

I

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Shakespeare and the Problem of Style

How does Shakespeare speak of style? Among his twenty thousand or so words, 'style' is not especially prominent, occurring fewer than twenty times. The range of those few uses, however, is wide enough to show the complexity of the concept, and to suggest how vital it is for his work even when it goes unnamed. Take these two bantering aristocrats. They are talking about style as though it had an altitude:

MARGARET Will you then write me a sonnet in praise of my beauty?
BENEDICK In so high a style, Margaret, that no man living shall come
over it. (*Ado* 5.2.3–6)

A high style, Benedick maintains, suits the elevated subject of love, and it vaults him above his competitors. He draws on the rhetoricians' traditional distinction of high, middle, and low. Another meaning of style must be in play when the word is used in the forest by a shivering courtier:

AMIENS I would not change it; happy is your grace
That can translate the stubbornness of Fortune
Into so quiet and so sweet a style. (*AYLI* 2.1.18–20)

These lines address the exiled Duke Senior, who has been rehearsing the consolations of his new home in Arcadia. Amiens praises his eloquence, and also his forbearance, the ability to translate hardship into a melodious stoicism. Style is a quality as well as a measure, and a way of living as well as speaking. Such continence and self-control are the very opposite of what the courtier Boyet points out in the Spaniard Don Armado:

PRINCESS What plume of feathers is he that indited this letter?
What vane? What weathercock? Did you ever hear better?
BOYET I am much deceived but I remember the style. (*LLL* 4.1.87–89)

The blustering soldier has an epistolary style that gives him away, excessive, self-aggrandizing, and not altogether deliberate. Style can be particular to an individual, and it can be a vice. It can also tell time:

But since he died, and poets better prove,
 Theirs for their style I'll read, his for his love. (Sonnet 32, 13–14)

Poets are better now, at least in the present's judgement; it is the newcomers that the speaker will read for their style. Style can be a marker of historical time and seasons of fashion. It also seems to be a way of thinking about something that has been lost.

Style as skill, style as a way of living, style as identity, style as time. Style as choice and as compulsion. The meanings of style in Shakespeare's lifetime are various enough to wish that there were another word or two to keep them straight, so much more with the meanings of style today. The problem of style is just this, its tangle of internal contradictions. Style is teachable and demands a specialised vocabulary, but it is also social and occasional, and depends upon a feel for situations. Style is the way we recognise groups and movements, past and present, but it is also the way we pick particular voices from a crowd. Shakespeare exposes these contradictions with unique force. His voice is often said to dissolve into the voices of his creations, each character with a style of his or her own; and yet his own singularity must be a matter of sounding different from other writers of his age, and also of sounding like himself. Conviction in that singularity has gone hand in hand with three centuries of argument about what he wrote and what he did not. The work of this chapter will be to try to hold these meanings and questions together in a survey of Shakespeare's career; to provide an outline of the development of the style of the plays, but also to see them together as a long enquiry into the problem of style itself.

Early Plays: Style and Skill

Style is always to do with difference. Take the following two passages:

I to the world am like a drop of water
 That in the ocean seeks another drop,
 Who, falling there to find his fellow forth,
 Unseen, inquisitive, confounds himself. (Err. 1.2.35–38)

The capon burns, the pig falls from the spit.
 The clock hath stricken twelve upon the bell,
 My mistress made it one upon my cheek.
 She is so hot because the meat is cold. (Err. 1.2.44–47)

They are of palpably different styles; you can feel that difference, without immediately being able to say why. The study of style is always a negotiation between such impressions and the analysis that would explain them. The primary sense of the word in the period was technical, grounded in

the ancient *artes* of grammar and rhetoric, arts – in the sense of a body of rules, descriptive and prescriptive – that remain the most basic resources for stylistic description. A modern reader might observe of the first passage that its single sentence is highly subordinated, with two nested, dependent clauses. (*Clausulae*, in sixteenth-century grammatical terminology.)¹ The final clause, beginning with ‘who’, is elegantly suspended, postponing the verb to the end in the manner of a classical period. To speak of a period is to cross from grammar, the rules of use, into rhetoric, the art of persuasion. A period is an orator’s device, a show of skill, training, and perhaps fortunate birth. Rhetoric will also point to the formal analogy – *I am to the world as the drop is to the ocean* – and the parallelisms that define it. The choice of words, too, matters to the sense of a style. The diction is mostly plain, a run of good Anglo-Saxon, but the conspicuously Latinate ‘inquisitive’ has a prominent place near the close.

