, reassure each other of the justice of taking action against the senator Priuli:

PIERRE. A Dog!

JAFFEIR. Agreed.

PIERRE. Shoot him.

JAFFEIR. With all my heart.

(1.1.301)

Otway's shared lines can break anywhere, including after the first syllable, and bring alive interpersonal moments of surprise, persuasion, and even comedy in the heated environment of the plot:

JAFFEIR. Oh for a Curse

To kill with!

PIERRE. Daggers, Daggers are much better!

JAFFEIR. Ha!

PIERRE. Daggers.

JAFFEIR. But where are they?

PIERRE. Oh, a Thousand

May be dispos'd in honest hands in Venice.

(2.2.58-62)

\*

ALL. Well, who are you?

JAFFEIR.                   A Villain.

ANTONIO.                   Short and pithy.

(4.2.29)

As the play goes on, the hesitant Jaffeir becomes part of this conspiring ‘All,’ but finds his personal allegiance (a marriage to the Senator Priuli’s daughter) pulling him away from their shared purpose. The splitting of lines throughout the narrative enables Otway to explore the breakdown of allegiances and the pressures upon individual identity when characters are hemmed between competing forces:

JAFFEIR. I’ve bound my self by all the strictest Sacraments,

Divine and humane —

BELVIDERA.               Speak! —

JAFFEIR.                   To kill thy father...

(3.2.138-9)

Having betrayed the conspiracy, Jaffeir changes tack one final time and stabs his friend Pierre to spare him the indignity of public execution before turning the knife on himself. Even his dying line is snatched as soon as he falls silent by another character whose function is to tidy him away politically as well as metrically. The Officer returns the following line and the political situation to a stability which ends in the Senate, the collective force which all of Jaffeir’s busy activity was intended to disrupt and unseat:

JAFFEIR. I am sick — I'm quiet —

[*Jaff. dyes*]

OFFICER. Bear this news to the Senate,

And guard their Bodies till there's farther order.

(5.1.494-5)

Jaffeir pits himself against a rigid order larger than any individual, inconstant person. His own internal division — his 'wavering Spirit,' (3.2.423) noted by the conspirator Renault and many critics — is vividly communicated through mid-line shifts in addressee and purpose, as in this moment where the torture of Pierre leads him to contemplate killing Belvidera:

Hark how he groans, his screams are in my ears

Already; see, th' have fixt him on the wheel,

And now they tear him — Murther! perjur'd Senate!

Murther — Oh! — hark thee, Traitress, thou hast done this;

Thanks to thy tears and false perswading love.

[*Fumbling for his Dagger*]

How her eyes speak! Oh thou bewitching creature!

Madness cannot hurt thee: Come, thou little trembler,

Creep, even into my heart, and there lie safe;

'Tis thy own Cittadel – hah – yet stand off,

Heaven must have Justice ...

(4.2.390-9)

And notably, Jaffeir himself is introduced into the conspiracy in a scene which begins with a direct comparison between 'giddy Tempers, Souls but half resolv'd' (2.2.149) and the objective time of the clock, an external measurement which bears some comparison to the expectations raised by regular metre:

RENAULT. Yes, Clocks will go as they are set: But Man,

Irregular Man's ne're constant, never certain ...

(2.2.144-5)

Renault here counterposes the ordered and mechanical with the individual and human: Jaffeir's unpredictability is a danger to the conspirators even as they themselves attempt to overturn a pre-existing system of order. His verse line describing irregularity is, to state the obvious, irregular. Even with the textual elision of 'ne're,' it runs to twelve syllables, and to hear its shape as at all iambic, it seems necessary to orally slide through the third syllable of 'Irregular' – otherwise every foot from 'Man's ne're' onward would fall as a trochee. Assuming, then, a scansion something like this:

Irregul'r Man's ne're constant, never certain ...

we are left with a hypermetric eleven-syllable line which uses two variants of the temporal adverb 'never,' the shorter of which has become an unstressed single syllable, just about making the line scan. 'Never' before 'constant' would not work if this line is to retain any kind of iambic context, and similarly 'ne're' could not fit the position before 'certain,' which seems to call for another trochaic word.

This line thus becomes a microcosm of the difficulties of cramming individual experience into regular metre: constancy and certainty are part of the 'ideal' iambic pentameter line, but these words rarely apply to the human life which is supposed to be recounted and presented in this metre. Man is too irregular for metre; Otway demonstrates the length to which metre can go to impose its regularity on man. He makes prosody convey social and individual disorder meaningfully through the use of variation. The form of his plays does not shun, but actively demonstrates, the effects of personal and interpersonal confusion — and the feared loss of form — upon its characters. As such, he makes verse mimetic of meaning and situation, manipulating its resources with a freedom Ham argues was directly learnt from Shakespeare. It is therefore tempting to wonder how different the development of verse drama might have been if Otway had produced a larger body of work: after his early death, however, just as Wright says of Shakespeare, his 'metrical devices were never adopted as a system by any formidable later poet,' at least in the following century (264).

Otway's influence did nonetheless stretch to a performance tradition throughout the two succeeding centuries, and is frequently evoked in the context of a range of later plays which are far less prosodically rich or socially searching. As Hughes explains, over the

eighteenth century Otway instead became most clearly associated with his subjects and characters:

Otway's naked portrayal of volcanic and tormented desire provided the impetus for the lavish exposure of personal sensation in post-Revolution plays ... Such plays, however, imitate manner rather than substance, spinning out desire and sorrow with none of the psychological depth and confusion that mark the outpourings of Otway's characters: outpourings which lay bare dark, inarticulate regions of the self that lie outside the compass of reason. (455-6)

The result was a formally flattened, simplified understanding of Otway's use of 'confusion' which brought his successors' work closer to the couplet drama: 'love and lust in post-Revolution tragedies are generally simple, repetitive conditions, opposing polarities of requited and unrequited, permitted and forbidden, pure and impure ... a long, sub-Otwayesque moan' (Hughes, 457). James Thomson's *Sophonisba* (1730), for instance, ends with an Epilogue calling for 'other Shakespears' and 'other Otways' to respectively 'rouze the Stage' and 'melt another Age,' but although this play contains many lively moments, it is rarely similar to either forebear: instead, little separates its prosody and diction from a work like Hannah More's *Percy* (1777), written nearly fifty years later.

Rather than adduce a range of 'sub-Otwayesque' plays which show a drift towards an unvaried metrical line and thus a diminishment in individual agency, I will limit myself here to three brief examples. Each seems to pick up where Dryden left off in regularising the form of verse – despite the absence of couplets – away from what retrospectively

seems like Otway's detour into a more eruptive prosody and diction, and away from Shakespeare's, which Pope in 1714 could still critique as 'the style of a bad age' which Nicholas Rowe was 'mighty simple' to have copied (quoted in Pedicord xxii). One clear effect of this regularisation is that the community or society imagined within a given play appears to speak with one voice: restricted prosody and diction therefore often constitutes a de facto suppression of dissent.

Rowe himself was anonymously praised in *Jane Shore* for pursuing a course whereby 'all the Rust and Obsolescence of Shakespear is filed off and polished, what is rough, uncouth and ill-fashioned in his Expression, is left behind, and so much only remains of him as is agreeable to the Ear, significant or venerable' (quoted in Pedicord xxiv). Some speeches by Alicia — a noblewoman married to the unfaithful Lord Hastings — illustrate what this means in practice. Hastings describes her as expressing 'distempered rage' (4.283), 'conflicting passions' (4.290) and declares 'Thy reason is grown wild' (4.301), but despite some degree of local variation, the overall effect of her responses remains comparatively tame and even:

Canst thou, O cruel Hastings, leave me thus?

Hear me, I beg thee — I conjure thee, hear me!

While with an agonizing heart, I swear

By all the pangs I feel, by all the sorrows,

The terrors and despair thy loss shall give me,

My hate was on my rival bent alone.



(4.335-40)

As Alicia closes the act in rhyming couplets, ready to ‘prove the torments of the last despair’ (4.431) with her rival Jane Shore, this much-reiterated despair never feels capable of mustering any genuine disruption: ‘all the sorrows’ metrically fall into place. When the two meet, despite all their talk of ruin and destruction, there is little sense, as we find in Otway, that the shared edifice of the verse is about to crumble:

ALICIA. Hark! something cracks above! — It shakes, it totters!

And see, the nodding ruin falls to crush me!

‘Tis fall’n, ‘tis here! I feel it on my brain!

FIRST SERVANT. This sight disorders her.

.....

JANE SHORE. Alas! She raves; her brain, I fear, is turned.

In mercy look upon her, gracious heaven,

Nor visit her for any wrong to me.

Sure, I am near upon my journey’s end;

My head runs round, my eyes begin to fail,

And dancing shadows swim before my sight.

(5.237-59)

If Rowe primarily describes, rather than communicates, disorder, another contemporary play went further still. Joseph Addison's *Cato* (1714), once an extremely popular play, almost never avails itself of the tricks used by Shakespeare and Otway to reflect disordered experience against a regularly audible norm. At one point, the title character tells a subordinate:

Let not a torrent of impetuous zeal

Transport thee thus beyond the bounds of reason ...

(2.1.44-5)

The bounds of reason seem to require the suppression of any forceful individual emotion. And lest it be thought that only the eponymous Stoic keeps so strictly within bounds, the play's much-maligned love scenes show little further variation. When Marcia believes her suitor Juba dead, she promises:

I will indulge my sorrows, and give way

To all the pangs and fury of despair ...

(4.3.22-3)

Marcia giving way, however, is not a particularly powerful or prosodically rich spectacle. Dobrée describes Addison's practice in this play as 'an object-lesson in what blank verse is not' (xviii):

Oh he was all made up of love and charms,

Whatever maid could wish, or man admire:

Delight of every eye! when he appear'd,

A secret pleasure gladned all that saw him;

But when he talk'd, the proudest Roman blush'd

To hear his virtues, and old age grew wise.

(4.3.35-40)

Finally, we turn to one of the most popular plays of the latter half of the century: John Home's *Douglas*. A great success in Scotland before its no less significant popularity in London, it obviously struck a chord of national pride which might have been much appreciated in 1756, only a decade after the Battle of Culloden. The dustjacket to Gerald D. Parker's edition describes how its Edinburgh production was greeted with a nationalistic shout of "Whaur's yur Wully Shakespeare nou?" and quotes David Hume, who declared it to possess "the true theatric genius of Shakespeare and Otway, refined" from the former's "barbarism" and the latter's "licentiousness." That this play could be compared to Shakespeare, however, let alone surpass him by implication, indicates how far the Shakespearean model of verse drama had fallen into disfavour with writers and audiences of the period.

Bevis suggests that Home's work manifests 'a rather pallid reflection of Shakespearean glories, a futile search for the lost Elizabethan chord' (206) but, in asserting that not only Rowe and Dryden but also Otway were engaged in the same search, indicates the lack of granularity in many historical accounts of verse drama in this period. *Douglas* specifically

demonstrates such a rigid use of metre that its recent editor can claim: '[i]t is extremely regular: only two lines in the entire play fail to scan as iambic pentameter' (7). Parker certainly underrates the number of trochaic substitutions in the text, but he aptly calls the verse 'essentially non-dramatic,' lacking in 'the modulation of rhythm, tone, diction and imagery which can more properly fulfil *dramatic*, as opposed to *poetic* functions' (7). This 'non-dramatic' play was nonetheless among the most popular uses of verse onstage in the eighteenth century.

The verse in *Douglas* rarely extends beyond the ten-syllable line and avoids late caesuras and inversions even in moments of extreme grief. It deploys the technical resources of enjambment and mid-line to mid-line writing, but *Douglas*, like the other eighteenth-century plays discussed above, underwhelms not only on the grounds of prosody but also diction. This, too, had become regular, restricted and conventional. A limited number of emotive abstract nouns and dead metaphors are the currency which circulate through the tragedies of the eighteenth century. Words like 'transport,' 'sorrows,' 'cruel,' 'pangs,' 'torrent' and 'despair' – to take only examples which appear in the above quotations – wear thin over the course of the period, becoming subject to a kind of linguistic hyperinflation, and subsequently cease to have any affective impact.

The narrow lexicon of tragedy in this period contrasts starkly with the vocabulary available to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, where ungainly, non-Latinate words such as 'pith,' 'bodkin' and 'shuffled' could appear in Hamlet's soliloquy on suicide, the most famous tragic speech of all time. One reason for this shift is, of course, the influence of French ideas of decorum. Nonetheless, Sarup Singh notes how this restriction of the language and poetic possibilities of verse drama arose equally clearly from a reaction

against Shakespeare. Singh's summary fails to account for the likes of Behn and Otway, but his overall argument is that the Restoration, despite its admiration for Shakespeare,

did not find him altogether intelligible. Its code of decorum demanded a purity of tone which Shakespeare lacked. To be acceptable to the new age, among other things, his imagery which was a curious mixture of the poetic and the homely had to be purified and refined ... It is [its failure to value this mixture] which explains the age's total incapacity to appreciate the vitality of the Shakespearean idiom. (97)

Dryden's disapproving comment — 'Never did any Author precipitate himself from such heights of thought to so low expressions' — bears out Singh's assessment (13: 213). Singh argues that, by avoiding Shakespeare's juxtaposition of 'the majestic and the mean' and retreating to a repetitive cycle of the same few lexical items and moral concepts, Restoration playwrights (and, I infer, their eighteenth-century successors) 'lost those very qualities which make poetry *dramatic*,' creating a style which could not 'adequately depict ... moments of spiritual crisis' (103).

Crucially, the twin restrictions of prosody and diction — as well as, eventually, the stringencies of the 1737 Licensing Act — made it difficult for plays in this period to explore much in the way of social or political crisis and tension, either. *Douglas*, in this respect, provides a highly instructive example. The play's best-known lines are delivered by Young Norval, raised as a shepherd, who only later discovers his noble parentage:

My name is Norval; on the Grampian Hills

My father feeds his flocks; a frugal swain,

Whose constant cares were to increase his store.

And keep his only son, myself, at home.

(2.44-7)

Perhaps surprisingly, his decidedly non-noble father delivers his own perfect pentameters in an almost indistinguishable register:

O noblest youth that ever yet was born!

Sweetest and best, gentlest and bravest spirit,

That ever bless'd the world! Wretch that I am,

Who saw that noble spirit swell and rise

Above the narrow limits that confin'd it!

(5.304-8)

It would therefore appear that in *Douglas*, background and social standing have no impact on who speaks verse and how. Norval, on discovering his heritage, is asked to 'frame thy manners still / To Norval's, not to noble Douglas' state,' (4.255-6), but it is hard to know how much more nobly he could speak than he already does.

In some ways, this transcendence of class boundaries might link Home's play more closely to the models of early modern drama — lower-status characters, like the 'factor' Leantio in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* and the ostracised Shylock, are often written in verse, illustrating the potential of the medium to distribute access to eloquence

equally. Home's use of verse across the board also erases difference between characters with very different origin points – a far cry from Dryden's strictures on rank in tragedy. Egalitarian though this may be, it also removes the possibility of prose offering any kind of resistance or challenge, and the lack of any liveliness in the prosody effectively sands the edges off any difference between characters. Little of the conflict in *Douglas* foregrounds the distribution of wealth, power and privilege – a striking fact in a play praising Highland culture before a London audience in 1756. The sheer blankness of the blank verse reflects this depoliticisation.

Despite the blandness of Home's lines, it is worth noting one other potentially surprising aspect of homogenised verse. In a period which cast a number of its characters and plot in 'exotic,' non-Western locales, the uniformity of speech patterns might offer a different lens through which to consider emerging concepts of race and ethnicity. Here I will note only that the conventional prosody given by white writers to characters such as the 'Numidian' prince Juba in *Cato* – whose proposal of an interracial marriage does not, as in *Othello*, generate any significant panic or threat – or Dryden's Arab lovers Ozymn and Benzayda, sets these figures on an equal footing with their white counterparts in the heroic tradition. By appearing in such a framework, on common metrical grounds, Juba is accorded an articulacy and an unquestioned virtue – this tacit respect provides an unexpected potential countercurrent in the context of developing European imperialism and slavery.

Of course, Dryden engages little with Islamic culture or theology, and Addison makes his prince a Christian – there are limits to this prosodic empathy. Much in these plays continues to reinforce white, Western hegemony. In a period where Thomas Rymer can

assert of *Othello* that '[w]ith us a Black-amoor might rise to be a Trumpeter; but Shakespear would not have him less than a Lieutenant-General,' and that a character with such origins has no '[c]ause for the Moors preferment to that dignity' of being heraldically styled 'the Moor of Venice,' the status of blank verse as a 'language' which characters of colour can readily and fluently speak, like other 'high status' characters, is nonetheless a striking cultural development (132-3).

Overall, however, the increasingly restricted use of prosodic resources reflects a wider change in the drama of the period. Plays billed as tragic started to eschew the use of prose for transition, counterpoint or simply variety: in so doing, they became more monovocal, less engaged with the range of experience. They were therefore less able to evoke the boundaries between and within different dramatic situations, as well as the complexities of character and social status, particularly where characters of varying statuses meet, collide, or find common ground. No prose appears in a majority of the plays I considered for this chapter.

Steiner's *The Death of Tragedy* does not explain this particular cultural change, but it does offer a version of the elitist social impulse which underlies the conventional allocation of formal resources. Noting 'the rise to power of the middle class' in this period, Steiner argues that thereby 'the centre of gravity in human affairs shifted from the public to the private' (194). This spelt difficulties of for the tragic strain of verse drama which was, increasingly, the only kind because for Steiner '[t]here is nothing democratic in the vision of tragedy,' wherein '[c]ommon men are prosaic and ... Kings answer in verse' – verse being, in his view, 'the prime divider between the world of high tragedy and that of ordinary existence' (241-2).



It is true that, along with the prose they commonly spoke onstage, characters ‘of inferior rank’ were largely purged from plays in verse in this period, with the result that the social scope of verse plays also narrowed. *Douglas*, however, testifies to some movement in the opposite direction: from Rowe’s *The Fair Penitent* onwards, verse tragedies occasionally promised to offer their socially-mixed audience ‘sorrows like your own.’ Henry Fielding’s prologue to George Lillo’s *Fatal Curiosity* placed that play’s focus squarely on destitute characters drawn from ‘lower life.’ It also castigated the increasing homogeneity of dramatic verse:

The Tragic Muse has long forgot to please

With Shakespeare’s nature, or with Fletcher’s ease.

No passion moved, through five long acts you sit,

Charmed with the poet’s language, or his wit.

Fine things are said, no matter whence they fall;

Each single character might speak them all.

But from this modern fashionable way,

Tonight our author begs your leave to stray.

No fustian hero rages here tonight;

No armies fall to fix a tyrant’s right.

From lower life we draw our scene’s distress;

Let not your equals move your pity less!

(l.1-12)

Shakespeare is brought in to turn the clock back on blank verse, but also to orientate it towards 'your equals,' an implied non-elite audience. Fielding's prologue draws attention to the fundamental problem that arises when all characters speak similar verse all of the time – a problem which bedevils *Douglas* – another link between form and content is broken, and verse drama becomes yet more regular and yet more removed from experience. In avowedly expanding the compass of verse to different kinds of speakers, drawn from non-elite backgrounds, Fielding and Lillo evoke Shakespeare to demonstrate that verse can and should have greater social scope. But without higher levels of variation in terms of prosody and diction, it is difficult for the community depicted in a play, however it is comprised, to interact in a way which produces meaningful and engaging conflict. The trend towards social expansion also failed to last: after 1765, Bevis notes tragedy had largely become 'the drama of exalted female nobility,' where 'domestic tragedies were as scarce as if Lillo had not written' (201).

The disappearance of domesticity comports with a corresponding decline in the inclusion of not only prose, but also comedy in the realms of verse drama (that is, in full-length plays in the patent theatres – I do not have space here to explore the significant development of the comic verse burlesque.) William Empson argued that '[t]he old quarrel about tragi-comedy ... shows that the drama in England has always at its best had a certain looseness of structure; one might almost say that the English drama did not outlive the double plot' (27). Despite this provocation, it has been remarkably rarely noted how the disappearance of prose plots from verse plays also led to a corresponding absence of

comedy from most plays in verse – comedy seems to have been banished along with the often low-status, prose-speaking characters who delivered it.

This is all the more striking because in the Renaissance there are also single-plot comic plays which do not hesitate to use verse throughout, the most familiar example of which might be Jonson's *The Alchemist*, whose verse techniques contribute hugely to its comic dramaturgy. In plays such as *Twelfth Night* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, comic scenes are also conducted in verse between 'high-status' characters with no implication that such a medium is inappropriate for the comic approach. Far from noting the breaking of this link, however, collections of critical essays on Restoration and eighteenth-century theatre often perpetuate the issue by reproducing, as section dividers, the categories of 'Comedy' and 'Serious Drama' (as if *The Alchemist*, for example, was not a work of extreme moral seriousness), without commenting in any detail on the fact that the use of verse or prose had become the clearest dividing line between the genres.<sup>8</sup>

In a rare exception, Anne Richter describes the rise of serious (prose) comedy as intrinsically linked to the decline of tragedy: 'it was characteristic of the Restoration, with its love of paradox, of contradiction and false faces, that it should have created a tragedy that was less serious than its comedy' (135). Often, however, one finds the common assumption that comedy is not serious, and thus cannot be expected to deploy verse without making itself ludicrous. Bevis's dismissive account of Behn's *The Town-Fopp* (1676), wherein a 'potentially significant story of forced marriage is overshadowed by disguises, cross-purposes dialogue, and absurd intrigues that Behn takes so seriously as to

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Jean I. Marsden's chapter on 'Tragedy and Varieties of Serious Drama' in *A Companion to Restoration Drama*, edited by Susan J. Owen.

employ verse on occasion,' is a textbook example (90). Describing *The Rover*, Bevis scoffs '[a]gain Behn rises to verse, though here are some characters who can (just) sustain it' (90). The implicit argument arising from such summaries is that verse in comedy is unsustainable, and that prose and verse have become forms with such clear generic allegiances that they would do better to keep to their own kind.<sup>9</sup>

As well as undermining the potential of verse to be both comic *and* serious, Bevis compounds a division between non-serious prose as the domain of comedy and very serious verse as the preserve of tragedy. This binary is unhelpfully restrictive for modern criticism: within the period itself, it was actively detrimental to both genres. The forms of social exclusion it enacts might, indeed, be traced back to Dryden's question in the *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*: 'what is more unbecoming the Majesty of Verse, then to call a Servant, or bid a door be shut in Rhime?' (17: 67) The assumed divorce between comic prose and serious verse has been long-lasting, and the wider cultural split it often stands in for is well expressed in a scene from Tony Harrison's modern verse play, *The Trackers of Oxyrynchus*, discussed in Chapter One.

At his first lyre recital, Apollo sidelines the satyrs, figured as a working class chorus, and makes it clear that they will only ever be perceived as crude, comic and marginal in a world of high art:

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<sup>9</sup> One recent development might offer a welcome challenge to such assumptions. The anonymous play *The Dutch Lady*, rediscovered in 2015 by Joseph F. Stephenson and forthcoming in its first modern edition, prepared by Stephenson, in 2019, dates from the early 1670s and is written for the most part in an unself-conscious, urbane comic verse which recalls James Shirley as much as Behn. Though I became aware of its re-emergence too late to discuss it in this thesis, Stephenson's *Times Literary Supplement* article ('Beauty's grand exemplar') gives valuable context and a 2017 production by FRED Theatre confirmed that the script – and particularly its comic verse – is likely to repay serious scholarly attention.

This is now my lyre and I define  
its music as half-human, half-divine,  
and satyrs, half-beasts, must never aspire  
to mastering my, and I mean *my*, lyre.

(132-3)

Apollo declares that the satyrs can go ‘free, if you stay / where you belong, in the crude Satyr Play’: a stricture Harrison directly challenged in the twentieth century by bringing the satyrs back into verse (and into the National Theatre). But in the eighteenth century, one of the lasting effects of the application of Apollonian decorum, arrived at partly in the reaction against ‘Shakespear’s ungovernable Flights’ (quoted in Pedicord, xxiv), was the departure of comedy from dramatic verse. And as prose outcompeted its increasingly inflexible counterpart on eighteenth century stages (and how could it not, without comedy on its side?) verse continued to calcify and decline in importance.

Throughout this period, paratextual material surrounding plays from Dryden to *Douglas* makes it clear that many authors of verse plays followed the paths they did – ranging from explicit avoidance to partial imitation – in response to the difficulty of negotiating with their form’s Shakespearean inheritance. Many of the plays discussed in this chapter stayed in the repertory throughout ‘the age of Garrick’ and were revived into the nineteenth century, but even *Venice Preserv’d* is almost forgotten in the present day while Shakespeare’s verse drama continues to succeed – a sad testament, perhaps, to the strength of cultural feeling against any post-Shakespearean verse drama which has since

set in, and which was already prefigured in Dryden's sense of belatedness and exhaustion, described at the beginning of this chapter.

Although Otway in particular might have created memorable and exciting work by picking up on Shakespearean principles of metrical liveliness, as the eighteenth century wore on, his formal practice made little lasting impact. Constricting horizons of diction, situation, genre and sentiment helped to diminish the interest of his successors' plays in a variety of significant ways which occasional instances of lively prosody alone could not counteract. As its scope narrowed, it seemed less and less possible for verse drama to both evoke and address a wide, varied community, and prose, possessed of a flexibility verse lacked, was well placed to fill the gap. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, it was therefore clear that verse drama would have to do something radically different not to continue its slow slide into irrelevance. The attempts made to buck this trend from 1789 onwards would confront, both implicitly and explicitly, the kind of assumptions about art and society still present two centuries later in Steiner's assertion that verse is 'the prime divider between the world of high tragedy and that of ordinary existence,' as we shall see in the next chapter (241).

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## CHAPTER FOUR

### ‘WE LIVE POORLY IN THE DEAD LINE’: SHAKESPEARE IN VERSE DRAMA, 1789-1900

Tracy C. Davis and Ellen Donkin, in a volume dedicated to the contributions made by female authors to playwriting in the nineteenth century, identify the period’s ‘persistent anxiety over rejuvenating the National Drama’ (3). In outlining a collective cultural desire to ‘make this mass medium as praiseworthy at the height of the British Empire’s world dominion as it was in the era of its formation, when Shakespeare (or so Britons recalled) came to the fore,’ the authors call attention indirectly to what had become three significant assumptions (3). Firstly, that Shakespeare had become inarguably representative of the highest level of British dramatic achievement; secondly, that the kind of theatre now associated with Shakespeare (grand, public, addressing a broad contemporary community, and – though this was rarely stated outright – largely predicated on the presence of dramatic verse in the tragic key) was now considered to be in deep decline; and thirdly, that many viewed gender as a considerable barrier to attempting this kind of writing:

The accomplishments of the culture were manifestly out of balance with the accomplishments of the nation, and a flowering of Genius was sought with desperate longing ... What the heralds of culture got instead was a patch of tangled weeds.

But could Genius be a woman? (3)

Donkin and Davis point to the contemporary success of Joanna Baillie to argue in the affirmative. Although productions of work by the Scottish poet-playwright, whose

importance has been reaffirmed over the last thirty years by critics including Catherine Burroughs, were somewhat sparse during her own lifetime due in large part to the significant differences between Baillie's own theatre theory and the conventions of the early nineteenth-century stage (see *Closet Stages* 93), her published texts were praised by figures as respected (and as distinct) as Walter Scott and Lord Byron. While explaining the reasons that he deemed his own *Marino Faliero* unstageworthy, Byron turned to Baillie as an example that 'surely there is dramatic power somewhere' (4: 305). Anna Letitia Barbauld went further, explicitly presenting Baillie as not simply an heir, but an equally-matched peer to Shakespeare's theatrical dominance in what she imagines as a more enlightened future. Baillie emerges in Barbauld's poem as a prophet once denied, now heeded at long last – her 'tragic Muse' will 'resume her just controul,' and her name shall finally 'live in light, and gather *all* its fame' as a joint standard-bearer of the British dramatic tradition:

Nor of the Bards that swept the British lyre

Shall fade one laurel, or one note expire.

Then, loved Joanna, to admiring eyes

Thy storied groups in scenic pomp shall rise;

Their high soul'd strains and Shakespear's noble rage

Shall with alternate passion shake the stage ...

(165)

But though Barbould offers Baillie as a mainstay of the stage in her own independent terms, many male authors of the period from the French Revolution onwards turned openly to the second author she invokes to support their own attempts at theatrical reinvention. Allardyce Nicoll's judgement that 'if the nineteenth century drama is weak, its weakness is due to Shakespeare' cannot be altogether denied (216). Nevertheless, the varying ways in which dramatists drew on Shakespeare as a model for dramatic renewal elude simple generalisation, and often led to rediscoveries of the affordances of verse drama, largely abandoned in the previous century, for which Nicoll's sweeping statement is unable to account.

Charles Lamb, for instance, wrote to Robert Southey that he planned to 'go upon the model of Shakspeare in my play [1799's *John Woodvil*], and endeavour after a colloquial ease & spirit something like him' (*Letters* 159). Shelley described Shakespeare as 'the lion in the path' who 'has done for the drama what the Greeks had done for sculpture – perfected it' (Trelawny 19); in endeavouring to imitate *King Lear* in his fragment *King Charles I*, he confessed: 'My audacity savours of madness' (Trelawny 67). Mary Russell Mitford presents King Charles I reading and identifying with *As You Like It*, and claims Shakespeare as a royalist on the side of the dispossessed true ruler (with tragic irony, given our own foreknowledge that he will never return from banishment to what he imagines as the play's 'gentle comfortable end'): 'Thrice princely poet, from whose lightest scene / Kings may draw comfort' (1.2). And less conservatively, Thomas Lovell Beddoes, in his Preface to *Death's Jest-Book*, vindicates its 'style and form ... somewhat unusual amongst us in later days,' with reference directly to Shakespeare (3).

Beddoes makes the case that writing modernity should always include a Shakespearean return:

the Shakspearian form of the Drama, under such unimportant modifications as the circumstances of our times demand, is the best, nay, the only English one: and arduous as the task may be, the observation of his example is the only course which can ever insure the dramatist any real popularity among his countrymen. (6)

Against the judgement of 'our most popular literary dictators,' Beddoes declares Shakespeare 'at once the best model and only legitimate authority for English playwrights' (3), and dismisses those who would challenge his propriety on Aristotelian terms in a turn comparable to Coriolanus's 'I banish you' (3.3.123):

It is not Shakespeare who is lawless, they are lawless who judge his British example by the precept of the Greeks, and summon him who should be their law-giver, before their bar who are literary outlaws. (5)

Beddoes himself, however, is reminiscent of the Middleton of *The Revenger's Tragedy* far more than Shakespeare:

I'll go brood  
And strain my burning and distracted soul  
Against the naked spirit of the world,  
Till some portent's begotten.

That such different plays and verse styles as those of Lamb, Shelley, Beddoes, and Mitford can each be produced with clear reference to Shakespeare alerts us to the fact that, by this period, what Shakespeare meant, and what he could thus impart to those who would learn from him, was already deeply contested. Thomas Babington Macaulay diagnoses a prevalent strain within Romantic-era self-image: the early Romantics were ‘a race who represented themselves as heirs of the ancient line, so long dispossessed by usurpers’ (528). This identification meant that while Dryden and his followers had either set aside the overbearing difference of Shakespeare from their own models in the name of progress (‘Within that Circle none durst walk but he’ – Dryden 6-7), or attempted partly to reform him, as in *All For Love*, Coleridge and his contemporaries were trying something different: namely, they sought to ‘imitate his manner’ (Coleridge 14: 2: 202). Coleridge acknowledged the complexity of the task:

At first sight, Shakspeare and his contemporary dramatists seem to write in styles much alike: nothing so easy as to fall into that of Massinger and the others; whilst no one has ever yet produced one scene conceived and expressed in the Shakspearian idiom. I suppose it is because Shakspeare is universal, and, in fact, has no *manner*; just as you can so much more readily copy a picture than nature herself. (14: 2: 202)

What was by now the acknowledged ‘universality’ of Shakespeare led in practice to a range of creative engagements with his concerns, dramaturgical devices, and formal techniques, including experiments with dramaturgy, character, diction and versification. Beddoes’s Preface raises a question that would reverberate through these engagements:

how contemporary could a verse drama directly informed by Shakespeare, alongside other Elizabethan and Jacobean forebears now coming to new cultural prominence, hope to be?

The anxieties around verse drama, archaism, and Shakespearean influence that first took shape in what we call the Romantic period would resonate through the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I will assess both the role played by Shakespeare (and critiqued by Nicoll and George Steiner) in contributing to a general air of archaism and inactive contemplation which pervades much of the drama of the period, and the more enlivening aspects of Shakespearean influence, as I observe the expanded social, political, metrical and linguistic scope of a range of nineteenth-century plays.

In the plays I have consulted for this chapter, George Eliot's *Armstrong* (1871) is perhaps the sole example of a verse drama which takes place in an explicitly contemporary context: one character 'hurrie[s] from the panting roaring steam' (115) of what appears to be a train journey, and the eponymous heroine hears a fellow singer perform a Beethoven work written in 1805. Many plays from the period appear significantly more dated – though often in ways which have little to do with Shakespeare. Diction and metre aside, a sizeable contingent of authors continue to conform with the conventions of eighteenth-century sentimentality. The family reunion prevented by Alvar's disguise in Coleridge's *Remorse* is just one example of this enduring mawkishness, not least in retaining the eighteenth century's curious obsession with parental knees:

My tears must not flow!

I must not clasp his knees, and cry, My father!



(Stage Version – 16: 2, 3.2.4-5)

Another speech from *Osorio*, the earlier version of the same play, suggests how far even a work by the co-author of *Lyrical Ballads* is removed from reality:

ALHADRA. Albert? – three years ago I heard that name

Murmur'd in sleep!

(16: 1, 4.3.39-40)

In this context – particularly after a century where verse was characteristically associated with tragedy – it might be hard to imagine how verse could be intentionally comic. ‘The eighteenth century, for all practical purposes, had forgotten Shakespeare’s romantic comedy’ (Nicoll 215): but it had also largely forgotten that comedy could be written in verse at all. It is therefore worth briefly noting the period’s one notable exponent of that near-moribund form, the five-act romantic verse comedy.

James Sheridan Knowles’s *The Love-Chase* (1837) is in many respects a versified version of the urban battles of wit between potential lovers which stretch from Sheridan back to *Much Ado About Nothing*, via Jacobean city comedy, but does at least sometimes catch a note appropriate to a contemporary nineteenth-century audience: ‘One takes, you know, / When one is flurried, twice the time to dress. / My dears, has either of you salts?’ (5.2). Though not hugely original, its very existence keeps the dim flame of a native form alive, and reminds the reader of the particular comic potential of shared verse lines – stichomythia and antilabe, carried by a light touch and skipping monosyllables – especially for the purposes of bickering:

CONSTANCE. You mean you are beloved again! I don't

Believe it.

WILDRAKE. I can give you proof.

CONSTANCE. What proof?

Loveletters? She's a shameless maid

To write them! Can she spell? Ay, I suppose

With prompting of a dictionary!

WILDRAKE. Nay

Without one.

CONSTANCE. I will lay you ten to one

She cannot spell! How know you she can spell?

You cannot spell yourself! You write command

With a single M - C-O-M-A-N-D . . .

(4.3)

The experiment did not catch on, and comedy in verse continued to languish throughout the century. Elsewhere, however, the uses of the past — especially a turn towards the literary past in the figure of Shakespeare and his contemporaries — had a considerable

impact upon the aesthetics of late-eighteenth and early nineteenth-century verse drama, and the negotiations between individuals and communities that the form was able to enact in this period. The negative judgements this trend has conventionally inspired are perhaps best summarised by Allardyce Nicoll's assessment of poetic plays where 'the language is neither the language of the older nor that of modern times,' in which 'the themes are all themes of the past,' and where '[m]any dramatists, "thouing" through five acts, seem physically incapable of penning a "you"' (62, 179, 89).

For instance, referring to the 1799 tragedy by Charles Lamb, Alfred Ainger notes that '*John Woodvil* has no quality that could have made its success on the stage possible' (54). The danger of a backward-looking aesthetic for Ainger inheres at least partly in its inability to avoid anachronism:

By a strange perverseness of choice, Lamb laid the scene of his drama, written in a language for the most part closely imitated from certain Elizabethan models, in the period of the Restoration, and with a strange carelessness introduced side by side with the imagery and rhythm of Fletcher and Massinger a diction often ludicrously incongruous. (54)

It is unclear what, on prosodic grounds, Ainger deems to be the 'rhythm of Fletcher and Massinger,' though the play's verse is indeed surprisingly loose by comparison to earlier eighteenth-century models. But although Ainger critiques the dramatic construction of Lamb's play, he sees some inherent merit in its author reviving 'with much skill the imagery and the rhythm of a family of dramatists whom the world had been content entirely to forget for nearly two centuries' (57). As with the verse-speaking Romans in Peter Oswald's *Augustine's Oak*, an old style can function as a new broom: *John Woodvil*

shows Lamb attempting to ‘overthrow the despotic conventionalities of eighteenth-century “poetic diction,” and to reaccustom the ear to the very different harmonies of an older time’ (55).

That these harmonies are nonetheless unfit, in Ainger’s view, for stage representation, is of a piece with Lamb’s comments in a notorious essay on what creates Shakespeare’s ‘distinguishing excellence’: the fact that his plays are ‘less calculated for performance on a stage than those of almost any other dramatist whatever’ (‘Tragedies’ 88). In asserting that a performance of ‘the play of Hamlet’ might have an equally potent effect on theatre audiences while ‘totally omitting all the poetry of it,’ in favour of ‘the poorest and most homely language of the servilest creeper after nature that ever consulted the palate of an audience,’ Lamb seems to separate out poetry from dramaturgical technique (90).

Furthermore, in dismissively suggesting that such a version of *Hamlet* could provide ‘room for all the power which an actor has, to display itself’ if it were ‘written over again by some such writer as Banks or Lillo,’ Lamb draws a clear dividing line between different poetic models (90). The example of Shakespeare is to be preferred over those of two more recent authors: respectively, the Restoration-era tragedian whom Edmund Gosse, in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (hereafter *DNB*) later that century, would declare ‘a dreary and illiterate writer, whose blank verse is execrable,’ and the early eighteenth-century author of the middle-class tragedies *Fatal Curiosity* (in verse) and *The London Merchant* (in prose).<sup>10</sup> And though *John Woodvil* poses little threat to *King Lear* in terms of linguistic or intellectual complexity, the combination of Lamb’s preference for

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<sup>10</sup> Charles Brayne, in a more recent, and more charitable, edition of the *DNB* credits Banks as a pioneer of the eighteenth-century ‘she tragedy,’ popularised by Nicholas Rowe.

a dramaturgy more cerebral than active and his turn towards the language of the era he associates with that dramaturgy is its own kind of perfect storm:

The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual: the explosions of his passion are terrible as a volcano: they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare. (96)

Such statements for Julie A. Carlson form part of a wider trend:

For the [male] romantic poets as playwrights, serving the master, mind, is indissociable from serving England's master mind, Shakespeare. And serving both in that age means distancing themselves from the calculations of theatre. (17)

As Carlson is aware, however, from Lamb to Tennyson, the vast majority of poets' plays discussed here were submitted to – though not accepted by – the professional theatres of their day. Lamb's own theatrical theories therefore come together in practice to form an uneasy mixture. His inclusion of prose within a play still understood as 'verse drama' is the most obvious shift from eighteenth-century practice which we can attribute to this backwards turn. Beginning with 'Servants drinking – *Time, the morning*,' a colloquial and conventional sequence of prose badinage on the 'shocking vice' of alcohol as it pertains to the lives of 'bad serving-men' shades into a supposedly offhand disclosure of wider sociopolitical conflicts:

FRANCIS. I marvel all this while where the old gentleman has found means to secrete himself. It seems no man has heard of him since the day

of the King's return. Can any tell why our young master, being favoured by the court, should not have interest to procure his father's pardon? (697-8)

This narrative strategy recalls *Romeo and Juliet* and *The Winter's Tale* – it is hard to imagine it in a play by Joseph Addison or John Home (whose own displaced shepherd-heir, Douglas, could never descend to Florizel's prose.) The conversation is soon disrupted, however, by a furious steward who out-Malvolios Malvolio, castigating their idleness in verse lines which vary in length with remarkable freedom:

You well-fed and unprofitable grooms,

Maintained for state, not use;

You lazy feasters at another's cost,

That eat like maggots into an estate,

And do as little work ...

(699)

Transitions between prose and verse also allow for the play's titular traitor, like such shifty figures as Iago, Edmund, and indeed Prince Hal, not to be limited by his class to one mode or another. Depending on who he is speaking to and the purpose of the conversation, he avails himself of prose and verse equally to slip between the different social practices of a post-1660 society becoming structurally unstuck. Woodvil nonetheless eschews prose entirely in the redemptive fifth act; as such, a Shakespearean streak of mutability and reform runs through Lamb's deployment of dramatic verse.

This apportioning of the resources of prose and verse, and the shift between them, may be found in any number of the Renaissance playwrights whose work Lamb would go on to edit, sparking a renewal of interest in their work. His stated Shakespearean ambitions work alongside many other elements in the play – not least a cross-dressed getaway to an alternate, utopian court in the forest – to present *John Woodvil* more specifically as a post-Restoration *As You Like It*. Ultimately, Lamb’s historically-inspired short play is undermined by the dramaturgical equivalent of its characters’ desire to live ‘quietly,’ ‘[u]nread in the world’s business, / And take no note of all its slippery changes’ (710). Nonetheless, in its willingness to learn from older models, *John Woodvil* reveals itself as a bad play driven by potentially productive ideas.

Furthermore, Kenneth R. Johnston and Joseph Nicholes argue that such a work, grounded in the historical detail of the English Revolution despite its Renaissance trappings, might not be entirely nostalgic: they read plays in this setting as an oblique comment on the far more recent upheaval in France. As such, while copying the Shakespearean pastoral with its mingled verse and prose seems on the surface to reach for the lost comforts of Eden/Arden, Lamb’s archaism might nonetheless – in a theatrical context still limited in its ability to comment on current affairs by the 1737 Licensing Act – be a conduit for ‘indirect political discourse’ (123).

Though the new guidelines for censorship in the 1843 Theatres Act primarily on the grounds of what restrictions might be ‘fitting for the Preservation of good Manners, Decorum, or of the public peace’ were taken by some in government as ‘attempt[ing] to narrow the scope of the Lord Chamberlain’s powers,’ David Thomas *et al.* clarify that ‘successive Lords Chamberlain were to use their extensive powers neither judiciously nor

sparingly' (62-4). As such, authors later in the century still had recourse to the potentially anachronistic technique of setting their work in distant times and places to avoid the Lord Chamberlain's intervention against 'any material of serious social or political significance' (67).

There might, for instance, be some political resonance in the plot of Tennyson's *Becket* (1886), as glossed by Leonie Ormond: 'The son of a London merchant, Becket is the new man, initially triumphing over the old Norman aristocracy, but eventually destroyed by it' (182). Largely, however, its historicism demonstrates Tennyson's 'impulse to explore the decisive moments of the national past' which, for the then-Poet Laureate, might have formed part of a quasi-official 'attempted definition of identity, a search for roots' for the emerging ideal of Englishness (Ormond 177-8). And at the level of the line, Eric Griffiths identifies a 'bantering pastiche' of earlier pronunciation across Tennyson's text, anachronistically calling for contractions and expansions of syllables to make the metre scan, which operates with 'laborious consistency' (148).

For Griffiths, this model is explained in part by the fact that

in the interim between the two writers, the lines of Shakespeare's verse had themselves been mistaken for grooves along which dramatic speech was imagined imperturbably to trundle, grooves which somewhere round the end of the eighteenth century became known as 'regular iambic pentameters.' (136)

Critiquing the retrospective tendency to 'correct' Shakespeare's metre to a perfect iambic grid, Griffiths describes the earlier author's theatrical prosody as 'the intricate wake left by



steering through choppy, interpersonal waters' (149), an 'alert, transactional' approach (141) which 'unmethodically notates a super-subtle imagining of the speech around him, crafting that speech into dramatic pattern' (147). Griffiths argues that the less 'cramping' term 'blank verse' might have allowed Shakespeare to imagine a less explicitly patterned existence and thus, *contra* George T. Wright, that Shakespeare's line cannot not be trusted in as 'a model of how things cosmically hang together' (137). By contrast, he finds Tennyson's experiments in Shakespearean-styled drama 'hollow at their vocal and auditory core, because the versification they tried to imitate was a mirage,' 'a phantom of metrical correctness with no acoustic substance' (141-2). The Victorian poet may have possessed a 'mobility of register' and an attentiveness to metrical variety which unsettled many contemporaries (151), but for Griffiths, his dramatic verse soon falls into the patten of an iambicated double-act' (142). The lengthy *Becket* contains passages like the following:

FITZURSE. It well befits thy new archbishoprick

To take the vagabond woman of the street

Into thine arms!

BECKET. O drunken ribaldry!

Out, beast, out, bear!

FITZURSE. I shall remember this.

BECKET. Do, and begone!

This is dialogue from a play produced less than ten years before *The Importance of Being Earnest*.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, as his comments in the Preface to *Death's Jest-Book* make clear, Thomas Lovell Beddoes's most developed play enters into a complex and productive relationship with the question of anachronism in dramatic verse. Beddoes was well aware of the common trope whereby literary rhetoric shifted its focus from an Augustan belief in progress and perfectibility to a Romantic emphasis on failure, insufficiency, and decline. Nonetheless, in an oft-cited letter from 1825 quoted in Bradshaw's edition of the play, he identifies the danger in retreating into the comforts of Romantic ruin-lust:

Say what you will – I am convinced the man who is to awaken the drama must be a bold trampling fellow – no creeper into worm-holes – no reviser even – however good. These reanimations are vampire-cold. Such ghosts as Marloe, Webster &c are better dramatists, better poets, I dare say, than any contemporary of ours – but they are ghosts – the worm is in their pages – & we want to see something that our great-grandsires did not know. With the greatest reverence for all the antiquities of the drama, I still think that we had better beget than revive – attempt to give the literature of this age an idiosyncrasy & spirit of its own, & only raise a

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<sup>11</sup> Even Oscar Wilde, however, dabbled in similar waters, as Sos Eltis pointed out in a personal email. Eltis notes that Wilde's 'pseudo-Shakespearean' *The Duchess of Padua* (1883, first performed as *Guido Ferranti* in the USA in 1891), employed 'equally archaic language and forms,' and was likely inspired both by Victor Hugo's verse plays and a well-received 1886 private performance of *The Cenci* by the Shelley Society.

ghost to gaze on, not to live with — just now the drama is a haunted ruin.

(xi)

Although Shakespeare is ‘the old and only canon,’ his follower does not recommend, as a consequence, that his contemporaries throw up their hands (6). Instead, new creation is urgently needed, because — as a later verse dramatist, T. S. Eliot, commented on Shelley’s *The Cenci* — ‘there is all the difference between preservation and restoration’ (‘Possibility’ 51). Despite its author’s assertions to the contrary, however, even *Death’s Jest-Book* itself functions partly (though not entirely) as just such a reanimation of ‘Webster &c.’ In practice, it would be hard to call it an example either of ‘Shakspearian form’ or a play consistently suited to ‘the circumstances of [its author’s] times’ (6). Indeed, Christopher Fry somewhat uncharitably describes its author as having ‘fought a prolonged, if desultory battle’ to solve this very problem, getting himself in the process into ‘a baroque plait, from which he could only extricate himself by cutting his throat’ (‘Return’ 93). Beddoes’s play therefore indicates some of the complexities of early nineteenth-century attitudes to the past, present and future of drama.

In a contemporary context, one of the letter’s metaphors has an unforeseen resonance: ‘worm-holes’ no longer point merely to the lexis of corpses and burial, but to time travel. And indeed, *Death’s Jest-Book* engenders a queasy sense of temporal dislocation, not least through constant reference to its own belatedness. The prose-speaking fool Mandrake’s first speech contains the lament: ‘My jests are cracked, my coxcomb fallen, my bauble confiscated, my cap mediatized,’ and goes on to note ‘we are laid aside and shall soon be forgotten’ (1.1.8-9; 1.1.42-3). The similarly superannuated wicked Duke compares his wooing to a cry from beyond the grave:

Thou art so silent, lady; and I utter

Shadows of words, like to an ancient ghost,

Arisen out of hoary centuries

Where none can speak his language.

(1.2.141-4)

There is a danger in grave-breaking which also applies to anachronism: ‘this breaking through the walls, that sever / The quick and cold, led never yet to good’ (3.2.199-200). Nonetheless, this haunted medieval setting – ‘Thou art old, world, / A hoary atheistic murderous star’ (2.3.356-7) – is occasionally joltingly modern. Attempting to persuade Mandrake he has become an invisible ghost, the disguised revenger Isbrand pretends the physical blows he is offering are merely a transient, recently-discovered phenomenon: ‘Be patient: ‘tis only electricity’ (2.1.139).

The play’s death-drive might, paradoxically, contain the possibility of change. This, at least, is what one of the would-be revengers promises will follow in the wake of the murder he intends to commit:

All is ready now:

I hold the latch-string of a new world’s wicket;

One pull – and it rolls in.

(2.4.5-7)

The verse of *Death's Jest-Book* contains many such firecracker moments, metrically lively and animated by the yoking together of disparate levels of diction, in a way no verse dramatist since Otway had consistently been able to match. But Beddoes most strongly evokes a dramaturgy appropriate to 'a new poetic theatre that [draws] from the past, but which look[s] straight into the depths and disturbances of our own times' (as Tony Harrison would put it a hundred and fifty years later – 170) not in the play's expansion of the possibilities of the pentameter line, but in a seemingly throwaway jibe in the fool Mandrake's increasingly modern comic prose. Undercutting a grandiloquent sorcerer, Mandrake offers the most effective comment on his creator's formal inheritance:

ZIBA. An incense for thy senses, god of those,

To whom life is as death to us; who were,

Ere our grey ancestors wrote history;

When these ruined towers were in the rock

.....

Momus of Hell, what's this?

*Enter MANDRAKE from the Sepulchre*

MANDRAKE. [...] Excuse my disorder. And, conjurer, I'll give you a little bit of advice: the next time don't bait your ghost-trap with bombast and doggrell, but good beef: we live poorly in the dead line ...

Many of the play's explorations of temporal collision resonate strikingly with the arguments made in what remains one of the most influential accounts of the drama of the period. It is difficult to offer a reading of Romantic-era drama without first confronting head-on the influential, and pessimistic, overview given by George Steiner in *The Death of Tragedy* (1961). Steiner claims that the playwright in Shakespeare's time 'depended on the existence of a common ground; a kind of preliminary pact of understanding had been drawn up between himself and his society' (320). 'Shakespearean drama relies on a community of expectation,' but for Steiner, the 'nearly tangible awareness of a continuity between the human and the divine order,' and the 'sense of a relationship between the rim of private experience and the hub of the great wheel of being' on which this depends were irrevocably lost after the time of Milton (320).

In *Death's Jest-Book*, Isbrand alludes to the disconnect between the everyday world and the sense of the supernatural which, for Steiner, had begun to make verse tragedy impossible: 'Methinks that earth and heaven are grown bad neighbours, / And have blocked up the common door between them' (3.3.384-5). The play's 'ancient ghost[s],' lured back with 'bombast and doggrell,' chime eerily with Steiner's fiery assertion that the 'tragic poets of our own time are graverobbers and conjurers of ghosts out of ancient glory' (304). And despite the many highly effective lines and moments in Beddoes's text, it is hard entirely to refute Steiner's dismissal of 'the romantic imitation of Shakespeare' as a misguidedly 'close, deliberate imitation of language,' wherein otherwise skilled poets 'hung on their melodramatic plots and egotistical imaginings great streamers of words borrowed from Marlowe, Shakespeare, Webster, or Ford' (146-7).

Much of Steiner's argument can and, indeed, must be challenged, however, once we have truly pursued the social implications inherent in his imagined, lost, Shakespearean 'community of expectation,' which is in practice far from communitarian. After a century of neoclassical contraction, the canvas of drama was newly broadened as verse plays in this period began to make space for elements almost unseen since the days of Otway and Lee. Hazlitt notes that 'kings and queens were dethroned from their rank and station in legitimate tragedy or epic poetry, as they were decapitated elsewhere,' a social development which, along with its ironically exaggerated corollary, greatly expanded the potential of that tragedy to speak to and for a broad audience: 'regular metre was abolished along with regular government' (247-8). Margaret Cavendish, in the 1660s, had approvingly noted that 'Shakespear did not want Wit, to Express to the Life all Sorts of Persons, of what Quality, Profession, Degree, Breeding, or Birth soever' – and now, a hundred and fifty years later, a model for verse drama was returning which included prose interludes, comic roles, and characters in significant numbers from non-aristocratic backgrounds (177).

Though many plays continued to centre on distant, high status characters up until the end of the nineteenth century – Tennyson's *Becket*, performed in 1886, and Michael Field's *Fair Rosamund* (1884) both feature the disintegrating medieval court of Henry II – this focus was now tempered, following a Shakespearean model: 'Like Shakespeare, Tennyson brings in lower-class characters, beggars and country-people, to comment on the doings of the great, directing our sympathy towards those who are unjustly abused by the court and the barons' (Ormond 182). Plays by Byron, Baillie, Knowles, and Charles Maturin (the popular *Bertran*) foreground minor aristocrats, urban sophisticates, and in

Browning's (*Pippa Passes*) and George Eliot's case, middle-class artists, whose particular turmoil has localised rather than national consequences.

At either end of the period, Wordsworth's *The Borderers* features an extended speech by a poor rural beggar, who speaks at length on '[w]hat strong temptations press upon the poor' (Early version – 1.3.133), and *Fair Rosamund* gives considerable dramatic space to a dog-breeding forester and his family: George Lillo's *Fatal Curiosity* aside, these kinds of roles are totally lacking in most eighteenth-century verse plays. Coleridge's *Osorio* even ends with an avenging Moorish woman cast in the role of the voice of the people, and Baillie's *De Monfort* features a minor character with a professional complaint worthy of Willy Loman:

CONRAD. In plodding drudgery I've spent my youth,

A careful penman in another's office;

And now, my master and employer dead,

They seek to set a stripling o'er my head,

And leave me on to drudge, e'en to old age,

Because I have no friend to take my part.

(4.2)

It is striking, then, that Steiner's largely negative account of Romantic verse drama turns partly on the wider social shift underpinning this growing inclusivity:



In Athens, in Shakespeare's England, and at Versailles, the hierarchies of worldly power were stable and manifest. The wheel of social life spun around the royal or aristocratic centre ... Tragedy presumes such a configuration. Its sphere is that of royal courts, dynastic quarrels, and vaulting ambitions ... With the rise to power of the middle class the centre of gravity in human affairs shifted from the public to the private ... In the eighteenth century there emerges for the first time the notion of a private tragedy ... And private tragedy became the chosen ground not of drama, but of the new, unfolding art of the novel.

(194-5)

This argument requires Steiner to quickly skate over the 'small number of Elizabethan domestic tragedies' which might undermine it, and falsely assumes a stability of world-order which if true would have made Elizabethan plays quite dull indeed (195). A number of plays where the bases of power are directly disrupted and questioned, including tragedies of usurpation such as *Macbeth* and *Lear* and the works of Middleton and Webster which examine social climbing both destabilise this social hierarchy and suggest that some of the dramatic energy of the Renaissance comes from its very fragility.<sup>12</sup>

Steiner's sweeping statement also completely ignores the explicitly private tragedy aimed at by the likes of Baillie, and is clearly predicated on the problematic assumption that audiences in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries constituted a unique, and

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<sup>12</sup> I owe to Martin Wiggins the reminder that this is also the case for the theatre of Athens, given the numbers of surviving Greek tragedies which were written in the context of recent or contemporaneous war.

irrecoverable, ‘organic community’ (197). His resistance to the very idea that verse drama as a form might be able to sustain a shift from a high-status and public to a more middle-class and domestic sphere – setting aside firstly the inclusion of many domestic elements in Elizabethan drama, and secondly the fact that plays featuring more non-elite characters will almost by definition address a broader community than those focused solely on palace intrigue – is, however, of a piece with his comments elsewhere on verse, tragedy, and the subjects appropriate to both.

Declaring verse ‘the prime divider between the world of high tragedy and that of ordinary existence,’ Steiner asserts that ‘[t]here is nothing democratic in the vision of tragedy,’ wherein ‘[c]ommon men are prosaic and ... Kings answer in verse’ (241-2). The Shakespeare play he chooses to illustrate this claim is *Richard II*, which features ‘a royal poet defeated by a rebellion of prose’ – there is, in fact, no prose in the play, and its most notable ‘common men,’ the two gardeners, speak in fluent verse (242). Steiner argues that when men speak verse, they do not ‘concern themselves with the next meal or train timetables’ (243). In response, I note only that much of the dramatic tension of *The Merchant of Venice* comes from the scheduled arrival of argosies, discussed in verse – ‘Hath all his ventures failed? What, not one hit?’ (3.2.266) – and that the following two lines constitute one of the defining narrative shifts of *As You Like It*:

ORLANDO. I almost die for food; and let me have it.

DUKE SENIOR. Sit down and feed, and welcome to our table.