Grammar, rhetoric, diction. The second passage, by contrast, is paratactic: no suspension, just one clause after another. It is asyndetic: omitting conjunctions, to colloquial effect. Both terms come from classical rhetoric, though the lines they describe do not sound particularly Roman. The vocabulary is predominantly Anglo-Saxon and, with that already old-fashioned *-en* verb ending in ‘strucken’, even a little homely. That is not to say the lines are without patterns of language that the rhetoricians would recognise. Parallelism structures everything: the capon burning and the pig falling, the clock and the mistress striking, the cheek and the bell struck. The rhetoric handbooks of the time, in Latin and English, would call this balancing act *isocolon*. The parallels are tight, if crude, repetitive, and predictable. They are also urgent, energetic, and funny.

The differences are obvious, the more so when they are itemised. They are obvious in a different way when they are side-by-side in the second scene of *The Comedy of Errors* (1594).² The weary traveller Antipholus of Syracuse meets Dromio of Ephesus, the lost-twin servant of his lost-twin brother, for the first time. He mistakes the Ephesian for his own man, Dromio of Syracuse, whom he has just dispatched on an errand. ‘What now? How chance thou art returned so soon?’ says the disoriented Antipholus. ‘Returned so soon? Rather approached too late’ (1.2.42–43), replies the wrong Dromio. The reader with leisure to parse the sentences must remember that the grammatical and rhetorical contrast is embodied as a social encounter on the stage, where the differences are matters of character and station, coloured in with costume, gesture, posture, and accent. Still, a technical analysis is not beside the point, even for a theatregoer. Like the rest of the play, the scene hews close to the devices of Roman comedy, Plautus’s *Menaechmi* in particular, and its most slapstick moments have a classical pedigree. The exchange is

stylised, as a modern would say; as Shakespeare's age would have it, artificial. Even for a contemporary audience member who could not hear the Latin behind the English, it would have played both as a comic fiction of authority and disobedience, and as an exhibition of joint skill in the arts of language.

Such style-effects are among the reasons why the early Shakespeare is sometimes called a literary dramatist. The humanist canon of Plautus and Ovid and Virgil is prominent among his influences, and the names of the rhetoricians' schemes and tropes sometimes hover over the action like supertitles. That can be true even in moments of high tragedy, as when, in *Titus Andronicus*, Titus's brother Marcus first sees his ravished, tongueless niece Lavinia. Listen, again, for the parallelisms:

Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind,
Doth rise and fall between thy rosèd lips,
Coming and going with thy honey breath. (2.4.22–25)

Rise and fall, coming and going; rosèd lips, honey breath. Such devices afford a particular kind of pleasure, which Shakespeare stages for maximum contrast with the violent fiction. The actors are playing a game that members of the audience can also play, the game of eloquence, and the theatre is at once a field outside ancient Rome and a social space of shared skill. Tragic event is also rhetorical occasion. One of the most important backgrounds for such performances of style – almost superimposed as a second stage upon that Roman field – is the Elizabethan schoolroom, where Shakespeare likely first read his Plautus and his Ovid. He was one of a number of well-educated playwrights emerging in the 1590s, which included men like Robert Greene, Thomas Kyd, and George Peele, who had grammar school or even university training. The boys learned to imitate Roman orators and poets, and to fill their commonplace books and their minds with the names of figures like *isocolon* and *anaphora* and *parataxis*. Frequent declamations and disputations and even, in some schools, the staging of Latin plays made the study of language into a performance, and behind Marcus's perverse fluency are countless classroom impersonations of Dido or Hecuba.³