(2.7.103-4)

This is a wilful misinterpretation of the corpus of Shakespearean verse drama, which actively includes the corporeal – ‘the complications of material and physical need’ which animate, for example, so much of *King Lear* (243). It is especially frustrating because elsewhere, Steiner rhapsodises over the power of the prose in that play while not noting how such ‘complications’ also enter its verse – ‘Poor naked wretches, whereso’er you are, / That bide the pelting of this pitiless night’ (3.4.25-6) – and boundary cases such as Caliban’s ‘angry poetry’ (249) tie him in rhetorical knots. There is a kind of desperate gate-keeping at work, which praises the contributions prose makes to Shakespeare while firmly resisting the idea that the prosaic elements might have any place in the tragic verse.

Steiner bowdlerises Shakespeare in the service of an argument against the poet-dramatists of the Romantic era that ‘[c]ertain styles of action are more appropriate to poetic incarnation than others’ (244). ‘Sordid or familiar’ elements, for Steiner, dog poetry from the *Lyrical Ballads* onwards: but these, of course, also pervade *Hamlet*, with its obsessive focus on ‘the rank sweat of an enseamèd bed’ (3.4.82). This earlier sordidness is presumably, therefore, excluded from his dismissal of the apparently prosaic elements within post-Wordsworthian verse. Given that only a single female dramatist appears in *The Death of Tragedy’s* extensive index, Steiner’s attitude may carry with it some of the gendered assumptions that denigrate women authors like Baillie:

In contemporary verse drama, we see repeated failures to distinguish between proper and improper uses of poetic form. The recent plays of T. S. Eliot give clear proof of what happens when blank verse is asked to carry out domestic functions. It rebels. (244)

If *Othello* is ‘the tragedy of a hero who went into a house’ (Nuttall 4), for Steiner this movement is the tragedy of tragedy itself. Throughout *The Death of Tragedy*, his emphasis is on tragedy as a genre failing by ‘refusing to avail itself of the reach of prose’ to address modern contexts for which verse is apparently unsuited, rather than on verse itself transforming for this purpose (265). He argues that ‘the distance between verse and the realities of common action with which drama must deal is greater than ever before’ (310), but castigates Eliot precisely for attempting to bring his verse closer to the realities of common action, or to what Eliot himself called ‘the ordinary everyday world’ (‘Poetry’ 146). With this bias in mind, it is understandable that Steiner should utterly overlook the Romantic era’s own attempts to bend verse, and plays containing verse, towards a medium expressive of the concerns of a contemporary society.

I have already addressed the presence, and the powerful counterpointing and ironising functions, of prose in the work of Beddoes. Similarly, though Shelley’s fragment *King Charles I* is in many ways a patchwork of Shakespearean quotations, the presence of the prose-speaking court fool Archy allows for a plane of ironic commentary on the doomed aristocrats not available to eighteenth-century authors – as the King describes their relationship, ‘He weaves about himself a world of mirth / Out of the wreck of ours’ (1.2.107-8). And even where prose itself is not actually present, one significant trend in this period saw verse once again being used to fulfil what neoclassical authors understood as prosaic functions.<sup>13</sup> Wordsworth’s assertion that poetry can, and should, offer the ‘real language of men’ (*Lyrical Ballads* 184), is of a piece with Baillie’s declared desire to

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<sup>13</sup> One participant in Dryden’s *Essay of Dramatick Poesie*, Crites, asks ‘what is more unbecoming the Majesty of Verse, then to call a Servant, or bid a door be shut in Rhime?’ and is encouraged to exercise the same ‘diligence’ as Seneca, whose ability to make such commands ‘high and lofty in his Latin’ might offer hope for us all (17: 67, 17: 78).

‘know what men are in the closet as well as the field,’ (Introductory Discourse 18) as she and playwrights like her contributed to a general turn from formal public situations towards the investigation of private thought.

Baillie’s *De Monfort* provides a number of instances where the stuff of daily life is conveyed in iambic pentameter lines, shared or rapidly exchanged, which in accommodating the mundane concerns of a broader community lose much of their foreboding stiffness:

MANUEL. Where shall I place the chest you gave in charge?

So please you, say, my lord.

DE MONFORT. (*Throwing himself into a chair.*) Where’er thou wilt.

MANUEL. I would not move that luggage till you came.

*Pointing to certain things.*

DE MONFORT. Move what thou wilt, and trouble me no more.

(1.1)

The simplicity to which Baillie’s verse is open, and the fact its resources are also open to the play’s many domestic servants, might partially be explained by a reference she makes to Shakespeare in the ‘Introductory Discourse’ to her first volume of plays:

Shakspeare, more than any of our poets, gives peculiar and appropriate distinction to the characters of his tragedies ... Neither has he, as other

Dramatists generally do, bestowed pains on the chief persons of his drama only, leaving the second and inferiour ones insignificant and spiritless. (72)

This enlarged focus and attention to character distinction allows a sense of convincing malaise and conflict to emerge, as in this tense moment from the revised edition of *De Monfort*:

THERESA. Go you abroad to-night?

LADY. Yes, thinkest thou I'll stay and fret at home?

THERESA. Then please to say what you would choose to wear: —

One of your newest robes?

LADY. I hate them all.

THERESA. Surely that purple scarf became you well,

With all those wreaths of richly-hanging flowers.

Did I not overhear them say, last night,

As from the crowded ball-room ladies pass'd.,

How gay and handsome, in her costly dress,

The Countess Freberg look'd?

LADY. Didst thou o'erhear it?

THERESA. I did, and more than this.

LADY. Well, all are not so greatly prejudic'd;

All do not think me like a May-day queen,

Which peasants deck in sport.

(3.1)

Byron was uncharacteristically praised by Steiner (who never mentions Baillie at all) for the incorporation of similar prosaic elements into his verse. His belief that the salvation of drama will come from avoiding the 'gross faults' of the 'old dramatists' and 'writing naturally and *regularly*,' ('Born' 57) much as Dryden hoped to do and declared that Shakespeare had not, receives particular approval from Steiner (203). In commending the 'tough sparsity' of Byron's language, Steiner identifies it as coming 'near to a middle ground between verse and an intensely charged prose' (202-207). As such, Byron 'comes near to writing the only dramatic blank verse in the English language from which the presence of Shakespeare has been entirely exorcized' (206-7). In this context, Steiner notably avoids any mention of *Werner* — Byron's much-maligned, last completed play, a work which nonetheless took up a moderately stable place in the repertory after his death, and which constituted its author's closest approach to what Martyn Corbett calls the 'open "Shakesperian" form' (199).

Byron had previously identified Shakespeare as 'the worst of models' for would-be dramatic poets, 'though the most extraordinary of writers,' but eventually ignored his own advice to eschew Shakespeare's example ('Born' 152). Corbett, who asserts that '[o]f the

major English poets between Dryden and Yeats, only Byron bears the marks of a substantial dramatist' (xi), notes that in this particular text, by 'modif[ying] the strict unity of time' and 'integrating the comic with the tragic' (199) – both techniques heavily associated with Shakespeare – Byron's verse was able to display a 'fresh liveliness' (205). This new development is implicitly, for Corbett, geared towards the courting of a broader community of spectators and an evocation of contemporary concerns:

Until Eliot's time, no verse dramatist achieved this natural tone so easily ... It seems to me that in *Werner*, Byron was attempting, perhaps less self-consciously, but effectively, the very experiment in dramatic verse which Eliot was to attempt in his dramas: the choice and dignifying of a popular stage genre, the striving for a natural diction, elastic enough to cover the wide contingencies of a drama which aspires to present the actuality of living, suggests a striking affinity with Eliot's experiments. (205-6)

Along with allowing a more expansive reach, however, Byron's new-found naturalness and elasticity serves to effectively individuate the speaking style of the play's main comic character, Idenstein. From his first appearance, Idenstein's speech is marked by fatuous repetition and qualification: on learning the name 'Werner,' he remarks

A goodly name, a very worthy name

As e'er was gilt upon a trader's board;

I have a cousin in the lazaretto

Of Hamburgh, who has got a wife who bore



The same. He is an officer of trust,  
Surgeon's assistant (hoping to be surgeon),  
And has done miracles i'the way of business.  
Perhaps you are related to my relative?

(1.1.186-193)

Later, when this 'dull gossip' (1.1.195) discovers Werner's true identity as the dispossessed Count Siegendorf, his attitude to his employer's guest changes rapidly in response to his actual social position. On sight of a priceless family jewel, Idenstein confirms he had underestimated Werner's birth, though his acknowledgement of recognition is unashamedly addressed to the heirloom: 'this looks like it: this is the true breeding / Of gentle blood!' (3.1.313-4). Promising to help Werner escape his pursuers, he flits from topic to topic, distracted by the riches on offer:

I'll show thee I am honest — (oh, thou jewel!)

Thou shalt be furnish'd, Werner, with such means

Of flight, that if wert a snail, not birds

Should overtake thee. — Let me gaze again!

I have a foster-brother in the mart

Of Hamburg, skill'd in precious stones — how many

Carats may it weigh? – Come, Werner, I will wing thee.

(3.1.349-355)

Idenstein's gabbling speech, combined with his venality, contributes to a sense that his bourgeois presumptions are being set up as the subject of our scorn. With his ready equation of wealth and 'breeding' and his extensive family in trade, he highlights the degradation of Werner-Siegenderf from his inherited social standing. (Similarly, in Shelley's *The Cenci*, a murderer is invited to wear 'the mantle which my grandfather / Wore in his high prosperity' (4.3.51-2), as the aristocratic world of the eponymous family crumbles into ruin.) Idenstein therefore offers one answer to the question of how verse drama might incorporate the mercantile, middle-class world: as a force of destabilising comedy.

But though Steiner might relish the comic incompatibility of 'miracles i'the way of business' as proof positive of his argument that plays incorporating business concerns can have no room for the miraculous, his stigmatised character traits are what makes Idenstein's verse individuated, mobile, specific, and interesting to listen to. In allowing a figure like Idenstein to speak verse at all, Byron opens the aristocratic onstage community to new forms of tension, energy and challenge. This is also possible in large part due to the speaker's technical flexibility. Whereas other characters in *Werner* and, especially, the only play of Byron's produced in his lifetime, *Marino Faliero*, suffer from a tendency towards sentimental overreach which makes them seem unintentionally comic, the peculiarities of Byron's prosody are well suited to an explicitly comic style. Its formal idiosyncracies were even a feature of comment in the press of the day, illustrating that

metrical awareness still formed an active element of cultural discourse: according to the *Monthly Review's* sceptical assessment of *Werner*, alongside its 'unpoetic diction,'

we could cite above fourscore lines which terminate most unmajestically and unmetrically with propositions [sic], adverbs, conjunctions, or other monosyllabic "small fry" of language; cutting through a line most needlessly and barbarously, where no division ought to be made on account of emphasis or construction or sense, but because the foot-rule has been supposed to mark off a sufficient quantity of syllables (403)

All of these 'barbarous' elements can, of course, contribute to a greater feeling of naturalism – breaks in the eight and ninth position, creating anticipation and 'added emphasis' (as Abigail Rokison suggests, 181) around unimportant words, help to convey the flustered pettiness of *Idenstein*, even if they might in their furthest excesses tend towards prosaic dissolution. Unpalatable though they may be in Byron's presentation, these speech patterns show how close early nineteenth-century verse drama *could* come to the language of its own time, and lay down the gauntlet for later writers to channel similar reserves of energy.

Though Steiner does not comment on the role played specifically by metre in creating such dramatic effects, his argument that Byron should be linked to 'the classicism of Jonson and Otway' suggests another flaw in his overarching theory (203). How 'classic' is Otway, so often compared to Shakespeare, and so irregular in his metrical variation and his melding of verse and prose (203)? And at the level of prosody, Jonson as a dramatist, like Byron, is also extremely irregular – far further than Shakespeare from the ideal of classical smoothness. This matters because Steiner, in endorsing Byron's assertion that he

was producing ‘regular tragedies like the Greeks’ (‘Born’ 57) in stark opposition to the ‘Shakespearean precedent’ of English tragedy, implicitly ignores everything that is not at all neoclassical about his use of metre (Steiner 202). He thus offers a remarkably narrow and misleading view of how dramatic verse in this period – the vehicle in which dramatic conflicts are staged, and the medium in which onstage individuals and communities are brought into being – was working.

A view of nineteenth-century metrical form at once wider and more specific, drawing on Caroline Levine’s model of energetic collisions between forms which ‘provid[e] opportunities for new and emancipatory social formations’ (45), might allow us to observe more accurately the kinds of models and relationships these plays are exploring. Levine’s work challenges the argument put forward by Anthony Easthope that the pentameter tradition begun in the Renaissance and continued throughout the nineteenth century was inherently and problematically conservative. Easthope sees in pentameter a ‘universalizing, essentializing tendency’ which has helped it to settle into a ‘solid institutional continuity’ (487, 476). He quotes Brecht on how the “smoothness and harmony of conventional poetry” inhibits the showing of “human dealings as contradictory,” to argue that

Pentameter aims to preclude shouting and improper excitement; it enhances the poise of a moderate yet uplifted tone of voice, a single voice self-possessed, self-controlled, impersonally self-expressive, a tone which has retained its dominance in British culture since the Renaissance. (485)

In his diagnosis of the problem which a certain singularity of tone – though without the impersonality – posed for the development as dramatists of Byron, Shelley *et al.*, Nicoll might seem to echo this assessment:

All the romantic poets were individualists, one might almost say egoists. Rarely could they pass beyond themselves to see the world and men objectively. As a result, their heroes are themselves, and the figures set alongside those heroes are either mistily outlined or else coloured by the reflected light of the author's personality. (168)

We can challenge Easthope's critique of pentameter by pointing out that *effective* drama by definition will include more than 'a single voice.' Ewan Fernie puts it directly: 'in drama, poetry can only achieve a monopolising power in the context of [its] essential pluralism' (75). And as Wright has shown with regard to Shakespeare, the power of shared-metre verse drama inheres in creating a common backdrop against which variation can shine, within which the contradictoriness of human dealings can be clearly marked precisely because of the shared frame of auditory reference. The most interesting dramatic verse of the period foregrounds flexibility, variability, resistance – forces within individual characters which actively work against the 'unruffled smoothness, flowing eloquence, poise' which Easthope claims pentameter facilitates (487). The shared pentameter is defined dialectically against the force of character which ruffles its smoothness and disrupts its flow, creating the tantalising feeling that at any point a figure might give up on playing the game.

A tension between the metrically flexible individual striving for freedom – in Fernie's terms, an 'ever-new, inherently dramatic' quality (75) – and the demands of a social

system, expressed in shared-metre verse, is therefore central to the political potential of verse plays which follow in Shakespeare's wake. After the somewhat sterile conventionality of many eighteenth-century plays, where apparently opposed characters all speak the same restricted, decorous language, English verse drama for the first time since Otway was operating within a metrical landscape where it could be imagined that characters had a complex, unfathomed interiority, rather than operating as ciphers for philosophical or civic values:

There is something in thee,

The deeper one doth venture in thy being,

That drags us on and down. What dost thou lead to?

(Beddoes, *Death's Jest-Book* 2.4.129-131)

A renewed focus on unpredictable individuality dovetailed with the emergence of an occasional sense of genuine threat in the theatre, a menace made more powerful by a new confidence in the unexplained. This element has sources in the German and Gothic traditions, but Bate explores how Romantic-era poets especially valued the use of the supernatural in Shakespeare's plays, as a conduit to realms beyond the rational and a welcome expression of the free, wild imagination (9-11). Shakespeare had also begun to be read more psychologically, and this period sees Coleridge's influential diagnosis of Iago's 'motiveless Malignity' (12: 4: 862).

As such, apparently motiveless and definitely malign figures prosper in this period. Rivers in Wordsworth's *The Borderers* and the title character in *De Monfort* are both driven by

occluded urges to commit or enable acts of murder; in the oppressive worlds of *Werner* and Maturin's *Bertram*, apparently good characters turn to shocking violence. Though this strain might be dismissed as Romantic histrionics, there is a power in the new awareness that the psychology behind human actions can never truly be understood or explained:

That man was never born whose secret soul,  
  
With all its motley treasure of dark thoughts,  
  
Foul fantasies, vain musings, and wild dreams,  
  
Was ever open'd to another's scan.

(*De Monfort* 1.2)

In its Gothic trappings, this psychological opacity points forward to a modern theatre of menace. The sense that '[t]he venom of [the] mind is rank and devilish, / And thin the film that hides it' (*De Monfort* 1.2) – that a genuine violence underpins human social interactions, that the buried secrets of psychology might emerge destructively at any point – re-establishes a line which stretches from *Macbeth* ('Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,' 5.3.43) to *The Caretaker*. And as in *Macbeth* – 'Strange things I have in head that will to hand, / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned' (3.4.137-8) – Baillie suggests a connection between the inner promptings of 'foul fantasies' which lead individuals into irrevocable acts and external attempts at parsing poetic structure.

This comes in the form of a subliminal pun on 'scan': the kind Simon Palfrey, with reference to Shakespeare, calls 'semi-secret' to the character speaking it, but which

‘present[s] perspectives, judgements or consequences unacknowledged by the speaker’ (111). In this case, while De Monfort believes himself (and certainly desires to be) utterly cut off from all social engagement, never ‘open’d to another’s scan,’ his fantasy of impossible privacy – of bodily and mental impermeability – is belied by the fact that he participates in a network of speakers of the same, scannable metrical language who are thus in a sense intrinsically open to each other. Like Coriolanus, or indeed Antipholus of Syracuse (as discussed in Chapter Two), he cannot wholly wall himself off from others: in Levine’s terms, he cannot operate as an individual bounded enclosure because he is continually being drawn into a wider community, a network (see 117).

Baillie’s comparatively measured metrics might even enable rather than prevent this. Although her attempt to move drama into the private space of the ‘secret closet’ suggests this is the venue for the expression of true individuality, which in Baillie’s vision of drama would be constituted by a prosody ‘whose irregular bursts, abrupt transitions, sudden pauses, and half-uttered suggestions, scorn all harmony of measured verse,’ practice seems to lag behind theory (Introductory Discourse 31). De Monfort is constantly berating the servants to leave him alone:

Who follows me to this sequester’d room?

.....

Who bids thee break upon my privacy?

(4.2)



Yet in the few scenes where he achieves this isolation, harmony notably fails to break down: even here, Baillie's prosody is on the smoother, more conservative side for this period, with few syntactic breaks falling later than the sixth position in the line. We never reach the longed-for breakdown – perhaps in part because the persistent attendance of servants such as Theresa and Manuel, though they are not themselves developed into complex individuals, contributes significantly to calling the tortured lead back (despite strong objections) to what Wright terms, with regard to Shakespeare's poetic dramaturgy, his 'social and affectional ties' (138).

In this period therefore, developments in the presentation of individuality could interact with the newly-expanded affordances of shared metre in a variety of ways. If Easthope suggests that iambic pentameter is the 'Keep calm and carry on' of metres, it comes alive when individuals such as De Monfort resist the imperative and lose their cool; when Byron's Cain or Shelley's Beatrice dismantle traditional hierarchies within, and by pushing against, the boundaries of traditional form. Even more ostensibly conservative places could give space to clashing voices and agendas – in Mary Russell Mitford's *King Charles I*, for instance, Oliver Cromwell is the most metrically deviant, politically devious, and by far the most interesting character. Threatening to 'cleanse' the Commons in his favour, Cromwell offers a vivid extended metaphor, bolstered by trochees ('Winnow'), hypermetrical additions in midline ('consciencess') and spondees ('full grain,' 'foul corn'):

I would not that our just

And righteous cause lacked any form of law

To startle tender consciences. I have thought

Afore of this. Didst never see the thresher  
Winnow the chaff from the full grain? Good Colonel,  
Thyself shalt play the husbandman to cleanse  
This sample of foul corn.

(1.1)

In Cromwell's forceful speech, an apparently conservative drama gives its best, and perhaps its liveliest, poetry to an individual who embodies a potential radical counter-current to the established state of affairs.

More widely, the abandonment of Augustan metrical balance offered many opportunities for a genre predicated on conflict and disruption between members of an onstage community. Along with Byron, whose late syntactic breaks were present in 'dramatic poems' such as *Cain* as well as his more standard tragedies, Coleridge's *Remorse* drew comment from the *Monthly Review* for its 'occasionally irregular and inharmonious' versification (92). To suit his work to a contemporary community of spectators, the author is advised to imitate 'the pathos and the melody of Otway' rather than 'the nerve and roughness of the elder play-wrights, in order to become a dramatic ornament of his age and his nation': a remarkable comment given Otway's own frequent roughness (93).

Verse drama in the period, metrically speaking, charted a course between the comparable conservatism of Baillie, who inherited a largely eighteenth-century prosody but nonetheless increased its social and linguistic scope with a wider range of registers, and more disruptive authors like Byron, Beddoes (who makes heavy use of trochees and

spondees) and, perhaps surprisingly given her reputation as a conservative cultural presence, Felicia Hemans. All of these playwrights consistently exploited enjambment and syntactic breaks from the seventh syllable onwards.

This looser style, in keeping with conventional accounts of the general Romantic flair for disruption, is conceivably linked to the rediscovery of such authors as Webster. In any case, such prosodic techniques tended to overshoot what we might call the Shakespearean golden mean, resulting in a style closer to Donne than to Pope – that is, ‘between the most rigid and the loosest variants of the English iambic pentameter’ – if we consider the two extremes laid out by Marina Tarlinskaja in her work on Shakespeare’s metre and the ‘index’ of liveliness on which lines can be measured (333). It is therefore worth asking who, if any in the period, occupied the centre ground – an area much-contested (and sometimes lamented) in the political arena, but which, understood in metrical terms, has largely been more popular with theatre-goers than more extreme forms of prosody such as Webster’s or Jonson’s, as Tarlinskaja’s and Russ McDonald’s analyses suggest.

Perhaps surprisingly, *The Cenci* – the one completed stage-play by the revolutionary Shelley – demonstrates just this kind of metrical freedom within limits. *The Cenci*’s versification, like Baillie’s, consists mainly of whole, unbroken lines or lines with syntactic breaks before the sixth position. At points of particular energy, its breaks can also shift towards the end of the line – these variations are not ever-present, however, and do not overtake the prosody of the play as a whole. As such, though detailed stylometric analysis would be required to bear this out, Shelley’s work appears to approach more closely the effects of Shakespearean prosody than any of the plays I am here considering.

This is not a case of its content (more readily understood as pseudo-Jacobean), nor of allusion, though Bate has explored at length how the play's network of Shakespearean references rewrite *Macbeth* (210-19). Indeed, in modelling the murder of the tyrannical Cenci on the assassination of the more noble-seeming Duncan, Shelley goes beyond his source, allowing for a more radical critique of the existing order ('we want the murder to take place' – Bate 218) which turns to Shakespeare for its main authority. That evocation of precedent is at least partly deliberate: 'in the preface Shelley enumerates Shakespearean principles without continually citing Shakespeare as exemplar' (Bate 211). As such, it contributes to Bate's assessment that '*The Cenci*, by simultaneously rejecting and borrowing creatively from Shakespeare, comes closer to successful English poetic tragedy than any other play of the age' (221).

Shelley wrote that in 'the blank verse of Shakespeare ... there is no shelter for mediocrity; you must either succeed or fail' (1: 42) and in extending Bate's account, I argue that *The Cenci's* success is at least partly a matter of its Shakespearean formal approach. We will recall McDonald's description of Shakespeare's particular realisation of the affordances of iambic pentameter:

even when characters speak the most tortured and irregular poetry, the unruliness of the rhythm declares itself as an aberration, a temporary and exceptional violation of the normally balanced blank verse. (109)

This somewhat conservative prosodic poise, Tarlinskaja reminds us, makes Shakespeare's dramatic verse 'well within the norm of his epoch' and often 'less loose than that of his contemporaries,' with a more sparing use of late-line breaks and inversions which contributes to an overall smoother style (338). Her comments on Shelley illuminate the

comparison to be made: ‘The ictic stress profile in “The Cenci” is not unlike late Shakespeare ... [its] typical syntactic line segmentation is not unlike that in “Richard II” ... Both Shakespearean tendencies, earlier and later, occur in Shelley’s play at the same time’ (77). As such, though lines such as Cenci’s speech below may have a Marlovian tone, Shelley’s negotiation between proportion and variety results in a comparatively Shakespearean prosodic profile:

All men delight in sensual luxury,  
  
All men enjoy revenge; and most exult  
  
Over the tortures they can never feel;  
  
Flattering their secret peace with others’ pain.  
  
But I delight in nothing else. I love  
  
The sight of agony, and the sense of joy,  
  
When this shall be another’s, and that mine.  
  
And I have no remorse, and little fear,  
  
Which are, I think, the checks of other men.

(1.1.77-85)

Though this speech deploys a range of prosodic tricks – the spondaic anaphora of ‘All men’; the hypermetric syllable lengthening ‘agony’; the refocusing trochee in ‘Flattering’ –

its most effective moments are its simplest. Short, monosyllabic phrases in positions bearing particular emphasis – ‘I love,’ ‘and that mine’ – guide us through Cenci’s unwholesome psyche, which puts his individual desires utterly above the needs and the humanity of others. One chilling parenthetical insertion illustrates the full extent of this light-footed psychopathy: ‘Which are, I think, the checks of other men.’

Cenci’s daughter Beatrice also shares in this simple but effective prosody, regularly checking herself from meditating too long on her tortures with phrases in plain prose which are skilfully fitted into the verse line:

Oh! He has trampled me

Under his feet, and made the blood stream down

My pallid cheeks. And he has given us all

Ditch-water, and the fever-stricken flesh

Of buffaloes, and bade us eat or starve,

And we have eaten. He has made me look

On my beloved Bernardo, when the rust

Of heavy chains has gangrened his sweet limbs,

And I have never yet despaired – but now!

What would I say?

*Recovering herself*

Ah! no, 'tis nothing new.

(2.1.64-73)

The generally taut structure of these lines, which despite their spirited language are rarely out of reasonable compass, allows Shelley to show Beatrice's thought developing within her conditions of restraint. Her individuality is starkly curbed by her realisation that she has little option but to conform to the strictures of her father's own grotesque parody of reasonable steadiness: 'What is it that you say? I was just thinking / 'Twere better not to struggle any more' (2.1.53-4). In such speeches, we see 'the restless life / Tortured within them' (3.1.84-5) coming to its own conclusions under much stricter prosodic control than, say, the frequent outbursts of Otway's Jaffeir.

Bate declares the play's diction 'unusually immediate for Shelley,' and notes this as a particularly Shakespearean strength, along with the fact that 'the characters sound like human beings, interrupting each other or stopping in mid-sentence as a new thought occurs to them' (219-20). The contemporaneity and complementarity these aspects imply are perhaps the most profound proofs that the play has taken significant influence from Shakespeare's manipulation of the dramaturgical resources of shared-metre verse drama, with its continuous counterpointing of colloquial conversation and poetic grandeur, individual desire and formal restraint. There is, however, a significant absence of the drive towards social reintegration on which Wright's model of Shakespearean drama is grounded: '[f]or all the bleakness of *Lear*, at least some good characters are left at the end

to sustain the gored state; in *The Cenci*, however, the social order is seen to be wholly rotten' (Bate 217).

What holds *The Cenci* together is its careful balance between unspeakable abstractions and short, clear words in an effective order, alternating between iambic fluency and small, lively variations. The rhetoric of Shelley's play does, however, occasionally manifest a tendency, seen elsewhere in his poems' evocation of 'viewless' realms ('Mont Blanc' – 1: 545) and overwhelming in a 'lyric drama' such as *Prometheus Unbound* (2: 456-649), to turn from the concrete towards the abstract, a kind of defeatist sublime which reaches beyond the limits of representation. Beatrice grapples with 'deeds / Which have no form, sufferings which have no tongue' and an 'undistinguishable mist / Of thoughts, which rise, like shadow after shadow, / Darkening each other' (3.1.141-2, 170-2).

This aesthetics of the numinous, the eternal, the unsayable and the ungraspable, shared by many nineteenth-century poet-playwrights, has been criticised for vitiating the potential of much verse drama in the period to function as actually *dramatic*. That is, the moment-by-moment effects of dramatic presence are limited in a context where, as Beddoes perhaps unwittingly puts it, 'Eternity hath overshadowed time' (3.3.667). In *De Monfort*, unreal 'Things horrid, bloody, terrible, do pass / As though they pass'd not' across the mind of a murderer (4.3), just as 'things unseen, / Untold, undreamt of ... like shadows pass' over the grieving mind in Hemans's *The Vespers of Palermo* (1.2). The vagueness of these 'things,' though such meditation helps to create a fuzzy kind of individuality, situates them in an interior space beyond the realm of the play which the audience cannot access. If suffering is indeed 'permanent, obscure and dark, / And has the nature of



infinity' (Wordsworth's *The Borderers*, Early version – 3.5.64-5), how are we to engage with it in the finite space of theatrical representation?