The coordinates of place, time, and station afforded by style can be very precise, but the schoolroom imposed a gross measure that shaped the period's consciousness of stylistic possibility. Style has three levels, or 'three principal complexions', as George Puttenham put it in 1589: 'high, mean, and base'.⁴ The division had the authority of Cicero, who had given the *genera dicendi*, or kinds of speech, their canonical formulations. The *genus grande* has 'splendid power of thought and majesty of diction', sometimes

achieved by poised and rounded sentences, artefacts of masterful premeditation; sometimes by a rougher vocabulary and blunter, irregular sentence structures, made in the heat of an urgent occasion. The *genus humile* is good for ‘explaining everything and making every point clear rather than impressive, using a refined, concise style stripped of ornament’. Between them lies a style ‘*medius et quasi temperatus*’, moderate and tempered, the middle style, which uses ‘neither the intellectual appeal of the latter class nor the fiery force of the former’. For some later theorists, this middle style could be ‘flowery’ or ‘sweet’, the idiom of lyric.⁵ The three would come to be identified with three motives: the high style, for moving its audience (*movere*); the middle, for pleasing (*conciliare* or *placere*); the low, for teaching (*docere*).

The levels of style are an ideology as much as an expressive repertoire. Together they project an ideal of decorum, the right level for every situation. Subject matter and speaker are both to be taken into account: ‘It behooveth the maker or the poet to follow the nature of his subject’, Puttenham advises, but it ‘may it be said as well that men do choose their subjects according to the mettle of their minds’ (234). When the style suits the occasion, when each interlocutor knows his or her place, society is integral and whole. The humanist ambition to unite eloquence and wise counsel is secure. When there is dissonance in the system it is a sign of dissent or injustice. *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (1594–5) is a particularly self-conscious laboratory for such stylistic adjustments, perhaps the play in Shakespeare’s canon most *about* style. As the action begins, if ‘action’ is the right word, King Ferdinand and his attendant lords have pledged themselves to three years of scholarly austerity. Their idiom is wit, an agile middle style. The play derives much of its comedy from listening in as they trade their arch banter for the high-style Petrarchan flights of their sonnets, falling in love, one by one, with the Princess of France and her retinue, preparing the way for a quartet of dynastic unions. Unless, that is, Petrarchan poetry is better understood as a lyric middle style. In that case, a true high style goes missing in the play, a play in which the nobility have retired to the country, absent from their courts, and which ends by deferring those marriages for a year. The levels can be tricky to apply in practice. The system cannot clarify, let alone resolve, every situation.

That there are *genera dicendi*, however, and that the play negotiates among them, is clear enough. As though to contain the possible confusions, *Love’s Labour’s Lost* surrounds its aristocratic speakers with avatars of obvious stylistic excess. Don Armado’s military high style is corrupt with bluster and the fashionable language of duelling manuals: ‘the *passado* he respects not, the *duello* he regards not. His disgrace is to be called boy,

but his glory is to subdue men. Adieu, valour; rust, rapier; be still, drum' (1.2.145–148). The punctiliousness of the schoolmaster Holofernes extends to pronouncing silent letters with special emphasis: 'I abhor such fanatical phantasimes, such insociable and point-device companions, such as rackers of orthography, as to speak "dout" sine "b", when he should say "doubt" ... It insinuateth me of insanie. *Ne intelligis, domine?*' (5.1.15–21). The Don and the pedant are two versions of the high style gone wrong, and a well-schooled ear will pick out the vices, the comically exaggerated patterning, foreign words, over-weaning copia, and pretentious, undigested Latin. Minor characters are often defined by such stylistic rigidity. If the repertory of the levels promises the free choice of rhetorical virtuosity, such characters suggest something different, style as a compulsion.