Bate observes a 'generalizing tendency ... in the way the 'concept of "suffering" has replaced the verb "suffers"' in *The Borderers*, and argues that because 'abstract nouns lead to static meditation, verbs to dramatic activity,' this tendency is what 'marks most Romantic drama off from its Shakespearean prototype and makes it moribund' (92). A corollary of the increased interest in interiority and individuality in this period is that contemplation often takes over from action. Centring passive, private grief makes it difficult for playwrights to develop a heteroglossic plot driven by a bristling collection of separate wills, like the 'musical confusion' of Theseus's hounds (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 4.1.566) which Fernie takes as an 'acoustic image of the [volatile, clashing] politics of freedom that all Shakespeare's plays enact' (67). Grace Kehler makes this critique in specifically Shakespearean terms:

Not only do key characters often ponder what constitutes appropriate action in a difficult situation – a pervasive "Hamletting" of the nineteenth-century drama – but, additionally, the genre itself repeatedly returns to the issue of the relative virtues of contemplation and action. The verse drama, which achieved but moderate success on the Romantic or Victorian stage, positions itself somewhere between embodied representation and closeted thought, between public and private ... Exacerbating this position, many of the drama's protagonists understand themselves as profoundly isolated by their exceptional situations. (148)

Though I have not endorsed the idea of an intentional ‘closet drama’ here, many nineteenth-century authors certainly distrusted the theatre of their day, and consequently may not have expected their work ever to be acted: a state of affairs which might explain a certain tendency towards verbosity and expansion, and away from interpersonal conflict. Kehler notes that the ‘Hamletting’ which produces the contemplative quality of George Eliot’s *Armstrong* (1871) tallies with a deep anxiety over theatrical representation:

The title character, like the verse drama itself, ultimately confronts issues of reception: whether or not there is a place where she will be heard; and whether or not, having lost her original, operatic voice – in the case of the verse drama, the public voice of the stage – transmission will take place elsewhere. (148)

Indeed, by the latter half of the century, verse in the mainstream theatre had continued to decline from prominence, with even the most famous poet of the age, Tennyson, doing little to alter its reputation. By the 1860s, the assumption in theatre circles was that ‘Shakespeare spells ruin and Byron bankruptcy’ (Dobbs 125). This continuing decline has many causes, to which a brief conclusion cannot do full justice, but many have been touched on already, albeit considered in the context of more positive developments. An attempt to recover less conventional, formalised speech patterns by turning to Shakespeare, as Lamb hoped, could also lead to the new conventions of anachronism; a new-found sense of inarticulate interior turmoil, linked to character analyses by the likes of Hazlitt and Coleridge of the irrational Shakespearean self, allowed authors to gesture towards a distinctive individuality unknown in the metrically undifferentiated, stoic characters of the eighteenth century. This new individualism was now frequently audibly

marked against a shared metrical background, but could also prioritise thought and philosophical speculation at the expense of action.

Many developments which expanded the social and linguistic scope of verse drama in this period, and refreshed its metrical variety, would continue to resonate in the twentieth century. Though critics have often imagined a clear divide between the poetic practice of the nineteenth century and the next, these shifts laid the groundwork for more radical reorganisations in the period from 1900 onwards, where the idea of verse drama as a vehicle for addressing and creating community would be articulated more clearly than ever before. Nonetheless, many of the works discussed still feel out of keeping with their nineteenth-century contexts: perhaps, regrettably, in part because of the sense that emulation of Shakespeare alone – soon shading into overdependence and archaism – would help reinvigorate dramatic practice. As Mortimer comments in the early version of *The Borderers*:

That a man  
So used to suit his language to the time,  
Should thus so widely differ from himself –  
It is most strange.

(3.5.89-92)

The particular circumstances of the period lead to a number of tantalising ‘what-ifs.’ ‘Had he lived and continued to develop as a playwright, perhaps English verse drama might have been saved from a long dwindling to virtual extinction,’ Corbett wrote of Byron; the same might go for Shelley, and in previous periods, for Otway and even Marlowe (204).

We might also wonder how theatrical history could be different if many writers with genuinely novel dramatic imaginations, such as Baillie, Beddoes and Field – to whom I will briefly return in the next chapter – had been given as much opportunity on the contemporary stage as they seemed to receive respect on the page. But speculation aside, it is clear that the evocation of Shakespeare led many nineteenth-century verse plays into a curious blend of the contemporary and the retrogressive.

Shelley's channelling of Shakespeare turned *The Cenci*, as Jonathan Bate asserts, into 'a confrontation with the lion in the path' (211). Much verse drama of the period set itself a similarly unenviable challenge, and as a result, despite its many innovations, would eventually become the subject and the victim of much twentieth-century distaste. A survey of verse plays written between 1789 and 1900 suggests a consensus opinion that the lion could not be avoided entirely; but many playwrights in the next century were determined to find a way around Shakespeare. That these very different responses ultimately inspired their own opprobrium might, as we shall see in the following chapter, add a melancholic air to their hopes of transcendence.

Christopher Fry, whose poetic practice was built explicitly upon Shakespearean principles, as I will demonstrate below, knew *The Cenci* well. In a graduation speech in 1956, he referred (without explicit comparison) to a 'stuffed and preserved lion' on display in his 'school museum' which, though it had doubtless once possessed 'a thundersome roar,' was now 'hardly even the shape of a lion; it stared with glassy eyes, like somebody looking at an examination question; its mane was full of moths; it was a mockery of a lion' ('On Keeping' 123). But though Fry's plays themselves would not have been possible without the Shakespearean experiments of the nineteenth century, the lion

Shelley and his peers feared seemed in the next century to have lost its terrors.

Alternative ways of writing verse drama emerged in response — but as the lion-tamer

Reddleman states in Fry's play *Venus Observed*, 'it's a sad job to be parted / From the lords of the jungle' (4).

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## CHAPTER FIVE

### ‘THAT WARDOUR STREET ELIZABETHAN’S / WRONG FOR YOU’: ATTEMPTS AT A COMMUNITY, 1900-1956

ARTIST. The stars transfigured leave their lamps on high

And fill an earthly lantern – see, her hair

Hangs darkling round this novel constellation

Sparkling in eyes and lips...

But no,

That Wardour Street Elizabethan’s

Wrong for you, all wrong: forgive it

And all our blunders.

– Anne Ridler, *The Shadow Factory* (60)

Over the first fifty or so years of the twentieth century, a sea-change took place in the way people wrote, wrote about, and culturally received verse drama. Anne Ridler’s *Artist*, addressing a young contemporary factory worker, Maria, succinctly demonstrates the mechanics of this cultural rejection scene: three lines of conventional iambic pentameter, drawing on familiar poetic comparisons (stars to the female face) and archaic phrasing (‘darkling,’ ‘on high’) are dismissed as gauche and inauthentic. These poetic attributes collectively create an aesthetics which is backward-looking, fake, and no longer fit for purpose: the *OED* locates the adjectival form of ‘Wardour Street’ in ‘the pseudo-archaic

diction affected by some modern writers, esp. of historical novels,' etymologically linked to the London address 'formerly occupied mainly by dealers in antique and imitation-antique furniture.'

In the place of this anachronistic pastiche, the speaker offers something which implicitly will be 'right' for a community of contemporary listeners: an irregular line, with an alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables which is neither fixed nor predictable, and which, while dealing in unfusty language with a ring of modernity ('blunders'), nonetheless gestures towards a hinterland of penance and expiation: 'forgive it.' Ridler's revision of the methods of verse drama in this transitional moment thereby testifies to many of the concerns of what has been understood as the revival of verse drama in the 1930s and 40s, largely inspired by the religiously-informed interventions of T. S. Eliot into drama and dramatic criticism.

However, Irene Morra has recently demonstrated that the presentation of Eliot and the authors, rightly or wrongly, most often associated with him – including Ridler, Christopher Fry, and Ronald Duncan – as a singular, and implicitly unprecedented, 'verse drama revival' is a substantial flattening-out of the complex evolution of verse drama in the early twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> While modern criticism 'typically disregard[s] the verse drama of the first decades of the century entirely' (2), Morra notes that the predominantly Christian, Eliotic revival in fact had many forebears:

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<sup>14</sup> A figure often listed alongside these authors is W. H. Auden, with whose sweeping, Brechtian plays co-authored with Christopher Isherwood for the Group Theatre Eliot himself substantially engaged. However, the fact that their verse is primarily sung or choric rather than – as for all other writers I have considered – a vehicle for dialogue means that I have regrettably been unable to include these works.

Ten years before *King Lear's Wife* [by Gordon Bottomley, premiered in 1915 at the Birmingham Rep] was hailed as having initiated the rebirth of an English poetic drama, the commercial plays of Stephen Phillips had been associated with a similar rebirth. (8)

In this chapter, I will examine key figures in a number of movements concerned with rendering dramatic verse more appropriate to its own cultural moment, and demonstrate that such figures – from Phillips, to John Drinkwater, to Eliot – frequently defined their practice in direct opposition to the Shakespearean example. In Eliot's case, I will explore how this opposition was complicated by his own overt attempts to recreate a lost, organic community of the kind he himself associated with Shakespeare, in presenting the broad 'Elizabethan audience' as one 'to whose ears both prose and verse came naturally' ('Poetry' 133). By contrast, I will offer a substantial reading of Christopher Fry, as an author whose own explicit intentions to present 'the concentricity of things' and the web binding disparate individuals onstage give him a strong claim to be returned to the mainstream of theatrical, and Shakespearean, history (Fry, 'Why Verse?' 137). I will conclude by reflecting on the cultural shift in theatrical taste which took place after 1956, leading to the fall from grace of verse drama in general, and of Fry, the verse dramatist who once enjoyed the greatest public popularity of the period.

Phillips's, Drinkwater's, and Eliot's different but related philosophies of verse drama were not only a marked alteration from the course explicitly taken by many of their nineteenth-century predecessors. They were essentially a rejection of that model which, in its most stereotyped form, inhered in shared-metre blank verse with inescapable Jacobethan overtones which exhibited 'a fundamental indifference both to the dramatic qualities of

Shakespeare and to the urgent imperative of the contemporary stage' (Morra 23). Though this comment still recognises the value of Shakespeare, most reforming responses in the early twentieth century suggested

that breach could only be repaired with a deliberate movement away from the received idiom of Shakespeare and his Romantic and Victorian imitators, through the development of a more self-consciously contemporary drama in form, structure and subject. (Morra 24)

Criticisms of the verse drama of the nineteenth century – its 'static oratory,' its individualistic, undramatic, 'sentimental effusion' have been well-rehearsed, not least in my previous chapter (Morra 20). In this context, as the influential critic William Archer argued, '[w]hatever was least essential to Shakespeare's greatness was conscientiously imitated; his ease and flexibility of diction, his subtle characterisation, and his occasional mastery of construction were all ignored' ('The Drama' 565). The emergence, on the cusp of the twentieth century, of Stephen Phillips – a poet who, as a member of his cousin Frank Benson's company, had a working familiarity with contemporary theatre, and who openly declared himself to be rejecting Shakespearean models – was therefore welcomed by many of those who had all but given up hope for a verse drama revival. Archer himself, best known today as a translator and champion of the realist works of Ibsen, reflected in 1912 that

The great Elizabethan tradition is an incubus to be exorcised. It was because Mr. Stephen Phillips was not Elizabethanizing, but clothing a vital and personal conception of drama in verse of a very lyrical appealing quality that some of us thought we saw in *Paolo and Francesca* the dawn of

a new art. Apparently it was a false dawn; but I still believe that our orientation was right when we looked for the daybreak in the lyric quarter of the heavens. (*Play-Making* 395)

Phillips's early plays, including *Paolo and Francesca*, commanded large audiences. They were produced under the auspices of Herbert Beerbohm Tree, and in his own account, were founded on what their author identified as Greek principles, as followed by Corneille and Racine, rather than being Shakespearean in style. Whereas '[t]he poetic drama,' as Phillips wrote, had 'for two centuries been crushed beneath the weight of the Shakespearian ideal,' he would – like Byron – 'seek after unity of effect where the Elizabethans sought after multiplicity' (quoted in P. C. W. Frost, 111, 38). Many of the hyperbolic responses Phillips's plays inspired, however, showed little indication that his 'a deliberate rebellion against the Elizabethan tradition' was either noted or appreciated (quoted in Morra 30).

Frost, in the only book-length study of the playwright's work to date, gathers adulatory comparisons such as the following: 'not unworthy of the author of *The Duchess of Malfi*'; 'intensity which entitles it to rank with the works of Webster and Chapman'; 'Mr. Phillips is the greatest poetic dramatist we have seen since Elizabethan times' (9, 52). A summary of a discussion at the Manchester Literary Club of 1901 reveals the contested state of what it actually meant to turn-of-the-century audiences to write in an 'Elizabethan' style: 'where one critic had claimed Phillips "a disciple of the Elizabethans," another contended that he "has broken absolutely with the Elizabethan models"' (quoted in Morra 30-31).

Phillips himself observed, and regretted, this ambiguity as one born of unfamiliarity. His terms both recall Thomas Lovell Beddoes – with his focus on Shakespeare as 'the old



and only canon' (6) – and point forward to Peter Oswald's observations, in 2005, about the ignorance of critics (Gardner):

They assume as a matter of course that I am imitating Shakespeare and imitating him badly. All they know about the poetic drama being gathered from Shakespeare, they think every drama that is written in verse must be judged by Shakespearean canons and no other (quoted in Morra 30).

These protestations, of course, beg the question of how Shakespearean Phillips's work really is. His dramaturgy is largely observant of the Aristotelian unities, though containing many incidental Shakespearean echoes: it is hard not to hear *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, when a helpful apothecary appears in 3.1 of *Paolo and Francesca* (1900), or *Lear* in these lines from *Nero* (1906): 'Arise, you veiling clouds; awake, you winds, / And stifle with your roaring human cries' (3.4). But his verse itself – lush, bombastic, and iambic – situates itself in a tradition which dates back through the rant of Nathaniel Lee to the 'high astounding terms' of Marlowe (*Tamburlaine the Great, Part One, Prologue* 5).

Like Marlowe, and unlike the more polyphonic Shakespeare, Phillips relies on grandiose individual parts for lead actors rather than creating any strong sense of a wider community, and as such lends himself to the familiar critiques of individualistic Romantic solipsism – despite these plays' more developed dramatic sense. His poetry shares with Shelley's an easy movement, and a comparative simplicity of diction, alternating plain, mono- or disyllabic, and 'glorious' words for targeted effect:

NERO.

I'll not attempt

A second time that life the sea restored;  
  
She is too vast a spirit to surprise.  
  
Even Nature stood aloof –  
  
My mother shall be gloriously caged,  
  
Imprisoned in purple and immured in gold.  
  
In some magnificent captivity  
  
Worthy the captive let her day decline.

(3.5)

In the passage above, Phillips's grandiosity is fully evident, as is his regular use of metrical substitution ('Imprisoned,' 'Worthy') for varied dramatic effect. But though speeches such as the above convey Phillips's closeness to a familiar tradition of Victorian grandstanding, they might obscure the contemporaneity of other aspects of his approach. At the cusp of the century, what reads in one context as melodrama might read in another as the rather different intensities of Decadence, or even predict those of Expressionism. In keeping with its author's stated Greek influence, there is certainly an Oedipal resonance to Nero's speech in response to Agrippina's death, the spectre of Freud and modern psychology waiting in the wings:

I – I – her boy, her baby that was, even I  
  
Have killed her: where I sucked there have I struck

.....

Ah! Ah! the crude stab of reality!

I am a son, and I have killed my mother!

Why! I am now no more than him who tills

Or reaps: and I am seized by primal pangs.

(3.4)

The fluid pace of Phillips's largely monosyllabic verse might explain some of its easy mainstream appeal. However, the complex triangulation between his self-proclaimed classicism, his decadent aesthetics, and his engaged invocation of Robert Bridges's cutting-edge writings on prosody – in an exchange of letters about his own scansion to the editor of the *Star* newspaper, a correspondence which reminds us that in 1898, 'the metrical fancies of a modern poet could usurp one third of the front page of a daily paper on three occasions' (Frost 7) – suggests it would be unfair to dismiss him simply as an outmoded oddity.

Such complexity also applies to the plays written by the two female authors collaborating as 'Michael Field.' Kelsey Williams argues, with regard to Field, that '[r]ather than plotting a linear trajectory between late Victorianism and early modernism, scholars must analyze the literature of fin de siècle authors within the full context of all prior, contemporary, and subsequent literary movements' (140). Field's chequered reception history illustrates the danger of being positioned at such a historical and aesthetic crux: in

their unperformed *Ras Byzance* (1918), for example, knowingly archaic diction in a five-act blank verse structure co-exists with references to recent colonial wars, with expressions of intense psychological torment, with a modernist ambiguity over questions of character motivation, and with vivid, yet strangely aestheticized, descriptions of gendered violence. And their *Deirdre*, written in 1903, was rejected for the Abbey Theatre by Yeats, who only a year later began writing ‘his own play based on the same myth titled Deirdre, which shares formal, verbal, and thematic qualities with Field’s play’ (Williams 136).

But despite these similarities – or indeed, borrowings – while for Field ‘Shakespeare & the Elizabethans’ were ‘the only masters,’ Yeats commented that ‘when I wrote in blank verse I was dissatisfied ... there was something in what I felt about Deirdre, about Cuchulain, that rejected the Renaissance and its characteristic metres’ (both quoted in Williams 137). Yeats’s complex response to Field, in a draft review first published by Williams, first praised the poets as part of a ‘great dramatic rebirth’ capable of inspiring – as Aristotle demanded – ‘pity’ and ‘terror,’ then dismissed their work for, among other defects, containing ‘no ... mystery, no Hamlet, or Iago’ (141-2). Though Williams argues ‘in rejecting the Renaissance, Yeats implicitly rejects the British aesthetic tradition’ which so fascinated Field, his own critique shows the Renaissance could not be rejected entirely (137).

Yeats, Field and Phillips alike thus occupy a liminal phase in the development of English theatre. This kind of complexity at the turn of the century is entirely dismissed, however, by Donna Gerstenberger, who declares without nuance that

the prevailing pattern for the verse play – or, to take the more inclusive term, for the poetic play – remained much the same throughout the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, even into the revival of verse drama in the early twentieth century by such diverse figures as ... Gordon Bottomley, Stephen Phillips, and John Drinkwater. The stereotype which had developed called for an elevated and elevating style, a vague and often archaic diction, a remote scene, and unreal characters. (2)

It is, however, strange in many ways to see John Drinkwater and his contemporaries – a group loosely referred to as the Georgian poets by literary historians – as simply late Victorians rather than transitional or experimental writers, and to do so ignores the many dissimilarities between Phillips and these authors. Frost even groups together ‘dramatist-poets like Masfield ... Bottomley, Abercrombie and Drinkwater,’ as defining their practice *against* that of Phillips (139). Gerstenberger’s summary dismissal is nonetheless quite common. Though many early twentieth-century verse plays broke with previous tradition in a variety of ways, much of their distinctive innovation has been flattened out in the tendency for writers on Eliot and his contemporaries to dismiss the ‘Georgian’ verse dramatists as a monolithic bloc, the last gasp of a dying line.

Despite these homogenising comments, Morra’s work reminds us of the great variety within this loose grouping, and the widespread thirst for an artistic reinvention which also had a strong social dimension. Broadly eschewing Shakespearean models, ‘the poetic and dramatic impetus for the Georgians [instead] had strong roots in the nineteenth-century drama, poetry and theories of Yeats’ (8), who himself noted that ‘Shakespeare’s art was ... always public,’ but declared ‘if our modern poetical drama has failed, it is mainly because, always dominated by the example of Shakespeare, it would restore an irrevocable past’ (‘The First Performance’ 692). Considerations of space have compelled me, reluctantly,

to exclude direct discussion of Yeats's own work – produced primarily in an Irish context – from my account of the development of verse drama in the English theatre. I will nonetheless refer to his plays to the extent that they illuminate the practice of other dramatists throughout this chapter, given that, in Frost's terms, the Georgian authors who turned their back on Phillips's example 'seemed remarkable because they adopted new styles of poetic diction in their drama, influenced strongly by the success of the Irish' (139).

What Eliot called Yeats's 'mythical method' ('Ulysses' 178), and what William V. Spanos less charitably calls 'vague, wavering symbols of psychic states' (32), is a model drawing on the austere and the ritualistic, and has been presented as the starting point of 'modern' verse drama by critics including Gerstenberger and Denis Donoghue. But Yeats was also associated at the beginning of his dramatic career with a more demotic vision of the art, that 'gave particular impetus to English verse dramatists bent on establishing poetic drama as a communal ritual with its origins in oral tradition' (Morra 58). Playwrights such as Drinkwater and John Masefield, following in this path, were politically motivated by 'a collective instinct to explore the precedent of earlier traditions in drama, popular ritual and poetry. That instinct was never purely aesthetic, but rooted in a strong sense of community and egalitarian social politics' (Morra 73).

Therefore, although the 'dominant critical tendency' – informed in part by Yeats's own later work – now tends 'to associate all verse drama with the interests of an "irrelevant" and "coterie" theatre,' Morra argues firmly that this

assumption ... goes very much against the stated intentions of many of the most prominent representatives of the diffuse movement variously (and

sometimes simultaneously) invoked, imagined and mourned by poets, directors and artists in the first decades of the twentieth century. (62)

George Steiner, as discussed in the previous chapter, complained of those poets who failed to ‘distinguish between proper and improper uses of poetic form,’ indecorously using blank verse for what he belittles as ‘domestic functions’ (244) and ‘the realities of common action’ (310). By contrast, the egalitarian social politics of this grouping implied a necessity to find a verse style capable of doing just that. Drinkwater himself – warned by John Galsworthy that ‘the shadow of the man Shakespeare was across the path of all who should attempt verse drama in these days’ – describes his one-act verse plays as ‘attempts to find some other constructional idiom whereby verse might be accepted as a natural thing by a modern audience’ (vi-vii).

In so doing, he is attempting to recover the effects possible ‘in the days when verse was the natural speech of the theatre,’ whereby ‘its beauty, like the beauty of all fine style, reached the audience without any insistence upon itself’ (viii). The evocation of the lost audience who could stand a good deal of poetry is familiar from Eliot’s later pronouncements; the search for a new idiom aligns him with Phillips’s practice. And the fact that Drinkwater wrote these plays while in the employ of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre, then at the forefront of performance practice thanks to Barry Jackson’s pioneering productions of Shakespeare in modern dress (see Cochrane), suggests critics should think twice before dismissing them as entirely archaic and removed from the main thrust of theatrical history.

The plays themselves step far from nineteenth-century conventions in their formal structure. *The Storm*, for instance, is a one-act play structured wholly around the

uncertainty over whether the husband of a woman named Alice will return home on a night of bad weather. Talking herself through the imagined scene of his return, the man's wife speaks with a simple modern diction that very little verse drama in the nineteenth century could begin to approach. Her lines, though still roughly iambic, contain so many substitutions that they take on the light and easy character of natural speech:

If he should walk in now —

Yes, that's the way to think. I'll work it out,

Slowly, his doings from when he left the door

Until he comes again. You stood at the oven

With cakes half-browned against his tea. And I

Stood here beside my man and strapped his coat

Under his chin.

(101)

One member of the waiting group, Sarah, however, has a seemingly supernatural conviction that he has been killed, which she expresses with an insistence and a mysticism that would make little sense in a naturalist framework:

Age is a quiet place where you can watch

The world bent with its pain and still be patient,



And warm your hands by the fire because you know

That the newest sorrow and the oldest sorrow are one.

They will bring and put him down upon the floor:

Be ready for that, girl. There are times when hope is cruel

As a fancy-man that goes without good-bye.

(99)

When a stranger arrives at the door, praising the ‘beauty’ and speed of the storm, its ‘supple torrent of might,’ (107) we move further again from the original picture of precarious rural existence (‘the neighbours up and down / Were scared and went out searching with their lanterns, / Like lighted gnats searching the mines of hell,’ 102) into a plane reminiscent of Yeatsian elemental symbolism. The final announcement of the husband’s death has the effect of a ritual completed, familiar from Yeats’s shorter plays like *At the Hawk’s Well*, published some two years after Drinkwater’s work.

Two further one-act plays by Drinkwater, *X = 0* and *The God of Quiet*, obliquely address the futility of World War One – fulfilling his ambition for verse to address an explicitly modern audience – through the prism of abstracted mythic and classical settings. Their poetry has the grim certainty and balance of the writings of Wilfred Owen:

I have thought

Often, upon those nights when I have gone

Fatally through the Grecian tents, how well  
Might he whose life I stole and I have thriven  
Together conspiring this or that of good  
For all men, and I have sickened, and gone on,  
To strike again as Troy has bidden me,  
For an oath is a queer weevil in the brain.

(*X* = 0 149-50)

The comparative metrical flexibility of these plays, and the relative modernity and simplicity of their diction, stem, as do Eliot's later experiments, from Drinkwater's stated desire to circumvent the Shakespearean model. As such, the multiple differences between Phillips and Drinkwater, not to mention his own contemporaries and the writers who came after, suggest how far from certain it was that the eventual large-scale reinvigoration of verse drama would take the form it did, when considered as one among a number of competing models. The work of such authors, in promoting via poetic experiment some measure of theatrical renewal, would nonetheless ironically 'ensure its status as one of the dominant targets for the next movement of dramatic reform' (Morra 92).

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Like his Georgian forebears, T. S. Eliot 'identified verse drama as uniquely capable of both expressing and manifesting an essential communal identity' (Morra 117). He 'recognized that the social (and thus spiritual) role once occupied by poetic drama had

become eclipsed by more popular forms,' and 'rather than retreating into the exclusive salon,' aimed in his own words to 'appeal to "as large and miscellaneous an audience as possible"' (Morra 117). In so doing, he became one of many playwrights – dating back at least to Masefield – who restored a sense of religious context to contemporary drama in verse. He and the playwrights associated with and informed by his practical and critical interventions in the 1930s and 40s hoped to achieve this in part by writing verse plays which rejected traditional metrical forms, and oriented themselves increasingly towards the problems and the language of contemporary experience.

William V. Spanos has given the most sustained account of the theological motives underpinning many of these texts, arguing for a common origin point in Eliot's theories on the need to renew a shared, organic culture with its roots in Christian teaching. Spanos describes his plays as communicating the message that, thanks to Christ's sacrifice, 'man and nature are reunited with the transcendent from which they had been separated' (26). This is a 'sacramental' rather than 'empirical' vision of life in which reality and spiritual value are not opposed: instead, 'all objects in space (nature) and all events in time (history) are placed according to a universal scheme and given transcendent significance' (50). The verse play conceived of in this way could not, however, be historically removed, or in a style so overtly formal or archaic as to be cut off from the significance of earthly things.

These combined pressures – towards nature, and away from the historically remote – are both addressed in Eliot's own writings on the subject. Associated from his second play onwards with the Pilgrim Players, founded by Henzie and E. Martin Browne and 'committed to fostering and developing art and a collective sense of identity through

theatre' (Morra 11), Eliot believed he was actively working to address, and create, a unified modern audience:

If the poetic drama is to reconquer its place, it must, in my opinion, enter into overt competition with prose drama. As I have said, people are prepared to put up with verse from the lips of personages dressed in the fashion of some distant age; therefore they should be made to hear it from people dressed like ourselves, living in houses and apartments like ours, and using telephones and motor cars and radio sets. ('Poetry' 141)

The aim of the dramatic poetry called for here is that 'we should not be transported into an artificial world; on the contrary, our own sordid, dreary daily world would be suddenly illuminated and transfigured' ('Poetry' 141). As such, verse drama can both 'come to terms' with the 'ordinary everyday world' ('Poetry' 146) – where Steiner felt it was not welcome – and communicate the numinous 'fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus' which, though not explicitly so here, in the context of Eliot's other pronouncements comes to seem religiously inflected ('Poetry' 145).

Eliot looks entirely past the diverse experiments of the authors of the nineteen-tens and twenties to their Victorian predecessors, arguing that the failure of nineteenth-century poets as dramatists was

due largely to their limitation to a strict blank verse which, after extensive use for non-dramatic poetry, had lost the flexibility which blank verse must have if it is to give the effect of conversation. The rhythm of regular blank

verse had become too remote from the movement of modern speech.  
(‘Poetry’ 139).

Eliot’s response to this verse drama when he writes his own therefore skips thirty years of attempted metrical loosening to begin with an assumption we have already seen used by poets from Phillips to Drinkwater: that ‘the essential was to avoid any echo of Shakespeare,’ and particularly to avoid ‘too much iambic’ (‘Poetry’ 139). The goals behind this are not merely aesthetic, but also social. In striving for ‘the effect of conversation,’ Eliot is aspiring not simply to a workable dramatic technique but also to a broad public, the telephone-using masses alluded to in his other work (‘Poetry’ 139). This is part of the social ‘reintegration’ he apparently desires (see Spanos 20): a term which implies a previous, integrated state.

In Steiner’s terms, Elizabethan poetic theatre did address such an integrated society, but could only do so where ‘there is some context of belief and convention which the artist shares with his audience’ (318). For Steiner, the ‘Elizabethan stage had behind it an edifice of religious and temporal values on whose façade men had their assigned place as in the ranked sculpture of a Gothic portal’ (319). In aiming to reinstate such shared values, Eliot is thereby reaching after a model of unity associated with the lost, integrated, organic Shakespearean audience. But while George T. Wright finds such a unity within the worlds of Shakespeare’s plays, his description of Shakespeare’s model for human interrelations is undeniably social at least as much as it might be divinely ordained.

By contrast, the engagement underlying Eliot’s view of community is, broadly speaking, spiritual rather than social – though Spanos accurately identifies a recurrent theme in Eliot’s plays whereby characters, from Harry Monchelsey to Edward and Lavinia

Castlemayne, come to recognise and make peace with their place in the fallen world, through their interactions with others (220-4). Nonetheless, in this context, Eliot's break with traditional metrics poses a further problem for the apparent objectives of his verse drama. If the common poetic basis available to Shakespeare's verse speakers is essential to the establishment of its world order, as Wright believes, Eliotic verse drama might always be partially hampered by not being able to avail itself of the poetic line which, for Wright, is uniquely suited to the kind of community-building for which Eliot strives.

The verse used instead in Eliot's plays has been presented, not least by Eliot himself, as a similarly logical and internally coherent system. After the heavily choral, *Everyman*-inspired *Murder in the Cathedral*, which its author felt had the 'negative merit' of being 'committed neither to the present nor the past,' he determined to pursue 'a rhythm close to contemporary speech, in which the stresses could be made to come wherever we should naturally put them, in uttering the particular phrase on the particular occasion' ('Poetry' 139, 141). In metrical terms, this was realised in

a line of varying length and varying number of syllables, with a caesura and three stresses. The caesura and the stresses may come at different places, almost anywhere in the line; the stresses may be close together or well separated by light syllables; the only rule being that there must be one stress on one side of the caesura and two on the other ('Poetry' 141).

It is remarkable how little critics, responding to this passage, have considered its implications for the actor. Denis Donoghue, in clarifying how such lines might be scanned in practice, indicates some of this model's inherent challenges: stresses, in his reading, rest somewhat arbitrarily on personal value judgements of what 'rhetorical

emphases' are considered to be inherent in a phrase, and of how an actor might speak a line most 'sensitively' (173). Donoghue scans Alex's speech from *The Cocktail Party* as follows:

Áh, | | in thát case I knów what I'll do.

Í'm going to gíve yóu | | a little surpríse;

You knów, | | I'm rather a fámous cóok.

Í'm going stráight | | to your kíchen now

And I shall prepáre you | | a níce little dínner

Which you can have alóne. | | And thén we'll léave you.

Méanwhile, | | you and Péter can go on tálking

And Í shan't distúrb you.

(132)

Suppose, however, that I were to offer this alternative scansion:

Áh, | | in thát case Í know what I'll do.

I'm góing to gíve you | | a little surpríse;

You knów, | | I'm ráther a fámous cook.

I'm going stráight | | to your kíchen nów

And I shall prepáre you | | a nice little dinner

Which you can have alóne. | | And thén we'll léave you.

Méanwhile, | | you and Péter can go on tálking

And I shán't distúrb you.

Many of these shifts in emphasis strike me as uncontroversial, conforming more than adequately to the rhythms of normal speech, but my understanding of what reading is 'most appropriate' still manages to contradict Donoghue's on five of the eight lines quoted (133). If 'the primary aim is to allow the rhythm to participate as fully as possible in the tone of the lines,' the fact that there is scope for this amount of disagreement over what the rhythm is doing strikes me as a potential stumbling block for actors and directors (133). Donoghue's own critical comments on Christopher Fry's work, wherein he finds 'the responsibilities of the verse-dramatist to the actor' – namely, that a 'pattern of sound [should] exist and be readily ascertainable,' inherent in 'the mechanical properties of the words' – to be wholly lacking, are therefore somewhat remarkable (237). In eight lines, we have ascertained two largely different patterns.

Critics such as Meredith Martin and Eric Griffiths have cautioned against the dangers of assuming any understanding of metre is fixed and objective, and my intent is not to set up the unassailable Shakespearean pentameter against the tenuous Eliotic line. Actors of Shakespearean pentameter often face choices over which words to stress: nonetheless, the regularity of intervals between stresses *as an underlying rule* makes these choices easier: is the effect to emphasise continuity, or variation and disruption? A discussion of 'iambic pentameter' in a Shakespearean speech presupposes that we know what measures of



order and disorder we are looking for. References to ‘blank verse,’ the proper placement of ‘accent,’ and the expectations implied by the ‘drumming decasyllabon’ date back to the period of composition and make interpretive sense in the present day (C.f. *Hamlet* 2.2.270 and 3.2.24 and Nashe 312). But as Donoghue himself recognises, unlike Shakespeare’s, ‘Eliot’s verse line cannot utilise the “promotions” or “suppressions” of the stress levels of normal speech possible by means of the pressure of an established metrical pattern’ (172).

As such, Eliot’s verse seems likely to be encountered mostly by actors with no sure technical footing beyond the strictures laid down by its author in a secondary text, explicated by critics like Donoghue at a further remove. If the ‘correct’ stress placement required to speak it is reliant on a third-party cribsheet, Eliot’s dramatic poetry does not have the hallmarks of a self-sufficient mnemonic system. None of this implies that Eliot’s plays are bad, *per se*, as either dramatic or poetic writing, but it is hard to imagine dramatic verse of such ambiguous structure being capable of what Wright posits as the logical outcome of skilled usage of the shared pentameter, which Eliot also seems in part to desire: a ‘world-view of continuing reciprocal engagement and mutual responsibility’ which adds up to a greater harmony (Wright 259).

Perhaps the clearest justification for this stylistic decision, which sacrifices the opportunity to establish a community legible in metrical terms, is Eliot’s search for a poetics ‘with nothing poetic about it ... a “mean” verse style from which he could, when necessary, rise’ (Donoghue 135). The course of Eliot’s dramatic career suggests this was achievable, but as the tendency of less favourable critics to relineate his later dramatic verse into prose have shown, elements of form and rhythm were liable to fall before it. The test of the

success of this principle might be in considering what Eliot's dramatic verse rises to, and whether, as his essays make clear that he intended, it is able to take us with it.

Discussing the quite different metrics of Eliot's poems, Philip Hobsbaum identifies a 'free *blank* verse' which matches 'the associative habit, which is characteristic of American poetry, to the rhythms of the Jacobean drama' (97). He calls this union 'extraordinary ... if we reflect that the drama depends on defined plot and is in other ways different from Eliot's craft of impressionistic monologue' (95-7). This undramatic monologue may, however, be what we recognise in the elements of Eliot's plays which approach the 'higher' style, as in this notorious passage from *The Family Reunion*:

What I see

May be one dream or another; if there is nothing else

The most real is what I fear. The bright colour fades

Together with the unrecapturable emotion,

The glow upon the world, that never found its object;

And the eye adjusts itself to a twilight

Where the dead stone is seen to be batrachian,

The aphyllous branch ophidian.

(308)

According to Donoghue,

Here Harry moves in and out of character, and the weakness of the lines may be described in these terms. Harry's feeling bears *some* relation to a dead stone which is batrachian and to an aphyllous branch which is ophidian, but we cannot believe that the feeling is *like* these words, or that these are the words in which it naturally issues. (97)

The alterations to the metre of dramatic verse which Eliot instigated were intended partly to make way for a seamless transition between the language of everyday life and the 'fringe of indefinite extent' related to spiritual feeling. It is hard, however, to see how anyone listening to these words in the theatre might recognise in them 'the effect of conversation' or 'the movement of modern speech' ('Poetry' 139), or experience anything like the revelation Eliot avowedly hoped that future verse dramatists following in his wake would offer their audiences:

What I should hope might be achieved, by a generation of dramatists having the benefit of our experience, is that the audience should find, at the moment of awareness that it is hearing poetry, that it is saying to itself:  
"I could talk in poetry too!" ('Poetry' 141)

If Eliot believed that 'we have to accustom our audiences to verse to the point at which they will cease to be conscious of it,' passages such as the above suggest a pretty steep learning curve ('Poetry' 134). Though Donoghue's somewhat charitable critique here is that '[t]he audience has no means of knowing at what point the "speaker" is superseded by the dramatist,' any spectator familiar with Eliot's style and concerns will be in no doubt about what has happened (98).

Having avowedly learned from such moments, in his next play, *The Cocktail Party*, Eliot claims to have

laid down for myself the ascetic rule to avoid poetry which could not stand the test of strict dramatic utility: with such success, indeed, that it is perhaps an open question whether there is any poetry in the play at all.  
(‘Poetry’ 144)

Following Eliot’s use of ‘poetry’ to mean something like the ‘high style’ to which everyday language can rise, we are encouraged by its author to consider *The Cocktail Party* as a verse play in which the language itself rarely, if ever, rises above the commonplace, and where, as I hope I have shown above, the existence of a clear governing rhythm to be engaged with by actors and auditors is also an open question. One conclusion from this might be that we are no longer actually talking about poetic drama. This would, however, be to ignore the other elements which set this play apart from prose. It is perhaps in repetition, anaphoric and isocolonic, that Eliot’s dramatic verse has tangible shape, rather than the rhythm of stressed syllables as conventionally understood.

Such devices appear clearly in the speech of Celia, on the brink of a spiritual journey whereby she will ‘undergo [suffering] / On the way of illumination’ (421):

I have thought at moments that the ecstasy is real

Although those who experience it may have no reality.

For what happened is remembered like a dream

In which one is exalted by intensity of loving

In the spirit, a vibration of delight

Without desire, for desire is fulfilled

In the delight of loving. A state one does not know

When awake. But what, or whom I loved,

Or what in me was loving, I do not know ...

(417)

This seems to me like a more than adequate demonstration that there *is* poetry in the play, but the changes rung on the words whose repetition gives the passage its heightened feeling — ‘real,’ ‘loving,’ ‘delight,’ ‘desire’ — are circular rather than progressive.

Donoghue defines dramatic verse as motivated by ‘nothing as tangible as diction or syntax or versification, but rather a bias ... toward the fulfilment of a form whose completion lies ahead,’ but in the chiasmic ballet of ‘intensity of loving / In the spirit, a vibration of delight / Without desire, for desire is fulfilled / In the delight of loving,’ I find it difficult to discern the necessary ‘force which presses *forward*’ (265).

Such passages read, instead, as the dramatic equivalent of Eliot’s aesthetic quest for the ‘still point of the turning world’ (‘Burnt Norton’ 175). Their gyroscopic interiority (in what is, after all, supposed to be a duologue, a psychiatric consultation), offers little advance on the ‘generalizing tendency’ noted by Jonathan Bate in the Romantic-era drama Eliot intended to set himself against, whereby ‘abstract nouns lead to static meditation’ and ‘the ‘concept of “suffering” has replaced the verb “suffers”’ (92). Whereas in Wordsworth’s *The Borderers* ‘[a]ction is transitory’ but ‘[s]uffering is permanent’ (3.5.61-5), in a much-

quoted line from *Murder in the Cathedral*, Eliot's drama takes a further step away from the sources of interpersonal conflict:

I shall no longer act or suffer, to the sword's end. (259)

The logical next step would be to ask: 'What else is there?' For Eliot, however, the answer is clear: the world beyond. As Celia declares in *The Cocktail Party*, 'I have no delusions — / Except that the world I live in seems all a delusion!' (413). Though the sacramental aesthetic apparently informing his plays aims to assert the importance of the things of what Eliot calls the 'ordinary everyday world' ('Poetry' 146) in the light of their place in a larger, divine scheme, Donoghue has identified 'Eliot's innate distaste for the Common Man' (245) who lives in that world. Spanos, furthermore, compares Eliot's theology to the *via negativa*, whose exponent 'achieves union with ultimate reality through the rejection of created things, the images of this world' (46).

In Eliot's verse plays, the quotidian seems really to matter very little, except as a conduit through which to reach ordinary everyday people and 'entice' them into a consciousness of what lies beyond it (Donoghue 114). Celia is told that her 'other life,' her life as a carefree party guest before being 'reconcile[d] to the human condition' through suffering, 'will be only like a book / You have read once, and lost' (418). The plays as a whole are primarily concerned with asking, as does Lavinia in Act 3 of *The Cocktail Party*: 'Is there anything you need / That you can't find in the kitchen?' (424) And indeed, Michael J. Sidnell asserts that this spiritual turn curtailed the form's burgeoning political possibilities: 'Under Eliot's influence, "poetic drama," as it was so infelicitously called, acquired utterly un-Brechtian connotations and an odour of sanctity' (151), implying for Morra 'a conservatism that is both aesthetic and social' (121).

This drama's persistent focus on 'a world elsewhere' (*Coriolanus* 3.3.135) – to quote the avowedly elitist Shakespearean protagonist who Eliot found most fully realised (see 'Hamlet' 84-5) – impacts upon its ability to manifest dramatic action. Eliot ruefully notes his eventual determination to 'keep in mind that in a play, from time to time, something should happen' ('Poetry' 144). But in outlining the plots of his first three plays, Gerstenberger acknowledges that *Murder in the Cathedral* poses 'difficulties of ... action (or lack of it),' that *The Family Reunion* 'fails for lack of a formal embodiment of significant action,' and that *The Cocktail Party*, more successfully, is governed by a 'general circular pattern' (50, 61, 65). Her description of the main focuses of interest in *The Cocktail Party* is instructive:

The restoration of Lavinia to Edward has objectified the cyclical nature of the play, as she is reborn to him ... when he, through self-knowledge, is prepared to receive her. On their level of action, the second cocktail party is a celebration of a communal victory (by nature partial) complementing Celia's lonely spiritual triumph through rebirth into Vocation after the death of the former self. Her actual physical death prefigures a final transformation both in a Christian context and at the final cocktail party where an epiphany occurs as the other characters are forced to bring their understanding of her nature into agreement with their new knowledge of her sacrificial action. (65-66)

In this lengthy explanation of internalised, personal and collective psychological change, Gerstenberger demonstrates precisely how Eliot's explorations 'lose the name of action' (*Hamlet* 3.1.89). Celia's 'actual physical death,' as in a Greek tragedy, even happens

offstage. There is, as Spanos has established, a plot trajectory in all of Eliot's works for the stage, but its trend in large part is, perhaps predictably, from naturalism towards the realisation of the sacramental aesthetic. In their project of bringing each protagonist 'into awareness of the paradoxically benign nature of his condition,' and into a reintegrative 'recognition of Incarnation which redeems sin,' there is not a clear, inherent forward motion (194).

This trajectory towards a penitent acceptance of pre-existing design does, however, reach outwards to the audience, whom Donoghue claims Eliot is 'hoping to entice ... into drama, into consciousness, and perhaps even into spirituality by offering them something which from a distance looks familiar. The trap is prepared with great subtlety' (114). In similar terms, Ted Hughes declares on the back cover of the Faber paperback edition of *The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot* that '[e]ach year Eliot's presence reasserts itself at a deeper level, to an audience that is surprised to find itself more chastened, more astonished, more humble.' Given these credentials, the comparative neglect of Eliot's plays in the present day seems unsurprising: how many people go to the theatre to be chastened or entrapped?

Another central factor in their decline from prominence, of course, is the restricted nature of their social canvas: although Eliot's 'ideas are rooted in what he identifies as a universal spiritual reality,' he 'positions that reality exclusively in relation to the experience and rituals of the very social class whose legitimacy would be so overtly challenged by the Angry Young Men of the English Stage Company' (Morra 164). Having 'aimed to meet his audience on what he identified as its own terms,' developments later in the 1950s suggested that the 'contemporary social realities represented by the conventional drawing-



room drama were no more relevant to the “world in which the audience lives” than those of “some imaginary world” (Morra 159).

Before this paradigm shift, however, Eliot’s approach to the drama became inseparably associated with the poet-playwrights grouped around London’s Mercury Theatre, which operated as a testing ground for new verse drama around 1945-6: these included Anne Ridler, Ronald Duncan, and a significant outlier in Christopher Fry. Ridler’s best known play, *The Shadow Factory*, was held by Raymond Williams to be a curious hybrid, ‘the versification of naturalist drama’ (259). Spanos critiques Ridler’s somewhat ungainly leap into ‘liturgical verse’ as her play’s ‘naturalistic surface is transfigured’ towards its close in a familiar sacramental shift, but the verse up to this point is largely lucid, natural and effectively contemporary in feel (266, 257). Unlike the wealthier and thus somewhat heightened social world of Eliot’s plays, with their three-act drawing room comedy structure, the setting – ‘A factory, a year or two after the war’ – is convincingly related to the ‘ordinary everyday world.’ The play even opens on two factory workers’ concerns about their career prospects:

2<sup>ND</sup> GIRL. Put it on his desk, and let’s get back,

I know we’ll catch it for coming here.

1<sup>ST</sup> GIRL. They *sent* us up. And anyhow

I don’t give nothin’ for what they say.

What can they do?

2<sup>ND</sup> GIRL. Give us the sack.

1<sup>ST</sup> GIRL. Soon get another job just as good.

*(She puts note down on desk.)*

2<sup>ND</sup> GIRL. Or just as bad. We'd best go back.

(1)

Their dialogue, resolutely unelevated as it is, retains the rhythms of natural speech while subtly heightening them with unobtrusive repetition and occasional rhyme. The factory's Director's speech is closer to the traditionally poetic, but his metaphors are also frequently drawn from the specifics of contemporary industry, which he proposes as a model of collective harmony:

So many pairs of hands and eyes

Moved in concert toward one purpose.

Bars and belts in smooth agreement.

Beauty – what is it if not the perfect

Means to an end?

(9)

The mechanistic interrelation which he evokes is a far cry from Wright's aesthetic of mutual obligation, and at times strikes the note of an Eliot more attuned to the machinations of contemporary politics:

The single pivot on which depend

Such huge rotations; the single stone

Stirring watery circles, vast

In ratio to the original movement —

That is the clue to modern power...

(8-9)

The play as a whole, however, moves beyond utilitarian views of progress to critique the belief that '[a] man needs nothing beside himself any more' (14). In its place, Ridler offers not only a religious, sacramental model of connection, but a socialist riposte to contemporary labour practices. Her script addresses 'tight' piecemeal working rates (27), 'the emancipation of women from slavery' (20), and, powerfully, 'Refugees without a refuge ... Dying of frost in a warm world' (62). Work and worldly comforts alone are insufficient to solve the world's problems:

Let him provide us all with work,

Refrigerators, leisure, sex —

The worm devours the apple still:

A bloody world, and bloody still

Do what you will.

(25)

A redistribution of wealth is nonetheless recommended. The factory's Director, persuaded to perform as a King in the closing Nativity play, must 'lay down' the gold which symbolises his power and learn to 'give' with regard to his co-workers (55). And where religion is evoked explicitly, its tendency towards retrogression – unlike, perhaps, Peter Oswald's verse-speaking Roman delegation – forms part of a realistic engagement with the contemporary world:

The Church must turn the world back –

An endless task, endlessly attempted –

Only, she works within conditions:

Since she cannot undo the past,

Making the best of a bad job

She works on what she finds.

(44)

While questioning materialistic assumptions and extolling a Christian perspective, *The Shadow Factory* shows no contempt for the things of this world and demonstrates a social conscience engaged with the economic conditions of post-war Britain. It fulfils many of the conditions for a successful contemporary verse drama proposed by Eliot to which Eliot himself seemed temperamentally unsuited. It also advocates, much more clearly than his own work, the kind of community of mutual obligation which Wright finds so

fully embodied in Shakespeare, and speaks eloquently to the need for a sense of the communal in this world to unite Ridler's alienated factory workers.

Its verse, availing itself of a contemporary diction quite effective in the more naturalistic stretches, in its 'higher' reaches leans somewhat heavily on the Eliotic model, and transitions between these aspects are often abrupt rather than gradual. The lack of a shared metrical pattern makes it harder for the play to convey formally the sense of dynamic exchange, and the greater harmony made possible by a grounding in mutual terms, for which its subject matter seems to strive. Overall, however, Ridler suggests one of the more convincing models for a metrically irregular verse drama fully engaged with ideas of community in the contemporary world, even as she follows Eliot's lead in moving explicitly beyond its secular aspects.

Despite *The Shadow Factory* having entered into what might be considered (however now neglected) the canon of mid-twentieth-century verse plays, one dramatist among the group whose work debuted at the Mercury Theatre had a far more substantial impact upon contemporary audiences. Breaking out beyond the little-theatre coterie to West End commercial success and widespread acclaim in the national press, at one point, in 1950, Christopher Fry had four plays running simultaneously in London, one of which was commissioned for a star turn by Laurence Olivier, perhaps the leading actor of his day (see Pryce-Jones 57). To understand what about Fry's work made this breakthrough achievement possible, we must first establish how substantially it departed from the model proposed by Eliot with which it is often unfairly grouped.

Critics, some more favourably inclined than others, have compared Fry's work to a variety of dramatists. Alongside comically and socially-inclined prose writers such as Shaw and

Wilde these include Beddoes, Marlowe, and his contemporary Charles Williams (see Emil Roy 5, Williams 262). As Morra writes, anticipation in the 1940s of a “new Elizabethan age” to be manifest in the cultural expressions of new Shakespeares, Marlowes and Sidneys’ promoted the work of verse dramatists currently working to a ‘fleeting ... centrality ... within mainstream discussions of a contemporary dramatic tradition’ (143). Arrowsmith identifies in Fry ‘the same verbal impatience’ as in Marlowe: ‘the same laddering effects toward an overall tonal roof, and the exuberance and extravagance of the autonomous language which is only an extension of the theme itself’ (208); unlike Marlowe’s, Fry’s protagonists always learn before it is too late the limits of their reach and understanding.

But Fry achieved prominence within this conversation, I argue, partly because his own model, more than that of any author considered above, is in fact implicitly and explicitly Shakespearean in a number of key aspects. It is his rich and surprising language which is not (as with, for example, Beddoes or Middleton) predominantly pessimistic, his blended tragicomic view of the world, and his holistic appreciation of the myriad-minded diversity of life, which go some way to explaining the comparison often made in Fry’s heyday to the most influential of all verse playwrights. As Emil Roy puts it,

reviewers in the daily press were ecstatic in their praise of Fry as a contemporary Shakespeare. The academics also saw the parallels, but found them more to Fry’s discredit. He had either slavishly imitated the weaker plays or the superficial traits of Shakespeare, they felt, or he had utilized stage conventions which were outmoded or inappropriate: the

Elizabethan wit-combats, bombast, passages of exuberant invective and wordplay. (3)

Morra's more recent analysis identifies in Fry 'an overtly poetic expression clearly informed by preceding traditions' which are 'rooted in an ideal of the public, the popular and the community' (169). She notes that Fry specifically 'aligns his embrace of a buoyant, non-realist idiom with that of Shakespeare, a poetic dramatist to whom overt allusions in verse drama had been conspicuously absent since the initial re-workings of Bottomley' (169). Fry's idiom, for James Woodfield, is 'structured in language and patterns of action which both exemplify unity and reach for ontological meaning in terms of a vision of a unified universe' (ii). This suggested, in Morra's terms, a 'reassuring continuity' in 'a post-war Britain marked by austerity, increasing debates about modern(ist) culture, urban renewal and mass technology' (167). Its premises 'depended upon an essentially absolute, traditionalist ideal of music (and art more generally) rooted not in discordant modernity or jazz improvisation, but rather in an ideal of order, structure and harmony' (Morra 167).

This harmonious structure – which I have demonstrated throughout this thesis is subject to substantial challenge – is crucial to the Shakespearean universe as articulated by Wright. While Shakespeare himself never offered in his own words an explicit statement of intent in support of this argument, a letter Fry wrote to the *New Statesman* did so liberally:

It is better that we should simplify towards a unity than towards a shoddy system of labels; towards an admission that everything and everyone is a member one of another, a unity of difference, where all things meet in

gradation, offsetting each other, dovetailing, completing, complementing, rather than towards the official chaos where nothing entirely belongs to the drawer it was put into.

(‘The Play of Ideas’)

This ‘unity of difference’ is inherently distinct from what Roy dismisses as ‘Eliot’s spare, ascetic, and joyless sense of discontinuity between earthly and divine’ (154). It explains in part some of the peculiarity of Fry’s poetic language, which has inspired the common criticism that all of his characters speak in the same voice. Their poetic interpenetration is at least theologically consistent:

In prose, we convey the eccentricity of things; in poetry, their concentricity, the sense of relationship between them; a belief that all things express the same identity, are all contained in one discipline of revelation. (‘Why Verse?’ 137)

This oneness, filtered through Fry’s consciousness though it will inevitably be, suggests something of the communal properties of metrical verse drama, its capacity to uphold difference while at a higher level dissolving it in sameness: this is a total vision, not a limited aristocratic one.<sup>15</sup> And for Fry, this striving for social (re)integration was directly associated with Shakespeare. In ‘Why Verse’ he offers an extended reading of lines from *Macbeth* to describe Duncan’s murder and its aftermath as an action ‘not only true of this

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<sup>15</sup> The fact that the essay which furnishes this theory appeared in a 1955 issue of *Vogue* magazine, opposite an advert for ‘Hollywood-Maxwell’s “Mais Oui” bras’ – ‘for the FRENCH look with the AMERICAN accent’ – is entirely of a piece with Fry’s comments on the inseparability of worldly and spiritual experience, that ‘there is in fact nothing which is absolutely irrelevant to anything else’ (162).



one human' but 'an elemental action'; his ideal account of the 'logic' of listening to verse is one where its sound 'wakens harmony, modulation, and the resolving of discord in us' (166), and to demonstrate the point Fry weaves in, without attribution, passages of Lorenzo's famous speech dismissing the 'man that hath no music in himself' in *The Merchant of Venice* (5.1.69-87).

Most explicitly, in a piece compiled for *Shakespeare Survey*, he identifies the problem faced by Hamlet as 'the acceptance of his utter separation from all other life in the world: he is outlawed by his own nerves': in this isolation, 'there *is* no real way of expression for him, except for his heart to break and destroy him' ('Letters' 58). This is also, however, a widespread contemporary problem which Fry's art explicitly aims at remedying. 'Every one of us to-day is Hamlet in part' ('Letters' 59), but as Jacob H. Adler notes, though multiple characters in Fry share a 'view of life [that] is limited, acceptance [that] is limited,' by the end 'all need to learn a broader view and a complete acceptance' (93).

Roy adds that this acceptance, though potentially quietist, is not the same as wilful blindness to the problems of the world. Fry's search for unity and acceptance has a contemporary political urgency: his plays 'reflect the breakdown in contemporary values, and his awareness of the loss of stable, implicitly accepted social standards emerges in his longing for a fresh start with the center of unity restored' (17). The ageing Duke in *Venus Observed*, for instance, like Prospero, must be brought out of his 'green enclosure of insensibility' (23) and find a mature solution for the essential loneliness of the human condition, not to fall 'back among the fragments' (69). He speaks to his son Edgar in terms which evoke Lear's 'unaccommodated man' (3.4.84):

Over all the world

Men move unhoming, and eternally

Concerned: a swarm of bees who have lost their queen.

Nothing else is so ill at ease.

(52).

Accepting our responsibility to others is neither ethically nor practically easy, but, as Wright argues for Shakespeare, the plays imply that it must be done. As Woodfield puts it, each of the characters, in a characteristically comic pattern, move ‘from isolation to integration with society’ and further, ‘towards a recognition of the interrelatedness of all life’ (149-51).

PERPETUA. No one is separate from another; how difficult

That is. I move, and the movement goes from life

To life all round me. And yet I have to be

Myself. And what is *my* freedom becomes

Another person’s compulsion. What are we to make

Of this dilemma?

(*Venus Observed* 95-6).

This dilemma – about freedom and its limits – has been recently posed with regard to Shakespeare by Ewan Fernie, who comments that, for example, ‘in *Macbeth*, the good of

individual freedom becomes so great that it violates the greater good of which it is part, which in turn reasserts itself and eviscerates it' (185). If 'freedom is the virtue that entails at least the possibility of evil,' (77) then it is dangerous to always consider it a supreme good – how can a dramaturgical model based on freedom 'make room ... for Shylock's honest hunger for revenge' (71)?

The questions Fry and Fernie, both in their own way responding to Shakespeare, raise, are of great contemporary political resonance: consider, for example, the frequent debates about 'free speech' with regard to extremist protest movements such as the 'Unite the Right' rally held on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2017 in Charlottesville, Virginia, in which Nazi salutes and symbols were openly presented and which culminated in at least one civilian death (see Cobb and 'The Far Right Comes to Campus'). Richard Wilson argues that Shakespeare never 'underestimated ... the problem of tolerating the intolerant' (55); Fry's sense of society perhaps comes closer to directly addressing Karl Popper's near-contemporaneous paradox of tolerance, wherein the philosopher warns 'if we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them' (962).