The liberties and bondages of artifice are the problem of style for early Shakespeare. It is, again, a literary problem. When he was writing *Love's Labour's Lost*, he was still publishing narrative poems in his own name, *Venus and Adonis* in 1592–3 and *The Rape of Lucrece* in 1593–4. He was closely involved with the community of other playwrights. His debts to Marlowe are widely recognised; at times Shakespeare imitates him as he might have imitated Ovid in school. (Critics have heard the Tamburlaine and Barabas in his Aaron: 'Now climbeth Tamora Olympus' top, / Safe out of fortune's shot, and sits aloft, / Secure of thunder's crack or lightning flash' (*Tit.* 2.1.1–3).) The banter of the Antipholus twins or the French gentlemen would not be out of place in Peele or Greene. The early plays, that is, show a shared reliance on a style system to make character. Shakespeare inhabits that system with burgeoning virtuosity, but it is fair to say that through *Love's Labour's Lost* he distinguishes himself primarily by skill, rather than by the making of an outlying, tell-tale style. The received rhetorical accounts of high, middle, low, and their derivatives – 'the plain and obscure, the rough and smooth, the facile and hard, the plentiful and barren, the rude and eloquent, the strong and feeble, the vehement and cold' (234), as Puttenham puts it – those given styles, ingeniously managed, sometimes exaggerated and satirised, are nonetheless adequate, more or less, to the stories he wants to tell and the people with which he populates them.

Middle Plays: Style and Voice

It is a six-year leap from *Love's Labour's Lost* to *Hamlet*, and what has changed in the plays between – *The Merchant of Venice*, the Henriad, *As You Like It*, among others – can be heard when the prince first speaks. The scene is the Danish court, where Hamlet's uncle Claudius has gathered his

council to act out what he hopes will be the final act of a comedy, in which a resourceful marriage, to his dead brother's widow, brings peace to the kingdom of Denmark.

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
 Th'imperial jointress of this warlike state,
 Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
 With one auspicious and one dropping eye,
 With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
 In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
 Taken to wife. (I.2.8–14)

Claudius writes his play in a high style: the masterful parallelism, the suspension of the periodic sentence, ending with an assertion as politically ruthless as it is syntactically elegant. The language of reconciled paradox prepares his audience to accept a union between 'uncle-father and aunt-mother' (2.2.344–345), as Hamlet later puts it. The new king meets no resistance until he looks to Hamlet himself. 'But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son', he says, turning his arbitration of opposites into a claim of paternity. Hamlet interrupts: 'A little more than kin, and less than kind' (1.2.65). The line plays along with Claudius's parallelism, but barbs it with a pun, driven between kinship and kindness. The exchange is a patent collision of styles, like the high melancholy of Antipholus and the comic plainness of Dromio – but what is Hamlet's style? He manages to be both plain and opaque at once, a maximum refusal of his uncle's stylised manipulations. What level is that? He will not play in Claudius's play, and he will not articulate his speech to the speech around him.

To Hamlet we will return. In the meantime he can stand for a change in the way that the problem of style is posed in the middle plays. The traditional criteria of rhetorical skill become less important, or rather, they are submerged into a complex of plot and character that interacts with language in new ways, more dynamic and idiosyncratic. Five years before *Hamlet*, Shakespeare wrote a scene between King Richard II and the usurper Bullingbrook that reflects this evolving relation to the *genera dicendi*. Like Claudius, Richard is trying to conjure a sense of ceremony out of a broken custom – though he is not usurping the crown, but letting it go. He calls for a mirror, hoping it will show him who he has become.

RICHARD

Was this the face
 That like the sun did make beholders wink?
 Is this the face which faced so many follies,
 That was at last outfaced by Bullingbrook?