One critique of Fry is that his philosophical disquisitions fail to move towards an adequate answer; that he merely repeats, rather than dramatises, the very idea of connection. Donoghue dismissed Fry's affirmative poetics in the following terms: 'His basic procedure is to place a spokesman in the centre of a play and let him proclaim that life is an enormous miracle' (186). It is perhaps true that Fry engages less than Shakespeare with the apparent 'motiveless malignity' of suffering; his is certainly a fallen

society, but not one in which the Gods ‘kill us for their sport’ (*King Lear* 4.1.36).<sup>16</sup> Sins are acknowledged, but can be forgiven in a greater unity: ‘something condones the world, incorrigibly’ (*The Lady’s Not for Burning* 73). Donoghue’s reaction against statements like these might resonate with Spanos’s diagnosis that an ‘undesired certainty’ has been imposed ‘on the Christian dramatist’s art’ (329) when writing for a largely secular age.

The basic fact of connectedness in Fry, however, whether or not it can be uncoupled from the rhetoric of absolution, bears strong comparison with what Michael Witmore describes as the ‘dramaturgical monism’ of Shakespeare’s metaphysics, whereby actions and their environment are both ‘part of a larger unity that is metaphysically one but internally diversified’ (3, 93). Shakespearean individuality, for Fernie, is ‘made in interaction’ (65), and for Witmore is ‘a characteristic state of motion defined interactively with respect to other individuals’ (108). Where Fry and Shakespeare differ most might therefore be in the extent to which their verse drama succeeds in harnessing this particular struggling resistance as a way to create distinctive individuals.

Like Eliot, Fry does not avail himself of the resources of a regular metre — though reviewer Harold Hobson referred to Fry’s largely irregular lines as ‘iambics’ in 1948, as if a reminiscence of Shakespearean atmosphere could prompt certain formal expectations (quoted in Ellis). He did, however, reflect at some length on iambic pentameter in a manner which suggests his own complex relationship to form in his own writing. Fry depicts nineteenth-century dramatists as bedevilled by

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<sup>16</sup> In this instance I am quoting the 2005 Oxford second edition, whose versions of both the Quarto and Folio text use the familiar ‘kill,’ rather than the 2016 New Oxford, which offers instead ‘bite us for their sport.’ The older reading is considerably more familiar to contemporary readers and audiences as a summary of the philosophical position I am describing.

a paralyzing memory of Shakespeare, a kind of Oedipus complex with Shakespeare as mother, which made even the most mature poets curl up as though in a womb as soon as they wrote for the stage. And what is most odd, it is a pre-Shakespearian womb they curl up in. Ignoring one of the greatest gifts that Shakespeare gave, the development of blank verse into a flexible speech rhythm, they go the rounds of their iambic pentameters as though the Master had written nothing after *The Comedy of Errors*.

(‘Return’ 93)

The insistence on Shakespeare’s creation of a new flexibility echoes Wright, and suggests Fry saw the ideal prosody as one engaged in a similar liberation. In the same essay, he argues that the ‘long misuse’ of blank verse had, by his own time, ‘made us feel that its life as a vehicle for the acted word was over’ – having, in terms quoted from Eliot, ‘lost touch with the development of speech’ – but soon after indicates that it might come back: ‘if we lose touch with someone while he is attending to something else it does not mean we shall never meet with him again’ (150). Fry goes on to praise the ‘advantage’ of the ‘five foot line’ in its ‘being there already ... in our blood,’ and challenges his friend Eliot’s own metrical techniques as no ‘nearer to our present-day speech rhythms, or easier to speak’ than the most famous lines from *Hamlet*: ‘if I were outside a door listening to the fearful buzz of a cocktail party, I should be at least as little surprised to hear the voices speaking the speech-rhythm of Shakespeare as that of Eliot’ (150).

For Fry, as for Peter Oswald sixty years later (see Gardner), ‘[b]lank verse, when used freely and according to our will, is the most pliable form we have yet discovered,’ and thus we ‘shouldn’t be alarmed if our own speech falls naturally into cadences familiar in the

past' (150). Nonetheless, if Fry believes himself to be using blank verse — and he does not explicitly answer that question one way or the other — he is doing so *extremely* freely, more so than, for example, Phillips, Drinkwater, or any other author quoted to date. Without a clear formal structure, his line breaks can often seem somewhat illogical. The lack of conventional metre underpinning the verse also limits its possibilities to convey shades of meaning and conflict between characters through non-verbal emphasis, suggesting another reason for the much-observed exaggerated quality of its diction. Wordplay takes the place of metrical tussles, and the fertility of language itself, rather than the connective tissue of regular metre, makes the case for life's concentricity.

Though Fry himself advocates an 'interplay of difference' between the resources of verse and prose, 'one touching the hand of the other as it separates, like men and women dancing the Grand Chain' ('Why Verse' 166), his harsher critics rarely detected any such groundedness. Roy observes how his verse alternately drew praise for its 'richly metaphorical, open-textured quality' and 'often dazzling language,' and criticism for its 'supposed emptiness, superficiality, and derivativeness' (163). The alternate fascination and repulsion with Fry's work seems often to stem from this verbal facility: David Pryce-Jones cites admiration for his 'continuous ripple of phrases,' his 'tide of sound' (57), before offering his own critique of the writing which takes Fry to task for his 'far-fetched vocabulary' and the implicit linguistic profligacy of his metaphors and word-games (62). Some of Fry's most beautiful set pieces stem from a sense of the sheer teemingness of life, a perception of a world of ceaseless change which manifests in a similarly abundant language:

DYNAMENE. What a mad blacksmith creation is

Who blows his furnaces until the stars fly upward

And iron Time is hot and politicians glow

And bulbs and roots sizzle into hyacinth

And orchis, and the sand puts out the lion,

Roaring yellow, and oceans bud with porpoises,

Blenny, tunny and the almost unexisting

Blindfish; throats are cut, the masterpiece

Looms out of labour; nations and rebellions

Are spat out to hang on the wind - and all is gone

In one Virilius, wearing his office tunic,

Checking the pence column as he went.

*(A Phoenix Too Frequent 105)*

This perspective, taking human beings at 'long range' (*Venus 20*), flitting between elements, might frustrate critics looking for 'tightly-knit ambiguity and layers of meaning' (Roy 12). Unlike Shakespeare's, Fry's language is rarely as densely-packed as the rose-buds Thomas offers Jennet in *The Lady's Not for Burning* (57), typically more free-wheeling than multi-faceted. But the very flux of his language, though sometimes lacking in both the density and the compression inherent in Shakespeare's metre-bound

technique, hints at a comparable indecorousness based on the fecundity of the world: '[t]he essence of his metaphorical system is a capability of transmutation: each image is both "being" and "becoming"' (Roy 152). Similarly, Fernie identifies 'being in Shakespeare in general' as a state 'where being is shifting into becoming' (61). Discomfitingly arch though it may be, there is a real *ars poetica* we should not ignore in Reedbeck's comment in *Venus Observed* that 'A spade is never so merely a spade as the word / Spade would imply' (36).

It will now be apparent that many of the critiques applied to Fry, as well as much of the praise he accumulated, link him to familiar descriptions of how Shakespeare's verse drama operates. Fry's apparent evocation of Shakespeare could be both positive and negative, partly depending on what vision of drama and the role of verse in theatre is being defended: after all, '[i]n writing like Shakespeare, Fry is assaulting almost every tendency of modern drama' (Adler 93). Adler, for example, posits Fry's 'romantic verse comedy' as a revival of a long-dormant genre whose traits include

an escape into a delightful imaginary world ... in which the problems are illogical, the physical (but not the philosophical) dangers unreal, the language highly poetic, and the people (as well as the view of life), oddly enough, solid and true and genuine. And that, of course, is the world of Shakespeare. (86)

This is so because, Adler notes convincingly, given the genre's disappearance elsewhere (barring the rare appearance of a figure such as James Sheridan Knowles, addressed in the previous chapter) 'in the English tradition, it seems possible to assume ... that if an



influence from Elizabethan romantic comedy exists at all, it is an influence from Shakespeare' (86 n.6).

Furthermore, although Fry himself used the puncturing effects of different kinds of language to great comic and dramatic effect (as discussed by Diane Filby Gillespie, 'Language as Life'), his linguistic achievement has often been characterised as precious, sophistic, or even a kind of incontinence. The neoclassical conception of Shakespeare as a freewheeling artist in sore need of discipline, decorum and restraint has been summarised by Bate and others. Dr Johnson famously chastised the playwright for his tendency to prioritise linguistic play, no matter the gravity of the matter at hand:

A quibble is to Shakespeare, what luminous vapours are to the traveller; he follows it at all adventures; it is sure to lead him out of his way, and sure to engulf him in the mire ... A quibble is the golden apple for which he will always turn aside from his career, or stoop from his elevation. A quibble, poor and barren as it is, gave him such delight, that he was content to purchase it, by the sacrifice of reason, propriety and truth. A quibble was to him the fatal Cleopatra for which he lost the world, and was content to lose it. (xxiii-iv)

Replace 'Shakespeare' with 'Fry' in this passage, and it would fit into the majority of critical discourse about the latter writer. Fry is regularly presented, like the early Shakespeare of *Love's Labours' Lost*, as being unwholesomely drunk on, even sick with, language. One suspects some theatre critics of the 1940s might see the word-purge administered to the compulsive neologist Crispinus in Jonson's *Poetaster* as an appropriate treatment.

Recent scholarly works including Palfrey's *Doing Shakespeare* assert an artistic necessity which counters negative portrayals of Shakespeare's own language as 'inflated and over-grand' (70) or 'long-winded' (76), and of his puns as nothing more than 'frivolous sideshow[s],' (97) inherently 'wasteful and barren' (99). Palfrey reminds us that 'there is no Shakespeare without them' (99), and the continuous performance of Shakespeare and his cultural centrality mask the fact that there has over time been considerable public and critical objection to these properties of his work. The fact that there is for Fry no similar performance tradition and very little in the way of critical rehabilitation means that an element of his work that is arguably deeply Shakespearean has not been subject to recuperation of the same quality which Shakespeare has enjoyed.

Could, or should it be? More work in this area would certainly be welcome: we owe to it our understanding of English theatre not to simply dismiss the once widespread notion that Fry, at one time an extremely popular playwright, was perhaps not coincidentally a deeply and impressively Shakespearean writer. And it is also not coincidental that the qualities for which he has been summarily dismissed from the critical conversation are his most Shakespearean aspects. The similarity of the critiques made about each writer suggest an intriguing comparison: though Shakespeare's cultural reputation remains entirely secure, contemporary reviewing culture (as seen in Chapter One) encourages theatre-goers to view Fry as a punchbag.

Writers who are compared directly to, or presented as a second Shakespeare, in their own time have been found in every period I have considered so far, including Thomas Otway, Joanna Baillie and Stephen Phillips. These are all authors against whom the tide of critical opinion has ignominiously turned, though in the case of Baillie some of her

former prominence has been restored. Shakespeare is offered as an idol to aspire to or a model to imitate in reinvigorating the ‘national drama,’ but any writer considered to have attempted to fly too close to the sun has suffered the heat of negative criticism in the decades and centuries after their death. Although Eliot and his followers specifically rejected Shakespeare, Fry was regularly seen through a Shakespearean lens (or microscope), and this may be one reason for the apparent thoroughness of the turn against verse drama which took place in English theatrical culture after 1956.

The general outline of the paradigm shift in theatrical taste around this point has been described as length by critics including Yael Zarhy-Levo and Irving Wardle. One of its primary effects was to render Fry perhaps the last truly successful verse dramatist in the mainstream English tradition — the last writer to offer, in a serious way, the tantalizing prospect that verse drama can or might work, and thus the most symbolic casualty of the turn towards John Osborne-style naturalism and, as Pryce-Jones argues, to the very different non-naturalism of Beckett (62). His fellow poet-playwright Ronald Duncan declared that ‘Within five years [of 1948’s *The Lady’s Not for Burning*] both Eliot and I found it difficult to get a production — Fry himself found it impossible’ (Morra 170). Within twelve years the English Stage Company at the Royal Court refused his script *Curtmantle*, despite the backing of Laurence Olivier — a decision Morra, quoting Philip Roberts, describes as ‘a seminal recognition that the drama represented by Fry and promoted by Duncan “no longer existed”’ (166).

Despite being a founder of the Royal Court project, Duncan himself found two of his own verse plays — *Don Juan* and *The Death of Satan* — spliced together by George Devine as a double bill which ran immediately after *Look Back in Anger*, a choice which

Osborne felt displayed ‘the unconcealed intention of killing them off as soon as possible’ (16). The critical failure of Duncan’s production led to the extension of Osborne’s: ‘*Anger* had to be extended when Duncan’s unspeakable historical pieces were pulled off after catastrophic reviews’ (Lawson). Fry’s collapse may have been more spectacular, but from reviewer Irving Wardle’s perspective, “Devine’s production of Duncan’s plays dealt the poetic drama its deathblow” (quoted in Zarhy-Levo 30).

As this chapter has shown, however, many of the inherent dramaturgical and poetic weaknesses of Eliot, the leading inspiration for writers such as Duncan, may have made this large-scale rejection inevitable: not least among them the close association between verse drama and Christianity. There is a wilful, taunting blasphemy behind Kenneth Tynan’s broadside against Eliot and Fry: ‘If they, the foremost heretics, can be persuaded off their crosses, away from their martyrdom in a lost cause, the theatre would immediately benefit’ (73). The general sacralisation of verse drama contained the seeds of its destruction: as a movement wrapped in an air of pious holiness, it must have seemed to some like a taboo crying out to be profaned. This is perhaps the puncturing impulse behind the words of the *Times* critic James Agate, writing to Fry in reference to Duncan’s *This Way to the Tomb*. The comic desire to overturn the dated and sanctimonious – a desire which would see Fry and his fellow verse dramatists thrown on the cultural scrapheap over the following decades – is clear from the alternative title Agate proposes: *Turn Right for the Crematorium* (quoted in Nathan 152).

Sixty years after the form underwent this cataclysmic shift, as Morra writes, early twentieth-century reformers of verse drama ‘languish, relatively forgotten both by theatrical history and literary criticism,’ sharing the fate of the nineteenth-century poet-

playwrights so many of them railed against (10-11). Writers such as Fry and Eliot, each dedicated in their own way to ideals of community and human interconnection, are derided as aloof, conservative elitists, and contemporary verse dramatists writing in a range of poetic styles are now frequently scuppered by comparison by these two ‘decidedly unfashionable’ figures (Morra 204).

In this thesis, I have argued that it remains nonetheless possible for verse drama to achieve the social and aesthetic ends towards which Fry, however imperfectly, aspired – to present human experience as deeply interwoven, and beyond that, to manifest and track the political tensions and ruptures within living communities. As Fry resonantly puts it, we can still seek ways to ‘meet ... again’ with what we had lost touch with (‘Return’ 150). In my final chapter, therefore, I will turn towards my own practice, detailing the practical knowledge gained from my experiments in the form. In foregrounding my experience as a contemporary practitioner, I will conclude by considering how verse drama might be able to address itself productively, and indeed uniquely, to the particular tensions of twenty-first century experience, half a century after its last stretch of significant commercial popularity.

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## CHAPTER SIX

### 'SOME ODD FREAKISH THING THAT'S ALWAYS WAITING TO COME IN': EXPLORATIONS THROUGH CREATIVE PRACTICE

In the two decades before his death in 2005, Christopher Fry gave a number of reflective interviews in which he attempted to account both for the particular advantages of his chosen form of theatre, and for its undeniable fall from grace. Despite the largely sanguine tone of these comments, the severity of the critical turn against verse drama had clearly taken its toll on one of the form's most committed advocates. In 1992, he told the *Times*: "I lost confidence ... I didn't know what theatre I was writing for. I sat at the typewriter wondering who wanted what I could provide. I felt more or less unwelcome" (Lewis). The contemporary verse dramatist, in Fry's experience, is unable to pursue his or her own practice in a climate of critical hostility: 'Why does there have to be only one ruling taste? ... Why can't we have theatre which contains the poetic, as well as other approaches to life?' (Lewis).

For Fry, poetic theatre represents an entire worldview, and the fact that its present-day proponents are repeatedly hamstrung by comparisons to a single author, Shakespeare, is strange and remarkable. Why, he wondered, should a form which once represented the mainstream of theatrical production be treated as a niche curiosity?

It's so curious that such a fuss is made about it, as though it's some odd freakish thing that's always waiting to come in. In literature in general, it would be very funny if you only had prose. Surely the life of the theatre must be the same. There should be room for everyone. (Cavendish)

As a creative practitioner writing a critical history of verse drama some sixty years after what is commonly considered the form's last hurrah in the brief ubiquity of Fry and Eliot, I am acutely aware of the diagnosis offered in this interview: that there should be, and is not, in a meaningful sense, 'room' for dramatists who use verse in contemporary English theatre. In the historical chapters of this thesis, I have offered an account of how verse drama came, through former practitioners' negotiations with Shakespeare and through the varied critical responses and counter-turns those negotiations inspired, to occupy its present, marginal position. In doing so, I have also advanced some arguments for what distinguishes verse drama – in the shared-metre iambic pentameter tradition with which it has been most firmly associated in the English theatre, despite the more varied rhythmical palette of the early professional drama, and despite Eric Griffiths's justified historical objections to that prosodic descriptor (136-7) – from other comparable forms, including the lyrical prose of Sarah Kane and Samuel Beckett, and even the more loosely-structured work of Fry himself.

To explore the practical questions raised by this aspect of my investigation in greater depth, in this final chapter I will follow in the footsteps of the practitioners whose testimonies I have previously considered, from Dryden to Fry, and speak in the first person to my own experiences as a practising verse dramatist. The impact of Shakespeare upon the development of the form, as I have shown in the preceding chapters, has been such as to make it increasingly impossible for playwrights using verse not to reflect upon and attempt to justify their own formal choices. Since at least the early twentieth century, it has been common for authors in this tradition to respond to presumed critical suspicion with a reasoned defence of their practice, a model for which Fry's comments in *Vogue* offer a particularly persuasive example:

in prose, we convey the eccentricity of things; in poetry, their concentricity, the sense of relationship between them; a belief that all things express the same identity, are all contained in one discipline of revelation. ('Why Verse?' 137)

Furthermore, as discussed in the Introduction, Shakespeare criticism is currently orientating itself towards the question of 'how creative modes of writing might facilitate new or different types of critical engagement with Shakespeare' (Conkie and Maisano 3). As such, in order to respond fully and honestly to the important provocation raised by the most prominent casualty of the English language verse drama tradition – what theatre am I, as a verse dramatist, writing for? – I need to step out from behind the veil of critical objectivity, and conclude this investigation on a more personal note. I will do so, however, in a context informed by the critical debates about the role and function of verse drama which have characterised its historical development and which are therefore inescapably part of my own professional trajectory as a practising poet-playwright.

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Although this thesis has demonstrated the need – and the possibility – for verse drama in the 'Shakespearean,' shared-metre tradition to address a broad contemporary community, I embarked on my own practice in the full awareness that this has not always been how Shakespeare or verse drama have been used or viewed. The connection between Shakespeare and cultural hegemony has been both promulgated and challenged throughout history, but Kiernan Ryan notes that 'most battles for the Bard have been won by forces intent on fabricating from his art a powerful apology for leaving the world as it

is' (*Shakespeare 2*). Margaret Thatcher's Chancellor, Nigel Lawson, for instance, was famously fond of quoting from *Troilus and Cressida* as an endorsement of his own beliefs about 'the fact of differences, and the need for some kind of hierarchy' (quoted in Heinemann 203):

Take but degree away, untune that string,

And hark what discord follows.

(1.3.108-9)

Furthermore, there has undeniably been a historical association between verse drama and elitism, despite the fact that Irene Morra has demonstrated it was closely associated in the early twentieth century with 'a strong sense of community and egalitarian social politics' (73). Robert Winder, in 1992, characterized dramatic verse as 'English poetry's most aristocratic form'; Anthony Easthope sees iambic pentameter as the voice of 'solid institutional continuity,' in which 'the tradition itself, the abstract pattern, is beyond question' (476, 488). As such, shared-metre verse drama might operate as a 'hegemonic form' implicitly confirming cultural norms (Easthope 486).

Writing in what has become clearly identified as 'Shakespeare's form' invites not only accusations of mediocrity and hubris, therefore, but the troubling consideration that I might thereby be implicitly seeking to locate myself in the largely 'male, pale and stale' (as defined by Dalzell) teleology of the Western canon, rather than modelling any meaningful change to existing circumstances. Contemporary theatre reviewing tends to be sceptical of this form for a range of reasons: as outlined in the Introduction, these centre largely on mustiness, antiquarianism, the 'fey'ness or affectedness of dramatic verse, a lack

of vitality and a propensity to bore the audience. But in much of the critical discourse in the contemporary English poetry scene, in which I have been an active participant for the past ten years, critique of traditional form is often explicitly political. For many poets today, progressive politics often co-exist with — indeed, even imply — a suspicion of traditional formal techniques.

Thus Jack Underwood, author of the 2015 Faber collection *Happiness*, critiques a set of unnamed older male poets whom ‘one can still occasionally find earnestly aerobicising their iambs in macho displays of supposed subtlety and control’ (‘Mirror-Within-Mirror’).<sup>17</sup> Underwood objects more broadly to the ‘fetishism of “craftedness” in poetry’: ‘when “quality” in poems is positioned as being synonymous with the prioritization of certain stylistic features that casually seem to enforce at the same time the priorities of a largely male, white, hetero Tradition, then I find it problematic’ (B O D Y). Sandeep Parmar, in a widely-shared essay for the *LA Review of Books*, also expresses frustration with the implicit ideologies of inherited structure, arriving at a similar conclusion to Easthope:

Gradually as I labored through postwar British poetry, the technical, lyrical sameness — a self-assured universal “voice” — began to rise from the pages, forming into homogenous, efficient, and consumable vehicles of meaning. The conservative, mainstream British poem behaved like modernism had

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<sup>17</sup> That the use of traditional poetic form can strike some reviewers — theatre critic Charles Spencer, for instance — as ‘fey,’ while for Underwood it is an explicitly ‘macho’ practice, might suggest that objections to formalism do not align with gender politics, and politics more broadly, in neatly predictable ways.

never happened. Its low-risk game of truth and meaning left little room for nuanced poetic subjectivities that challenged the singular British voice.

The subject, and the art-form, I have chosen therefore beg the question of how my own self-perception as politically progressive exists in tension with the various positions of structural privilege that I inhabit. In Sara Ahmed's terms, a contemporary verse play by a white, male, middle-class subject risks being solely 'citational relational' to other such plays and subjects, even as it manifests its own forms of internal tension ('White Men'). As I engage creatively with verse drama, I therefore find myself thinking continually about the form's relation – the relation of form, full stop – to politics, ethics and power. In what ways can a systematized way of writing – structured, metred verse – engage with, and allow for and facilitate challenges to, entrenched systems of power without merely endorsing or replicating them? If, as Ryan puts it, for many critics, Shakespeare has 'for too long been ideologically complicit ... in perpetuating social, sexual and racial injustice' (*Universality x*), what is my own complicity in pursuing a project which aims to some extent to emulate Shakespearean form?

In what follows I will quote from my own work extracts where I wrestled, poetically and dramaturgically, with such ethical challenges to my own project: namely, writing verse plays which might speak to a broad community of theatregoers in the modern world. First, however, I will return to the case for what Caroline Levine calls the 'affordances' of shared-metre verse drama: for what the use of dramatic verse, distributed among a range of characters, is uniquely able to highlight and explore. A form conventionally, if erroneously, associated – by critics such as George Steiner as well as those opposing any such 'abstract pattern' from positions on the political left (Easthope 488) – with a



restrictive and hierarchical world-order, it is nonetheless, according to Levine, capable of being put to a 'range of uses ... even if no one has yet taken advantage of those possibilities' (10-11).

But of course, many writers before me have quite comprehensively done so. Although in many ways I am not well placed to call for a reclamation of traditional form, I have been encouraged in my own practice as a verse dramatist by the voices of contemporary women writers who insist on the importance of such traditions to their own work, even if doing so means explicitly writing against the grain. Annie Finch, introducing her anthology *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women*, asserts that 'the poems collected here contradict the popular assumption that formal poetics correspond to reactionary politics and elitist aesthetics' (1). Contributor Carolyn Kizer goes further: '[w]riting about the iambic pentameter is like writing a defense of breathing' (131). And indeed, throughout this study, I have referenced women writers such as Aphra Behn, Joanna Baillie and Anne Ridler who have appropriated the particular form of verse drama — described by Kate Newey in its tragic guise as not only a 'masculinist form' but 'an implicitly political genre' for women to reclaim — for their own ends, often in the face of denigration from male critics (135).

As a male critic, I cite these oppositional uses of the traditional form of the iambic pentameter verse drama not in order to spuriously align my own work with a resistance born of gendered oppression, but to point out that there has never been a single, stable, unchallenged sense of the group or groups to whom verse drama belonged, or the cultural roles it was suited to play. On the contrary, in every period under consideration, the verse play was a contested space in which different understandings of what poetry and

drama could and should be clashed in the work of authors writing from a variety of political and aesthetic perspectives.

As a writer who finds the most challenge, interest, and reward in working with traditional form, the most honest course for my own practice is therefore to proceed with an awareness not only of the many historical objections to formal writing, but of the politically engaging counter-examples offered by playwrights both female and male to the idea of verse drama as an unshakeably hegemonic and conservative medium. What Alan Sinfield says of Shakespeare might well be appropriate to formal writing as a whole which follows in the path now heavily associated with his example:

Shakespeare does not have to work in a conservative manner. His plays do not have to signify in the ways they have customarily been made ... He does not have to be a crucial stage in the justification of elitism in education and culture. He has been appropriated for certain practices and attitudes, and can be reappropriated for others. (137)

How, then, can a writer of verse drama today appropriate this traditional form in ways which explore political and interpersonal tension without tacitly endorsing conservative practices and attitudes? In the Introduction, I proposed a series of hypotheses about the affordances of verse drama through which this question might productively be considered. These were, distilled to their most basic form, the following statements:

- 1) In creating an onstage community where all characters speak the same ‘metrical language,’ verse creates a stylised ‘natural order.’

- 2) In this context, stretches of smooth, uninterrupted verse-speaking can consolidate (or establish) authority in this community.
- 3) By contrast, interruptions of a speaker's line, by another speaker or by a high degree of internal variation can contribute to a sense of instability, fragmentation or conflict over the possession or bases of that authority within the community.
- 4) The opposition of norm and variation (and of verse and prose, where prose is a factor in the play's dramaturgy) can create meaningful character conflict, marking out individual characters as distinctive, engaging, or notably divergent from the other members of the community with whom they share the stage at any given moment.
- 5) The inherent artifice of verse can allow for explorations of theme and subject that go beyond the realistic and the everyday; in Tony Harrison's phrase, it can 'rescue the actor and text from the suffocation of naturalism' (Introduction, *Square Rounds* 170).
- 6) If widely distributed, the linguistic resource of verse allows all characters in a community or network equal access to articulacy, eloquence and gravitas.

With these aspects in mind, in putting into motion a community of characters who share underlying patterns of speech while each attempting to achieve different individual ends, verse drama reveals itself as a powerful formal tool for exploring the dialectic between the individual and society, and between self and other. In the three plays I have written, iambic pentameter functions as the building block for a social world; my characters are bound by a shared metrical underpattern, and the regularity of shared metre creates a web of expectation which each divergence subverts. Metrical departure might connote revolutionary energy (a break from a repressive system) or the darker freedom born of

certain kinds of self-determination (a rupture in the social fabric). As Peter Holbrook puts it, ‘Villains want freedom too, and from his own perspective a tyrant will be merely exercising his own liberty’ (26).

Metre, in this account, is political precisely because of its neutrality, or its malleability. As I. A. Richards writes, ‘the notion that there is any virtue in regularity or variety, or in any other formal feature, apart from its effects upon us, must be discarded before any metrical problem can be understood,’ and not every trochee, spondee or extra syllable, of course, carries a weight of meaning on its own terms, beyond localised narrative impact or phonetic variety (107). Nonetheless, in a variety of situations, the relative fixity of the shared pentameter has made it, for me, an paradoxically flexible and neutral vehicle to contrast deviant individuality and unvaried, norm-governed pattern.

By bringing into conversation the work of critics such as Wright and Ryan, Levine and Abigail Rokison, I demonstrated in Chapter Two that Shakespeare’s use of metre is powerful and enduring in large part because his exploitation of regularity and variation, flowing speech and stichomythia, effectively captures this very dialectic. The fact that subsequent verse dramatists have had a less substantial cultural impact is explained in part by the increasing dominance of Shakespeare in the conversation about what verse drama should be. It is also true, however, that other poet-playwrights have rarely counterpointed these formal elements with quite such flexibility and finesse: as Wright comments, ‘his metrical devices were never adopted as a system by any formidable later poet’ (264). As such, my research-informed practice has largely arisen from a triangulation of three elements: my above hypotheses; my desire, similar to that articulated in Levine’s work, to challenge a lazy alignment of political and aesthetic structures; and my assessment,

inspired by the work of Wright, Ryan, Rokison and others, of how Shakespeare's own deployment of his 'metrical devices' might best be mapped and understood.

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In my first script using verse, *Free for All*, I had not yet settled on many of the perspectives described above. My writing was informed by a desire to test my initial hypotheses, but my sense that a tension between individuals and communities was what linked many of those proposals had not yet fully coalesced. A survey of audience responses to the play in performance, conducted during the tour of the production I mounted in early 2016 – funded by a grant from the Midlands3Cities Cohort Development Fund, and taking in shows in Stratford-upon-Avon, Nottingham, Leicester and Birmingham – helped to clarify both which of my hypotheses were also perceived as relevant to an audience in practice, and *how* practice could most effectively communicate these ideas. Responses were also collected at a Stratford preview in advance of the play's run at the 2015 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. In total, the exercise produced 71 responses, and the impact of this feedback on my development as a verse dramatist is discussed below.

*Free for All* began with a sense that verse was heavily bound up in concepts of authority, power, and control. I had been thinking about the division between verse and prose that operates across Shakespeare's plays: what it meant to have, or not have, access to verse in terms of a character's social capital and level of comfort in their onstage situation. The world in which I decided to explore these concepts formally was one where concepts of access, hierarchy, equality and exclusion were foregrounded in the surrounding media discourse: the British education system.

The play staged the conflicts arising between parents, children, and staff at an open evening for a new-build free school, a kind of educational establishment pioneered under the 2010-2015 Coalition Government which was intended to allow for the devolution of substantial decision-making powers away from local authorities and into the hands of parents and community groups. This type of school appealed to me as the basis of a verse play in as much as the thematic concerns associated with them seemed to lend themselves to formal parallels: I could pursue, through my management of verse and prose, concepts of status, hierarchy, freedom and constraint.

The idea of a completely level, collectivist playing field which might neglect the range of individual needs ('An education – free for all, / And all the same in every town / From Millom to the Surrey Downs' – *Free for All 2*) could be contrasted to a system that favoured the development of individuality and tailored, child-centred learning: a philosophy which in its extreme form might lead to a viciously individualistic competition for resources. My script's narrative ended in a violent video game simulation, taking place in a distorted version of the school where these dynamics of competition had been escalated to their fullest extent: the second meaning of the title's 'free for all.' As Ewan Fernie comments, Shakespeare's plays demonstrate an awareness of 'how readily freedom degenerates into a violent free for all: a "universal wolf" that will devour everything, including itself (*Troilus and Cressida* 1.3.121),' though modern readers are nonetheless unlikely to favour 'Ulysses's recommendation that we should shut it out with an unassailable hierarchy' (73).

The hypotheses stated above gave me an opportunity to explore the theories around freedom, control, authority and verse which ran through the project dramaturgically. One

key dramaturgical choice was informed by hypothesis (2), that stretches of fluent verse could consolidate character authority: by making some characters more ‘at home’ in verse than others, I hoped to imply that being able to move fluently and flexibly through verse lines might signify other forms of social self-possession. Thus the school’s headmaster, Torben, responds to a challenge from his main antagonist, Kerry – a veteran trade unionist – in lines which are light, supple and confident, containing some late syntactic breaks and metrical inversions but not overtaken by them, with some of the self-interruptions of natural speech:

TORBEN. See, what I mean is freedom – after years

of desks in lines and one man at the board

and targets, tests, the tedium of chalk,

we’re taking matters into our own hands,

nourishing individuality.

Open the windows, let in light and air;

eat lunch for breakfast, Kerry – we don’t care!

Why shouldn’t we? Because the man says no?

Because some suit looked at his boring chart

and said ‘Top button’ and ‘Keep off the grass’?

We don’t have ties. We don’t even have grass!

And why? Because we took a step ourselves,

broke out of LEA control –

*KERRY can't listen to any more and leaps up.*

**KERRY.** Control!

Control, control, control, control, control!

That's all you people talk about – control!

**TORBEN.** Oh really? I remember saying 'freedom' ...

(18)

Freedom and control were thematically counterpointed throughout, but even at this early stage my treatment of Torben and Kerry revealed a potential challenge to hypothesis (4) – the use of norm and variation to mark characters as divergent and thus create character conflict. It felt necessary for Kerry's character to speak an equally fluent verse, even when Torben patronisingly attempted to speak prose to connect 'on her level.' I thereby gave Kerry – a self-taught, working-class woman – a kind of parallel authority to Torben's speech style:

We must seize this chaos here,

grip it in our raised fists and cast it out.

It all starts here, the job of taking back



the future that was going to be ours,  
before they shunted it off to one side  
and took a piece for him, a piece for her,  
carved up our birthright like a wedding cake  
then pulverised it like an Eton mess ...

(27)

An alternative might have been to frame Kerry as Torben's formal opposite, even a kind of linguistic obstacle: in giving her extremely broken lines with multiple internal breaks, I might have positioned her as a metrical roadblock to his grandstanding rhetoric, though this could clearly have limited the latitude available to her to express herself as an independent character. I could also have written her entire dialogue in uncompromising prose: an option I did in fact use for one parent, Keith, whose construction company had part-funded the new school but who was clearly at odds with the middle-class paradigms encouraged by this institution. In a world to which his self-made wealth had bought him access, Keith's prose stood out as a form of resistance to its norms, a recalcitrant otherness which went hand-in-hand with his tendency to make off-colour and prejudiced remarks in public.

Early modern playwrights had used prose in similar ways: the more socially-integrated Simon Eyre in Dekker's *Shoemaker's Holiday* continues to speak primarily in ribald prose even when he has been elevated to Lord Mayor of London. That Eyre does so while his predecessor in the role, Sir Roger Oatley, speaks verse, might indicate

something of his pride in his origins. By contrast, Leantio in Middleton's *Women Beware Women* begins the play as an economically precarious 'factor' but speaks comfortably in verse as he moves into the world of the court. Keith's refusal to speak verse could represent a stubborn certainty in his own identity, even as his wife, Angela, spoke a uncomfortably metronomic pentameter which was framed as a learnt, aspirational behaviour.

As director Rebecca Martin and I discussed how to bring across the thinking behind these formal choices in the rehearsal room, however, I began to be haunted by the idea that the portioning out of the resources of verse and prose simply repeated inherited inequities: that to stage a builder speaking only prose would reinforce the kinds of assumptions about class and intelligence identified not only by George Steiner by also Tony Harrison in 'Them & [uz]': 'You're one of those / That Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose' (1874). I justified the choice in part by reasoning that unequal access to the tools of social and cultural capital remains a persistent social problem, and that in the context of this particular play-world my use of linguistic stratification onstage could expose, rather than entrench, such real-world dynamics. Nonetheless, even before seeking audience responses on this question, hearing the prose/verse dynamic in practice I began to reconsider how possible it was, in a contemporary context, to explore conflicts of character through the alternation of verse and prose without becoming complicit in a process of elitist othering.

My first experiments with verse in *Free for All*, working towards a fuller sense of what this form could *mean* – with apologies to Archibald MacLeish, whose 'Ars Poetica' puts the case that 'A poem should not mean, but be' – revealed the dangers of overdetermination,

and of ascribing too much fixed significance to what I would later understand as an inherently *flexible* dramaturgical resource. I found myself, in practice, continually rationalising the use of verse, sometimes feeling I had made metre mean too much, and sometimes not enough. Creative decisions in the heat of composition can often feel entirely arbitrary, but this in itself made me question the logic behind my use of such an ostensibly structured medium: this extreme self-consciousness about the purpose of verse is, of course, a factor that makes its deployment especially problematic in the contemporary context.

Many characters' verse styles were nonetheless explicitly mapped to personality and position as I pursued hypothesis (4), linking verse style to character distinction. A disgraced French teacher, who kept trapping people in conversations for longer than they wanted to be there, spoke mostly in alexandrines; by contrast, Starfish, an overworked school girl, was given lines of tight, rhymed trochaic tetrameter, the intention of these formal constraints being to show the internal and external pressure she was under:

Ten-on-one debating winner,  
  
always back in time for dinner,  
  
Teenage Vegan Essay Contest,  
  
Cuckoo drowning in a swan's nest.

(7)

This tetrameter was mirrored in another character with whom Starfish later developed a connection: The Ghost of Anthony Crosland, a grotesquely exaggerated version of the

1960s Labour education minister responsible in part for the British comprehensive system. Crosland was introduced to bring chaos into an apparently ordered world: I planned for the highly-ordered, technologically-integrated, streamlined setting of the modern school to be disrupted by a ghost from the past, metaphorically and literally. Crosland's trochaic rhythms and full rhymes put his style of speaking midway between the late medieval morality plays and contemporary pantomime. He sounded, at any rate, unusual, non-naturalistic, other.

While these distinct styles achieved a certain dramaturgical effect in terms of character definition, one (highly negative) reviewer felt they suggested the use of verse was an academic exercise rather than a living motor of expression, 'a dramatic form that feels shackled by syllables' (Morgan). They also risked muddying the dramaturgical waters: Crosland, for instance, stood both for a lost continuity (a social order which used to, up to a point, make sense) and for a willed disruption of the current state of things. His verse style might have gestured to a different, older authority, and was certainly disruptive in its strangeness, but the very regularity its untimeliness required made it difficult for his interventions to seem truly chaotic and unpredictable, rather than the work of, say, a capricious but controlling magician. The character's overdetermination was only emphasised by the lack of clarity in what I was using his metre to mean. In general, therefore, the variety of verse idioms in this script made it more difficult for me to present verse as a social-structural world which is truly shared, and thus where individual departures from metrical norms might have a significant relationship to the social fabric. Audiences we surveyed did, nonetheless, report a clear awareness of the play being in verse as they listened to it, and thus possibly registered some of the stylised order implied

in hypothesis (1). The show was explicitly promoted as a verse play in our publicity materials, and some audience members might have felt compelled to ‘produce’ an awareness of verse being used, a response which risked enhancing the idea of verse as an elitist hoop to jump through: as one wrote, ‘I feel stupid but I only noticed it when the ghost was talking.’ With these important caveats, 88% of respondents asserted they had noticed the presence of verse either ‘sometimes,’ ‘often,’ or ‘throughout’ the performance. An online survey I conducted after the BBC screening of a filmed version of Bartlett’s *King Charles III*, with a differently phrased question, produced remarkably similar results: 89% found the use of rhythm noticeable either ‘throughout,’ or ‘somewhat’ (‘Some unscientific thoughts.’)

Both results resonate with George T. Wright’s suggestion of an inbuilt somatic awareness in our ‘nervous systems’ for the use of verse (92), but also have direct implications for practice. If I wished to heighten this awareness (converting the ‘sometimes’ respondents – 37% – to ‘often’ – here 34% – or ‘throughout,’ currently 17%), which might in turn allow for a stronger awareness of the significance of regularity and deviation, I would have to work with actors and directors to foreground the role of verse speaking. As director Rebecca Martin pointed out in our Stratford post-show discussion, my use of colloquial language in a rigid form might pose problems for maintaining metre, when considered in the light of the naturalistic traditions of contemporary actor training:

One thing I found interesting listening and watching it is the tendency of modern actors, myself very much included, to put in your “um”s and your “ah”s when you’re talking in modern day speech, and particularly on screen, if you get trained in screen, then the line is kind of a vague

approximation of what you're going to say. I'm sure at every point I gave someone a note about "you can't say that 'ah,'" or "you can't do a cough in the middle of a line," or something as minute as that... you can't do it, because it'll automatically disrupt the metre, and that was a very nice lightbulb moment for me as an actor and as a director, the specificity.

Audience responses to the question of where, if anywhere, rhythm or poetic language seemed particularly prominent in the performance, suggested that hypothesis (2) – that longer, uninterrupted verse speeches could consolidate authority – merited more investigation. 18 respondents mentioned moments where long speeches were delivered, or characters who did so, as making them particularly aware of verse use. As regards hypothesis (3) – that the audience might, in contrast to such fluency, perceive any split, broken or interrupted line as a struggle for power, alive with a new charge and energy – the responses I read did not reflect this. One audience response offered a particular challenge to this idea:

The times I had the most trouble keeping track of the rhythm were...  
some of the shared lines in dialogue which sometimes moved too quickly.

To test more fully what might happen if split lines were overtly emphasised, I would therefore need to pursue in future productions a mode of directorial practice which particularly heightened broken or split lines, perhaps at the expense of even more elements of naturalism.

The experience of staging *Free for All* also suggested I might have to restrict the role of prose, in contrast to hypothesis (4) which suggested verse/prose distinctions might signify

character distinction and conflict. One audience comment at the post-show question-and-answer session held in Stratford (where many spectators possessed specialised academic training) suggested that promoting the performance as a verse play had created a set of expectations in which the variations produced by incorporating prose did not always register:

I think because I felt like I'd been primed to expect verse, that I assumed everything was verse, and I think when I wasn't hearing verse I thought that I was just losing the anchor and I was waiting to get it back ... I didn't think "oh I'm hearing prose now," I just assumed "I'm not able to hear the verse at this moment."

Rhyme was similarly, and perhaps surprisingly, a stumbling block. With regard to a question over where rhythm felt prominent, my survey yielded 84 separate references either to rhyming or to Starfish and the Ghost, two characters whose dialogue was almost exclusively rhyming. Rhyme also elicited by far the most negative responses to the effect of verse: one audience member felt it 'made meaning more difficult to follow waiting for clunky rhymes at the end.'

Actor Octavia Finch commented positively on the heightened form in which her own lines had been written. Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, in *Shakespeare in Parts*, describe how 'prosody furnishes the actor with his character's grounds of being ... For the actor, prosody and ontology become one' (391). And indeed, Octavia described the stylised form of her lines as 'incredibly freeing':

because it's so short, it helped that kind of high-strung character, and so I just felt this sort of ease with the lines. I didn't really have to spend a whole lot of time – I feel like when I work on a play normally there's this massive backstory, and there's character work, and it just sort of came to me that this is who Starfish was.

Nonetheless, the survey responses made me consider the extent to which rhyme risked taking over responses to the idea of verse onstage, and the negative associations which for some listeners had culturally accrued to rhyme rather than to poetry as a whole. In my future practice, I resolved to avoid this distorting effect by using rhyme more sparingly.

Finally, and more positively, views consonant with hypotheses (5) and (6) – that the artificiality of verse could allow it to transcend realist conventions, and that verse added a sense of eloquence and gravitas to a range of speakers – were expressed unbidden in a number of survey responses. William Stafford's review pointed out that a playing style 'broader than naturalism' was an appropriate choice 'to fit the comic styling as well as the sometimes-heightened language.' Asked to describe any effect of verse on meaning, many audience members commented in similar terms on 'a slightly heightened, fairy-tale-ish quality,' and observed that the 'poetic language, in some ways, seemed to establish a level of suspension of disbelief upfront, such that the supernatural aspects were more reasonable in the established sort of non-reality.' Critic Gareth Morgan, however, reached for Shakespeare in objecting, in terms reminiscent of Steiner, to the blend of poetic language and quotidian subject matter:



The heightenedness of the language is hard to dispute, yet the sheer everydayness, rightly or wrongly, of the story – the mystical elements notwithstanding – is no “sad stories of the death of kings.”

Verse was also described widely in terms which implied it ‘adds weight to certain moments,’ including by making ‘certain words and sentences feel more significant’; for one respondent, it ‘heightened [the] import and impact’ of particular lines. Reviewer Cara Balingall found it ‘immensely enjoyable to hear a play written this way be spoken out loud,’ because ‘[a]s the actors run through rhythm and rhyme, you feel the verse form adding a layer of impact to the manifestos being put forward.’

This survey thus confirmed for me the importance of non-naturalistic world building, use of verse to underline meaning, and focusing attention on language as I moved into my next project. Given that split lines did not seem to be registering as significant, the results also led me to favour what Martin describes as a linguistically ‘specific,’ non-naturalistic style of acting and directing, further bringing out the effects of end-stopping which Rokison’s historical research suggests were practised in the early modern theatre (179-81). In terms of writing, these comments – along with my concerns about the class semiotics of prose-speaking – led me away from the use of prose and variant verse forms.

My decision to stick more closely to an iambic norm was also influenced by an observation by T. S. Eliot (who had himself avoided iambs altogether):

Today, however, because of the handicap under which verse drama suffers, I believe that prose should be used very sparingly indeed; that we should aim at a form of verse in which everything can be said that has to

be said; and that when we find some situation which is intractable in verse, it is merely that our form of verse is inelastic. And if there prove to be scenes which we cannot put in verse, we must either develop our verse, or avoid having to introduce such scenes. For we have to accustom our audiences to verse to the point at which they cease to be conscious of it; and to introduce prose dialogue, would only be to distract their attention from the play itself to the medium of its expression. (134)

I didn't necessarily agree with Eliot that verse should be taken in unconsciously; nor did I feel it was necessarily a bad thing when 'each transition makes the auditor aware, with a jolt, of the medium' (134). Survey responses, however, showed transitions between forms were often either not noticed, or became a kind of distraction from the guiding principles of a shared-metre stage world. Having a number of scenes outside of the main metre risked diluting the sense of a baseline or norm against which variations were meaningful. In my future practice, I therefore resolved to avoid this distorting effect by using both rhyme and prose more sparingly.

Around this time, I also became more deeply invested in the idea that verse might be able to counterpoint individuals and their social and political communities. Replicating the manoeuvres of many of the verse dramatists whose work I have previously discussed, I wondered what making my next project more 'Shakespearean' might mean in practice. I looked back through old notes from a workshop on what dramaturgical tools the RSC Literary Department recommended to new writers seeking to emulate the house style, and the mirage of an ideal, potential play emerged from my summaries. What the RSC saw as Shakespearean was a story which took place on a larger political canvas, with an

epic quality, featuring ruptured families, big ideas, a large cast, a struggle for power, and the use of rhetoric to manipulate the audience and other characters (Hill).

Though verse was not considered in the workshop as directly relevant to these aims and objectives, my sense was that the shared-ness of a metrical stage-world allowed for those domestic and political ruptures to take on a greater resonance, expressed in formal terms, and that the license for articulacy given by verse was also the prime motor in much Shakespearean rhetoric. I was coming to an understanding that verse and its uses could both set people apart, and bring people together. I therefore started looking for a story which, even more so than the school setting of *Free for All*, could foreground and link verse usage to the conflicts within a clearly defined community, allowing me to experiment with putting both these qualities into dramaturgical effect.

I began, and abandoned, one project in this vein. *Maiden Voyage* was a dark comedy, following the fates of the fourteen Greek virgins who were to be offered as sacrificial victims to the Minotaur. But with its focus on the heterosexual 'loss' of virginity, the more I worked on the play, the more keenly I felt that its thematic concerns aligned uncomfortably with the objections Levine has documented to the formal use of 'bounded enclosures,' namely their 'willingness to impose boundaries, to imprison, to create inclusions and exclusions' (25). Rather than 'disrupt[ing] the controlling power of other bounded shapes, the encounters themselves providing opportunities for new and emancipatory social formations,' to tell this heteronormative story in this formal structure risked simply reinforcing conventional values and hierarchies (45). As such, I set it aside in favour of a different subject which would allow for similar explorations.

I found one in a podcast episode telling the true story of Rajneeshpuram: a utopian religious community established in the 1980s around the teachings of the Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh ('184 – Rajneeshpuram'). Rajneeshpuram brought together a group of primarily highly-educated Westerners with an interest in Eastern mysticism as a model for remaking society: as Frances Fitzgerald puts it in her account in *Cities on a Hill*, which I consulted while redrafting the script, 'guru or no guru, the ranch was a year-round summer camp for young urban professionals' (275). The site they occupied was in blue-collar rural Oregon, and was viewed with suspicion and mistrust by many residents of the neighbouring town of Antelope, which the Rajneeshee community eventually annexed. A local professor told Fitzgerald that he 'thought Antelope "a Greek tragedy" in the sense that the outcome was inevitable given the character of both groups' (326), and to me the dramatic potential was readily apparent.

The story appealed to me in part because it was self-contained and *sui generis* enough to allow for an investigation into the very basics of what it might mean to live in community with others, and what the use of verse might reveal about that social paradigm. The Rajneeshpuram community eventually collapsed under a variety of internal and external pressures including financial mismanagement, immigration fraud, the consolidation of power in the hands of a secretive leader who tapped the phones of the city's residents and literally tranquilised those expressing dissent, and most prosaically of all, a wilful disregard for county planning and zoning laws. It also, due in part to a paradoxically controlling focus on openness and spontaneity, became increasingly dependent on formal rules. The overall effect was that 'the flowing, liquid, egalitarian community had to erect high walls around itself lest its members took to loving others and simply flowing away ... In their attempt to suppress their differences they developed a kind of totalitarianism' (Fitzgerald

408). In the later stages of the commune's existence, in 1985, Fitzgerald explains how walls and rules had come to predominate:

there were security guards all over the place, and the restrictions on visitors were like those of a federal prison. From the entrance of the ranch to the reception center, there were five guard posts, each staffed by two Rajneeshee in uniform. At the reception center there were more uniformed guards with guard dogs to search all comers. Visitors were now asked to sign three separate regulations forms before being given an identification bracelet ... All of this created a sense of constriction and threat – a feeling mightily strengthened by the fact that the guards and ranch managers could not, or would not, explain the reasons for the particular barriers and roadblocks. (354)

I had already decided my account of this story wouldn't be bound to historical accuracy, and that I would instead reimagine the Rajneeshpuram narrative in the present day, where the factors bringing people together were more likely to be based on concepts of economic and social justice rather than spiritually-motivated; to that end I removed the guru from the story entirely. As the process of writing and revisions went on, two core elements of the material – the fracturing of society into implacably opposed interest groups and the protectionist rhetoric of walls and barriers – suggested to me that this project might be a helpful prism for political developments in contemporary America.

With each revision, including most notably for a run of staged readings at the Shakespeare Institute in February 2017, the play therefore became more and more directly a comment on first the campaign, then the Presidency of Donald Trump. The

community at the heart of the play, called ‘Amnesty’ in my first few drafts, eventually morphed into ‘Sanctuary’ as ‘sanctuary cities,’ such as New York and Los Angeles, set themselves up as centres of authority in opposition to the nativist immigration policies of the national government (see Zurcher). That conflict made this subject matter an effective testing ground to explore ideas of form, community, and tension between different kinds of networks and ‘bounded enclosures,’ and for the verse medium to take on political weight and power (Levine 25).

Before I had discovered Levine’s work, however, Fitzgerald’s account of Rajneeshpuram introduced me in the redrafting phase to the writings of the anthropologist Victor Turner. Various schools of thought had already seemed to offer me useful analogues for the structuring opposition between norm and variation, and between the individual and society, which shared-metre dramatic verse reified, from Freud’s id and superego to Greenblatt’s subversion and containment (38). New to me, however, was Turner’s model of structure and anti-structure. Briefly sketched, Turner’s terms provided an intriguing framework in which to consider the relationship of constraining pattern and variation: ‘social structure, while it inhibits full social satisfaction, gives a measure of finiteness and security,’ while the liminal state Turner called ‘*communitas*’ and associated with anti-structural forces – sometimes individualistic, sometimes communal – ‘may be for many the acme of insecurity, the breakthrough of chaos into cosmos, of disorder into order’ (*From Ritual* 46).

These terms did not, however, in practice, map as neatly onto the individual/community binary as I might have hoped. Shared-metre verse drama seemed to me at times to exemplify some of the aspects of *communitas*, wherein characters are ‘levelled’ in their

form of expression and brought, at least, linguistically, into a neutral relation: was this what might be going on in the social blending represented in the settlement I was then calling Amnesty? On the other hand, the need for the Amnesty residents to live in harmony seemed more relevant to Turner's use of 'structure,' within which marks of extreme, 'antistructural' individuality are potentially disruptive (*From Ritual* 113).

In its challenge to structure, *communitas* 'transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships,' (*Ritual Process* 128) and 'raises basic problems for social structural man, invites him to speculation or criticism' (*From Ritual* 47). This made it look somewhat like the challenges to the existing order of things, the sketching of alternative models, that Ryan finds in Shakespeare: Turner even cites as an example the utopian rhetoric of Gonzalo's commonwealth in *The Tempest*. But *communitas*, of course, by definition, is the manifestation of communal rather than individual feeling. Characters in plays who consistently flout the expectations of metrical structure, sometimes in the process ruffling and shaking the framework of their societies, do so as individuals, not as representatives of an alternative pattern.

As such, Turner's *communitas* could not map neatly onto 'the breakthrough of chaos into cosmos' (*From Ritual* 46) represented by metrical deviation within Wright's world of 'cosmic order' (262). The implicit separation necessary to maintaining structure meant that this term could not wholly be the domain of metrical regularity, either. Different forms of structural barrier in dramatic verse take on different meaning: end-stopping would tend to increase a sense of ordered proportion, whereas mid-line caesurae might be more likely to indicate an agitated individual isolating himself from others.

Turner's terminology for discussing communities was therefore a complicated and somewhat awkward model to explore dramaturgically. These theories nonetheless significantly informed the process of research and development (or trial and error) leading to my second draft of the script. So too did the significant challenge to Turner's model offered by Renato Rosaldo. Taking issue with the idea of culture and society as 'control mechanisms' which 'have the [potentially repressive] function of regulating human behaviour' (97), Rosaldo's challenge further stressed for me the importance of affirming that there is no necessary drive towards institutional healing, reintegration, or repression in verse drama.

Throughout the traditional five-act structure of *Amnesty*, I experimented with making the Turnerian ideas of structure and anti-structure which Fitzgerald applied to Rajneeshpuram register as significant in my exploitation of the resources of verse.<sup>18</sup> My intention, broadly speaking, was for the early speeches of the commune's residents – as they aimed to reject social norms in forming a new 'seamless and structureless whole' (*Ritual Process* 135) – to convey some of the anti-structural dynamics of free flow. In this draft of the script, I prioritised keeping the residents' dialogue relatively light on full stops and mid-line disruptions, favouring instead a high use of commas and run-on lines, as in this public address from the commune's de facto leader, Meera:

Thank you. Thank you for joining us today,

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<sup>18</sup> Here I thank Martin Wiggins for reminding me that this is a 'tradition' established and adopted by subsequent editors of Shakespeare's texts and other early modern plays, rather than a common factor of early modern theatre practice before the second decade of the seventeenth century. Anachronistic though it therefore is, the division into five acts nonetheless seemed to me a particularly and helpfully un-modern way of going about things.



on this great day of public celebration:

this referendum signals to the world

not only that our town is here to stay,

but that our rights to congregate together

have taken root and are unshakeable,

despite the forces who'd prize us apart.

This is a mandate for a better system:

you've seen the goody bags? Go on, spark up —

the use of cannabis for recreation

is legal in this state and we are proud

to show it can promote — forgive me — growth.

You'll find a book of mycoprotein recipes

and lifetime passes for the karmabus.

Also, a brochure with our city plan:

green spaces, native wildlife in reach,

three thousand acres and an aquifer ...

In contrast, I explored the idea that a heavy emphasis on prosodic disruption, highlighting division rather than flow, might correspond to Turner's account of structure as a separating force. I therefore planned for Meera's political opponent, county planning official Tony Morelli, to speak in a less fluent way, using end-stopped lines and a high number of mid-line stops, starts and substitutions. An antagonistic figure arriving from outside, I wondered if the metrical disruption brought with him could effectively mirror political disturbance having an impact on a community.

Already, however, this revealed the difficulty in using Turner as an analogue. Now the communitarian Amnesty residents, in seeming to represent unruffled order, read as a sort of *parallel* structure, whereas Tony felt like the malevolent individualistic force causing problems for this version of society:

TONY. Sorry to butt in. Headed to the ranch?

Me too. Spa, I should say. You need a ride?

ANITA. That would be great, actually; are you joining?

TONY. No, not exactly. More – checking things out.

I'd say "Throw all your stuff in back," but, well...

You haven't got much stuff, so – don't I know you?

LEILA. I don't think so.

ANITA. We're not from round here, really.

TONY. Sure? There's just something... It'll come to me.

I'm Tony, by the way. Tony Morelli.

ANITA. What brings you here?

TONY. Work. County Planning Team.

(10-11)

As the play continues and the community, under internal and external pressure, begins to take on more of the aspects of an external 'structure' – armed police, roadblocks, etc – I experimented with making the increasingly-dictatorial Meera's lines begin to resemble Tony's. They became more end-stopped, with a higher proportion of mid-line interruptions and blockages. The idea was for Tony's somewhat authoritarian perspective to inform the kind of verse he spoke, and for that to influence Meera's own prosody, just as Othello's verse has been observed to 'become infected by [the] poison' in Iago's speaking style (Palfrey 188). Here, for instance, is Meera dressing down the community's architect, Jerome, towards the end of Act Three:

Go home, Jerome. Back to your drawing board.

We told them we'd revamp the library,

build new headquarters for the Fire Service,

replant the parks. What more is there to give?

Patty can see. The Mayor can't? Fuck the Mayor:

bigots, sore losers, they can't look beyond

their baseball caps. We're doing them a favour.

If someone gets their little fingers bruised,

so be it. You don't have to understand:

this isn't art, now. This is politics.

(48)

There was an internal logic to having Meera's lines become 'aggressively asymmetrical' (as McDonald writes of Jonson's verse, 109) as her style of leadership became more authoritarian. But Tony, the character to whom she was directly opposed in the narrative, could not himself in practice always employ a 'poetic style marked by shifts in direction, emotional flashes, surprising turns, short stops' (McDonald 115-6), even as his role was to challenge the equilibrium of the Amnesty community by insisting they conform to external requirements. Tony had to deliver a lot of big rhetorical speeches, including a closing monologue to the audience. It therefore felt natural in practice to allow his language to flow more freely, to be more expansive with fewer shifts and stoppages, even though this would mean abandoning some of the Turnerian parallels with which I started.

Indeed, the more I considered my work in *Amnesty*, the further I felt from a neat equation between, on the one hand, individuality and resistance, and on the other, order and social structure. Any verse system based on the theoretical oppositions I found in

Turner and Fitzgerald started to melt away in the face of the demands of dramaturgical practice. When the time came to revise the play for its staged reading at the Shakespeare Institute, along with changing the title to *Sanctuary* to reflect its new political focus, I also found myself setting aside the vague and unwieldy framework drawn from my reading of Turner in favour of a greater practical attention to what each scene and onstage moment required.

In practice this meant – as in *Free for All* – prioritising a Shakespearean sense of equilibrium and balance between the arguments made by the two opposing sides. Accordingly, at moments where it was necessary for him to carry the audience with him, I allowed Tony’s rhetoric to become significantly more fluent, with more frequent enjambment:

DENISE. They’ve got some really interesting ideas –

why can’t they try them here?

TONY. Ideas? Right.

Those airy things, those giddy clouds of nothing,

that sit on human lives like bucking broncos,

ready to tumble at one sudden lurch.

You want a blank slate? Then build on the moon.

Real people live here, and they’re not lab-rats,

waiting for some benevolent gloved hand:  
  
you think the Nettle Ridge guys will be grateful  
  
to see a living Twitter mob descend,  
  
turn quiet country into San Francisco  
  
while virtue signalling they understand  
  
the struggles of the rural working class?  
  
These people, fundamentally, don't care  
  
about them, they don't understand their lives:  
  
who clears up if their little project fails?  
  
They won't engage. It's summer camp to them.  
  
They've got ideas, sure. But they won't work,  
  
and we'll be left with sewage, trash and rubble.

(33)

I was also keen, in this more recent revision, to take on feedback received from submitting the play to theatre companies, some of which suggested questions about the priorities of my practice. One reader's report, for Pentabus, described the play as offering 'a cartoon strip account of its story rather than seeking to go deeper.' I understood the logic behind asking for greater character development, but felt that cartoonish

exaggeration and broad types were part of the dramatic worldview I had found in many Renaissance writers with whom I had engaged – this was perhaps a Jonsonian, rather than a Shakespearean, model of verse drama. In line with hypothesis (5), I had been using verse partly as a device which oriented my writing away from the expectations of realist theatre.

This didn't, of course, imply that my work was allowed to be boring. The script reader's diagnosis that 'there is no real attempt to depict [Meera] as having or having had any idealism, only a taste for and an enjoyment of power, so there is not much suspense in her exposure' was hard to ignore – even in *Volpone*, the creation of suspense is a necessary element of the play's theatrical interest. As such, I set about reshaping Meera into *Mona* – a more defined character whose investment in the Sanctuary project, in its new political iteration, was at least initially born out of progressive activism. The sense of Shakespearean balance was therefore at least partly enhanced by presenting surveillance and the suppression of dissent emerging within a leftist community, against the wider backdrop of Trump's right-wing policy agenda.

I hoped the plot arc might, with *Mona*'s character more distinct in her aims from the opening, feel something like *Richard II* in reverse, as an initially sympathetic character comes to govern in ways which are increasingly capricious and cruel. *Mona* now started off with a somewhat sharp-elbowed idealism, as in these lines reassuring Patty, an elected official from the neighbouring town of Nettle Ridge who is concerned about the influx of a new demographic:

For instance, those well-educated folks

you mention are spearheading these revivals,<sup>19</sup>  
but in their wake will come skilled manual jobs,  
the kind this county hasn't seen for decades,  
the kind with healthcare plans and training programs.  
I don't mean to presume about your vote,  
but this county has been through some hard times —  
we think we can respond to those concerns.

(19)

By the end of the narrative, however, she displayed the spitting fury of a cornered animal, when local law enforcement refused to let claim her status as a political protestor as a factor mitigating the crimes in which she had been involved:

MONA. I'll talk, Kim. It won't help you. But I'll talk.

The problem with you is, you have no vision.

None of you do. And no imagination.

Did we cut corners? Yes. Did we cut limits?

Of course. You've heard the phrase 'disruptive talent'?

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<sup>19</sup> Mona is referring to a rewilding scheme, meant to build up both the local ecosystem and the town's economy.



Yeah, I'm disruptive. I overturned tables,  
I rocked the boat, I cut the power lines.  
I am an earthquake underneath this country,  
and your response? To put me in a cage.  
My people understand — yours never will —  
that what you've done is taken hope, change, progress,  
and beaten it so hard it can't stand up.

**KIM.** What we've done is arrested you for failing  
to follow the same laws that others do.

**MONA.** It's known as revolutionary justice:  
you chose a moral side, and you deserve it.

Why should our lives be bound by men like you?

(79)

These revisions shored up both character and narrative arcs, and helped in part to develop my practice by ensuring my play in verse was inherently dramatic rather than in verse for its own sake. Accounts by both T. S. Eliot ('Poetry and Drama,' *passim*) and Peter Oswald indicate the particularly steep learning curve involved in working out how to write verse that is also dramatically effective: Oswald's experience in contemporary

theatre is that “there was nowhere to be trained to work for the Globe or anywhere else like it” (Fallow 94). The lack of widespread training in the skills necessary to develop theatre in verse means that practical experiment is essential but, paradoxically, rarely possible: “Verse plays are put together in a different way and they require a leap of faith. My first drafts are always terrible. It is about collaborating and seeing what works and doesn’t work during the rehearsal period. Verse plays require patience” (Gardner).

In my own collaborative experiments, I found myself increasingly unable to answer the frequent question about what the resource of prose meant in my stage worlds in a way that felt to me wholly justifiable. In *Sanctuary*, I had still considered that prose might contribute something valuable to the dramaturgy: for instance, the Nettle Ridge council member Patty signalled some of her difference from the more privileged Sanctuary residents by initially speaking prose, and was subsequently coerced into a somewhat stilted verse as Mona talked her into joining their community. Jack, an older male character who gave little thought to the space he took up in the world, also spoke a prose which had a sprawling quality – like Falstaff’s, which Ewan Fernie defines as expressing a baseline ‘condition of superabundant liberty’ which rejects the constraints of ‘duty, industry, self-control’ (2).

Jack’s prose confirmed his Falstaffian role as exhibiting ‘the scandalous’ – and, ultimately, destructive – ‘freedom of a mature person who lives his (or her) own life entirely beyond respectability’ (4). When he used this prose style with neighbours he did not know well, I

hoped its presumptive intimacy might appear as a kind of linguistic manspreading<sup>20</sup>; when Jack was later given a position of public responsibility as an officer in the Amnesty police, I shifted his language into verse accordingly. Here, the power it exerted, based on new-found public authority, seemed to me entirely different from the power of his unsolicited volubility in prose.

Nonetheless, over the many conferences and Q&A sessions at which I discussed my dramaturgical choices, there always seemed to be an angle from which prose could be felt to be pessimistically reinforcing hierarchies of exclusion more convincingly than making a strong dramatic point about the persistence of those hierarchies or demonstrating some kind of forceful resistance to their stranglehold on social capital. For all that I wrote about verse in terms of social cohesion, showing tensions being raised and/or worked out within a defined group, the persistence of prose continued to create an ‘out-group,’ the presence of which I would then struggle to intellectually and creatively account for, even as it reflected real-world social dynamics relating to access and power.

In *Sanctuary*, prose and verse were involved in a continuous dance around ideas of power, control, borders and boundaries, authority and resistance and the conflicting demands of individuals and communities. Neither resource continuously meant one thing and one thing only – and even considering verse alone, metrical fluency could not be counterposed with disruption in any stable sense that was not thrown into question by further reading and creative experiment. The presence of prose, however, as Eliot

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<sup>20</sup> Defined by *Oxford Living Dictionaries* as ‘the practice whereby a man, especially one travelling on public transport, adopts a sitting position with his legs wide apart, in such a way as to encroach on an adjacent seat or seats.’

predicted, still seemed inevitably to ‘distract [the audience’s] attention from the play itself to the medium of its expression’ (134). In 1912, before Eliot had even publicly considered the issue of the rhythm of poetic drama, William Archer cautioned playwrights against using ‘some nondescript rhythm which is one long series of jolts and pitfalls to the sensitive ear ... to escape from the monotony of blank verse’:

If you cannot save your blank verse from monotony without breaking it on the wheel, that merely means that you cannot write blank verse, and had better let it alone. Again, in spite of Elizabethan precedent, there is nothing more irritating on the modern stage than a play which keeps on changing from verse to prose and back again. It gives the verse passages an air of pompous self-consciousness. We seem to hear the author saying, as he shifts his gear, “Look you now! I am going to be eloquent and impressive!” (396-7)

Alongside these aesthetic arguments, I had to consider the political dimension. I have made the critical argument throughout this thesis that one of the most significant currents in the historical development of verse drama, through writers like George Lillo, Joanna Baillie, and even, in his own way, T. S. Eliot, has been an extension of the social canvas on which verse drama operates in the face of an alternative tendency to constrict it. I felt therefore that my best course in my next play might be to follow suit: to distribute the resources of articulacy and eloquence equally among all characters, in accordance with hypothesis (6), and allow each character to make their case in equal terms.

In the third and final script I am discussing here, I took these cautionary conclusions into full account. In *The Vetting of Kit Shaughnessy*, as a consequence, the ‘meaning’ of verse

during the writing process was less overburdened, less explicitly theorised; I was more concerned with the moment-by-moment dramatic effects of regularity and variation than with the kind of external logic I applied to *Free for All* and *Amnesty*. I did not assign any specific associations with regularity, order and subversion to particular characters, and I also eschewed the use of prose entirely, aiming instead, as Eliot recommended, ‘at a form of verse in which everything can be said that has to be said’ (134). This final play took place on a smaller scale, with only four characters, but nonetheless addressed issues of politics and society which resonated far more widely.

The script tested the possibility of verse drama to work as a kind of chamber piece, orchestrating four voices, while availing itself of some of the resources of more recent dramaturgy, namely overlapping lines indicated with a ‘/’ as well as the traditional ‘split’ metrical lines. It still explored social tensions, and those between individuals, through the distribution of metrical and variant lines, but on a more shifting, fluid, *ad hoc* basis, treating verse as an inherently flexible vehicle for the constant process of negotiation between ideas, states, and relationships between social groups and individuals.

The situation this play explored was personal and political: Kit Shaughnessy, an RP-speaking, Russell Group-educated candidate for a government intelligence position, is being vetted for the role by Geoff McCullough. A former policeman from Birkenhead, Geoff is a character from a working class background who exercises a degree of institutional power, and the bulk of the play is a series of vetting interviews between him and Annabel Fensome, a friend of Kit’s who is being pressed to reveal potentially compromising personal information about him to assess his suitability to serve the country.

GEOFF. We're curious about Kit's sex life, Annie.

ANNIE. That's quite an opener.

GEOFF. I'm sorry. Sit.

We find it helps to ask that question early.

ANNIE. Um, shouldn't you be asking him, not me?

GEOFF. Do you know anything about it?

ANNIE. No. Not really.

GEOFF. Can you elaborate on that?

(1)

From these personal discussions, which turn on the question of how much we can really know another person, wider issues arise. What kind of country is Kit being enlisted in the service of, and – as I discussed with regard to Rome in Chapter Two's analysis of *Coriolanus* – how much can its constituent members even agree on what it is? In the wake of the referendum result for Britain to leave the European Union, these questions seemed particularly pressing, and touched on my wider concerns about social cohesion and fracture. Furthermore, by this point in my development as a verse dramatist, my theoretical conception of these issues was directly feeding into my practical writerly choices in a way that felt newly fluent and, despite its artifice, creatively 'natural.' An extended extract from the script will indicate some of its increased fluency of mode and approach in exploring these concerns dramaturgically:



GEOFF. This isn't about me.

ANNIE. Nothing's about you, is it? You've no plan,

no doctrine, no, no ideology –

GEOFF. I didn't go to university.

ANNIE. – and what are you protecting? Nothing visible,

a vague idea – tea and scones and Pimms,

and steadiness and half-time oranges,

and keeping calm – a white glove on a fist.

GEOFF. Feel free to think we don't have enemies.

Go on your marches. Sing your little songs.

Hashtag us any name under the sun.

We'll be here working for you anyway,

and you know why?

ANNIE. I'm leaving.

GEOFF. So your mother

won't have to shrug at something charred and gray



laid out upon a table in a morgue

till scans identify you by your teeth.

Yeah, leave. There's a big demo down in Bristol,

you'll make it if you catch the 3:16.

Abolish borders. Solidarity.

*We are the world.* If your friend wants a job,

you might want to consider what that means.

If we don't need him after all, that's great.

I'd love not to need anything like this,

this fret, this agitation, these alerts,

these teams of geeks, these four cold submarines.

You know what I'd prefer? A folding chair,

a six-pack in the park in Birkenhead,

a radio, a nice ripe Granny Smith,

my grandkids playing catch — d'you think of them?

ANNIE. I didn't ask...

GEOFF.                    Because you didn't care.

That's OK. I don't care about you either.

Except that I am you, and you are me.

That's what this letterhead is meant to mean:

it marks what we've consented to. It says

our interests are the same under this crest,

under this crown. Under this stupid horse.

ANNIE. I think that's meant to be a unicorn.

(11-12)

In these exchanges, each character is given the opportunity to grandstand, to embark on long, metrically fluent rhetorical speeches outlining their beliefs, holding the stage and leaving the other person silent: these sections of my writing corresponded to those moments noted by the *Free for All* survey respondents where longer verse sections heightened awareness of and focus on language, wherein words took on greater weight and significance and the metre served as a springboard for more stylised language use. Each also has a fairly equal opportunity to steal momentum away from the other, with interruptions – mid-line and mid-speech – and each at one point goes on the attack, putting the other on the back foot. Although the survey respondents seemed largely not to notice shared and split lines as significant, references to flow, pace and momentum indicated some awareness of verse allowing for both propulsion and interruption.

This ebb-and-flow of power takes place within – is enabled and contained by – a shared baseline rhythm that, as Wright would argue, pulls them back to their obligations to each other despite themselves: ‘Except that I am you, and you are me.’ The play as a whole asked, but not did answer, the questions of how we should relate to each other, as individuals and as citizens, and as such addressed some of the concerns I have been arguing are hard-coded into verse drama as a whole. By doing away with some of the distractions introduced by prose in a modern context, I felt I could more clearly convey the dramatic potential which an opposition between harmony and discord, both present and marked on the pulses of a shared metrical line, can make possible. Though their use was not bound by a dogmatic theoretical framework, shared and split lines, metrical disruption and interruption, enjambment and end-stopping all remained central to my dramaturgical process.

It therefore seems valuable, as I conclude my account of my own practice, to offer some suggestions as to how current performance practice might take these devices and resources into account – whether when working with a contemporary play in verse, or with elements of the classical repertoire, including Shakespeare – in order to most effectively communicate what I have argued are the form’s affordances. How can verse – classic or modern – in the contemporary theatre demonstrate its full potential as a signifying practice with political as well as aesthetic resonance?

Firstly, it seems necessary that playwrights interested in the effects of metrical norm, variation and the dramaturgical conflict and contact of split/shared lines find ways of working closely with a director to convey these in practice, and that productions consider carefully methods of collecting audience data which would lead to a workable

understanding of how such effects are perceived. The kind of close-up work involved in this recommendation, including detailed metrical scanning, is not negligible, given that even a short verse play such as *The Vetting of Kit Shaughnessy* comprises almost 1400 distinct lines.

Nonetheless, Oswald's comments above suggest the crucial importance of writers and directors collaborating on verse-based scripts in the rehearsal room to re-establish a set of skills which once were, but are no longer, part of the established mainstream of theatrical practice. Writers bear some responsibility to communicate, and directors to respect and exploit, the signifying properties of verse and its variations as a dramaturgical resource when taking poetic dialogue off the page into live performance. This network of knowledge about the words on the page, elaborated between writer and director, also has to be put into practice in the way that actors train and rehearse, if the political potential of verse to foreground and make audible and expressive the conflict between self and other and within societies – something I have found possible and effective in my own practice – is to be made manifest.

Some comments from the actors involved in *Free for All*, in our two Q&A sessions, suggest the benefits of emphasising this kind of heightened formal approach. Blake Barbiche (Jenny) noted that while 'the tendency [with using modern colloquial language] is to kind of think about it, and then speak ... actually that kind of structure helps you drive through the action more.' Director Rebecca Martin found that awareness of form was key: the 'regimented structure of the verse allows you to be quite free onstage, but without the regimented structure the whole thing kind of falls apart.' For Jayne Turpin (Kerry), verse means 'your mind works differently, it is a skill ... there's something very

satisfying when you get it,' and Chris Silvestri (Torben) discovered in the rehearsal process how the structure informed character and action onstage, in that it

specified choices I had to make, especially in a verse line where you have to make a line-break clear but there's no punctuation, so if it had been written in prose, for example, on one line I probably wouldn't try to have a discovery, or make a choice, or endow something in a negative or positive manner, but because there's a line break there, I have to. I have to try and make a choice as the character to try to get the audience to feel the line-break.

The idea that line-breaks are not only heard but felt returns us to the somatic awareness which Wright hypothesised as central to the experience of Shakespeare's original audiences (92). In the Introduction, I assembled a number of examples from contemporary reviewing practice which suggest that even today's theatre critics – habituated to seeing Shakespeare's plays performed in a variety of modes and styles – do not seem to share, or to articulate this awareness, in a meaningful way. What, then, could Shakespearean performance practice offer to foreground the feeling of verse and its variations being heard, without becoming – as Rokison cautions with respect to Peter Hall – bound by inflexible rules?

Ron Rosenbaum, interviewing Hall, implies the potentially chilling political resonance of such dogmatism when he suggests that references to 'Insisture ... proportion ... [the] line of order' in Ulysses's speech on degree, so forcefully appropriated by Nigel Lawson, 'could be Peter Hall talking about the importance of line structure or metrical regularity.'

The interviewer, however, finds the most convincing counter-argument in Hall's own theory and practice:

The metric structure, the line structure that Sir Peter insists on, is not repressive and confining, but expressive and liberating, like the expressive masks he used in *Tantalus*. The grace of the ballet depends on the base of rhythmic structure from which the graceful leaps, the spins and pirouettes take off. Improvisation in jazz arises not from nothing, not from noise, but from a melodic or rhythmic base.

That this has to be stated so explicitly in our current theatrical context suggests that the elements of artifice, poise, choreography – even ritual, as the reference to *Tantalus* implies – which the mainstream traditions of British theatre have largely abandoned might need to be recovered in order to best enable actors to make meaning from prosody. My own practice has led me to argue that a more heightened playing style, with a greater attention to line, structure, pause and emphasis – a style which, in short, treats the words as something more like poetry – is best-suited to enabling plays in verse to fully communicate their meanings.

This argument resonates unavoidably with recent debates over shared light playing – a term for theatre where the actors and audience exist under the same (usually natural) lighting conditions for the duration of a show – not least as throughout this project I have been using my own analogous term, 'shared metre.' In the context of Emma Rice's abrupt departure as Artistic Director of Shakespeare's Globe, the term 'shared light' has taken on a host of conservative connotations, with many critics finding the board's 2016

decision – with its emphasis on lighting – regrettably retrograde. Matt Trueman, for *The Stage*, links this debate directly with arguments over the delivery of verse:

There's been a small culture war waging on the South Bank ever since.

Traditionalists grumbled about the tech – this singular space designed for a pre-electric age being lit up like any other, its unique acoustic undercut by amps. There were carps about the verse speaking, and cavils about chopped-up texts.

But although insisting on the positive contribution that informed verse speaking can make risks aligning my work with the much-stigmatised ‘traditionalists,’ any assumption that attention to shared light *or* shared metre connotes a kind of knee-jerk conservatism overlooks the radical origins of the former and the political potential of the latter. In the introduction to *The Trackers of Oxyrynchus*, Tony Harrison argues that shared light, in the Greek and Elizabethan theatre, created ‘a communal act of attention ... in which the spellbinding metrical language also plays a primary part’ (6). In contrast to a later, generically ‘divided art’ which perpetuates ‘divided audiences, divided societies,’ Harrison asserts that in uniting a broad-based audience, the ‘[t]he shared light begs a common language’ (10, 6).

My argument is that the common language of shared-metre dramaturgy can evoke a similar, if illusory, breadth and wholeness. Poetic theatre can explore ideas of social structure, rupture and reconfiguration, and as practitioners, centring the strangeness of verse can allow us to foreground and dramatically work through these conflicts, rather than to take the conservative and, implicitly, the losing side in Trueman’s ‘culture war.’ I agree wholeheartedly with Natasha Tripney’s assertion – in defence of Rice – that the

Globe ought to be an ‘irreverent, intelligent, diverse, accessible and welcoming theatre that actively engages with these plays and what they might say to an audience today.’ A fully attentive use of Shakespeare’s plays’ inbuilt linguistic and structural resources can, however, play a valuable role in making these commendable objectives possible.

Incoming Globe director Michelle Terry has described the company’s two early modern-inspired auditoria as ‘pure and uniquely democratic spaces’ (Shakespeare’s Globe Blog). My research, and Harrison’s comments above, suggest that this vision of democracy can be unlocked precisely by emphasising the fact that verse is a unique, constitutive, formal and ontological difference between Shakespeare’s plays and most contemporary writing for theatre. To downplay that fact is to shy away from what these plays, and that medium, can do.

Terry has promised to ‘reclaim and rediscover not only Shakespeare, but the work of his contemporaries, alongside new work from our current writers’ – is it implausible to suggest she might revisit Globe founder Mark Rylance’s commitment, in 1998, to make ‘experiment[s] with new verse writing’ a central piece of the theatre’s strategy (quoted in Fallow 91)? I hope not, and I would therefore like to conclude with a rallying cry to both contemporary practitioners of poetry and theatre, and to those professionally invested in the study of Shakespeare.

Glyn Maxwell, with whose frustrating experience as a modern-day verse playwright this investigation began, appeals to his fellow authors to make his somewhat lonely position less unique:



I suddenly think this country full of poets good enough to try their hands  
at what they think has gone: verse on stage. Not what it was, what it is ...  
Make some poets' theatre, someone, before I go cheerfully mad alone in  
this field. (Character 13)

As each chapter of this thesis has demonstrated, a large part of what makes it seem 'mad' to even consider producing 'poets' theatre' (itself a suspect term) is the psychological difficulty caused by such work having to be both developed and judged in comparison to Shakespeare's practice. If practitioners are to resist this damaging paradigm, we should begin by noting that verse drama is treated in contemporary culture with a mixture of exceptionalism and outright contempt, and that this, as Christopher Fry argued, is fundamentally unhelpful to those working in any tradition of theatre.

Not only does this situation restrict the possibilities of expression available to creative artists, it further adds to what Emma Smith describes as 'the impossible ethical gravity with which we have charged these texts and, in particular, this author.' Treating verse drama as a form irrevocably tainted by its Shakespearean associations does very little to reduce the outsized cultural weight accorded to Shakespeare; writing our own verse plays, by contrast, is not an act of homage but an active demonstration that this form has not been perfected and time-locked, but can continue to produce effects in the present day which are not only available through the revival of classic texts.

What Ben Lerner aptly terms 'the hatred of poetry' in contemporary society is at least partly due to its status as a form apart from mainstream cultural expressions. How different might the cultural position of poetry be if it was heard as a mode of dialogue in modern-day political theatre; in TV sitcoms; in Netflix serials? How might our society

look if once again, as Wright commented of early modern England, '[r]hyme and meter belonged to the class of rhetorical devices [people] expected to meet in public places,' and what about our times might be discovered in the experiment (95)? I offer these questions not as rhetorical speculation, but as provocations for experimental practice on the part of writers, directors and commissioners. My accounts of how earlier writers have struggled with what to do with the overdetermination of Shakespearean influence might offer some preliminary guidance for practitioners in our own time.

This thesis further suggests that those of us working as teachers and researchers in the field of Shakespeare studies should be more attentive to subsequent verse drama. We, too, have an admission to make: there is an entirely unjustifiable fissure between the idea that Shakespeare can speak, at least to some extent, equally to and for a vast number of contrasting perspectives – his supposed universality – and the idea that there are a certain range of prescribed things verse drama by other people is for, can do, and can mean.

Despite the prevailing reductive accounts of verse in today's theatre criticism, most reviewers seem to believe that Shakespeare's plays are capable of more than the playwrights they dismiss.

Rather than consigning the formal framework which produced them to the dustbin of theatrical history, then, academics and practitioners alike should continue to offer it the same open-minded welcome, if we are to continue to perform and value Shakespeare's writing without ignoring one of its most distinctive qualities. We have become unfamiliar with this central tenet of Shakespeare's dramaturgy, and we have a duty as critics and practitioners to examine our complicated and ambiguous feelings about its presence in Shakespeare and throughout subsequent theatrical history. Many verse plays are not

candidates for imminent stage revival, but the process of negotiation with Shakespeare enacted through them over the centuries is something to which it is useful for us all to attend, whether we work on early modern literature or on the later periods of literary history this project has discussed.

The transhistorical conversation I have assembled can help us to reconstruct the changing significance, aesthetic and political, of Shakespeare and of poetic theatre – reminding us, for example, that the verse plays of the early twentieth century, as Morra argues, expressed a far more radical vision of the national community than they have been given credit for, and that Shakespeare was a key factor in the process by which Romantic-era verse playwrights began to address a wider social canvas than their eighteenth-century counterparts. It returns us to Levine’s provocation that the uses of form are inherently political, but not in the simplistic analogical relation to which they have frequently been reduced – a recognition which can only help Shakespeare, as Sinfield comments, be ‘reappropriated for othe[r]’ practices and attitudes to those in which he has traditionally reinforced hegemonic cultural values (137).

This thesis builds on the invaluable tracking of Shakespeare’s formal architecture by critics such as Wright, Marina Tarlinskaja and Russ McDonald, to establish why this should matter to us as thinkers engaged not only in the aesthetic, but in the political and social world. It also supplements Kiernan Ryan’s and Richard Wilson’s work with a concretely formalist frame of reference, to argue that ‘universality’ and agonism are *both* at the heart of Shakespeare’s use of form, and that this is what allows his plays, in performance, to counterpose self and other, individual and community, in a manner which is profoundly and inherently political. It counters the most significant previous

reading of the history of post-Shakespearean verse drama by Steiner, and suggests how dramatic verse could be not only an egalitarian, but a living form. Engaging with Rokison's practice-oriented research to suggest how theatre-makers could enhance their ability to make political dialectics within Shakespeare visible and audible, it also prompts contemporary poets and playwrights to consider possibilities for the role of dramatic verse in their own practice. And finally, it opens the path for future critical work which engages both with the political potential embedded in Shakespeare's use of verse, and with contemporary practitioners who apply themselves to exploring and exploiting those same dramaturgical resources.

Many readers today will share Jaques's dismissal in *As You Like It* of a form of language heard as affected, overblown, inappropriate to an informal context: 'God b' wi' you, an you talk in blank verse' (4.1.24). But Jaques avails himself of this resource to deliver one of the best-known speeches in the English language. This tension – between his embrace of and his distaste for the medium – is all around us, in reactions to Shakespeare and to verse drama produced by later authors, and is central to understanding the conflicted position (blank) verse in the theatre occupies today. Like Jaques, we are all sometimes sick of hearing it. And like Jaques, we are all too aware of what it can do when used effectively. We are, perhaps, simply no longer used to truly hearing verse, by Shakespeare or any other playwright, onstage. This thesis encourages readers to hear it spoken again, fully and without embarrassment; to hear its form as clearly and significantly as its content; and to advocate for the opportunity for contemporary theatre-goers to hear it in the wide range of contexts and situations to which it can speak, and in which, now as much as ever, it deserves to be heard.

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