A brittle glory shineth in this face.
 As brittle as the glory is the face,
 [*Smashes the glass.*]
 For there it is, cracked in a hundred shivers. (4.1.282–288)

There is something of the capable statesman's balancing act in the lines' parallelism and anaphora, but Richard is more poet than king, and his dignified cadences are shot through with more anarchic wordplay: 'face', 'face', 'outfaced'. Such punning is almost always in Shakespeare the resource of the disempowered. When Richard takes it up, he is laying down his claim to rule. Bullingbrook, who assumes the crown, began the play in overflowing outrage, but he has learned by Act 4 a new self-control. His answer here is terse: 'The shadow of your sorrow hath destroyed / The shadow of your face' (4.1.291–292). He echoes Richard's isocolon and anaphora and even his wordplay, but subjects them to the discipline of a new regime.

This basic plot of transition from a ceremonial order to the pragmatic language of a disenchanted *Realpolitik* is acted out again and again. In *Julius Caesar*, it can be heard in the words. The old-school Stoicism of Brutus is gradually suborned by the ambitions of Cassius as they conspire in the emperor's murder, and Cassius's new-fangled vocabulary insinuates itself in words like 'majestic' or 'indifferent'.⁶ (When Brutus starts to waver, he muses, 'Fashion it thus' (2.1.30).) Style is doing its work of telling historical time. The same rough plot happens inside Prince Hal, Bullingbrook's son, in *Henry IV, Part 1*. The dialect Hal forsakes is the raucous prose of the Eastcheap Tavern, where he prides himself on his fluency: 'They call drinking deep "dyeing scarlet", and when you breathe in your watering they cry "Hem!" and bid you "Play it off!" To conclude, I am so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life' (2.4.12–16). The dialect he takes up is the high ceremonial idiom of his ageing father. But he can sound like that pragmatic new man too. Consider his response to Falstaff's passionate self-defence in the second act's mock trial, a torrent of copious prose that concludes with three stirring lines of iambic pentameter: 'banish him not thy Harry's company, banish him not thy Harry's company. Banish plump Jack, and banish all the world' (2.4.396–398). Playing the part of his father, Hal's efficiency would make the Bullingbrook of *King Richard II* proud: 'I do, I will' (2.4.399).

Such characters shift stations and place themselves variously in time. It is not only the hierarchy of styles, however, that defines their differences. They also explore regions of a language-map that has become increasingly psychological as well as political and historical. Cicero, master of the *genera dicendi*, offers precedent for this notion of individual stylistic idiosyncrasy.

In his *De Oratore* he asks of the great orators, ‘which resembles anyone but himself?’⁷ Shakespeare’s characters sound different from themselves over time, too, whether because they are managing a complex stylistic repertory, like Hal or the aristocrats of *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, or because their voices alter under the pressure of events. In *Othello* the field of stylistic affinity and difference is as dynamic as the plot. The opening scenes make a statement of what G. Wilson Knight has called the ‘Othello music’,⁸ the confident, Marlovian high style that is the general at his most authoritative:

Wherein I spake of most disastrous chances
Of moving accidents by flood and field,
Of hair-breadth scapes i’th’imminent deadly breach,
Of being taken by the insolent foe
And sold to slavery; of my redemption thence. (1.3.133–137)

But there is another music in the play, the barbed wit of Iago, with its thrust-and-parry prose and the jangle of its rhyming. When Othello begins to succumb to Iago’s hints about his wife’s infidelity, his language crosses towards his tempter’s, imagining the lovers ‘as prime as goats, as hot as monkeys, / As salt as wolves in pride’ (3.3.405–406). The fate of Antony in *Antony and Cleopatra* can likewise be told in his (Anthony’s) stylistic volatility, the lavish high style of his self-abandonment (‘Let Rome in Tiber melt’ (1.1.35)); the terse, Stoic maxims with which he greets news of his wife’s death (‘She’s good, being gone’ (1.2.123)); the broken language of his shame after Actium (‘Apace, Eros, apace! / No more a soldier. Bruisèd pieces, go’ (4.15.41–42)). Cleopatra’s magnificent oratory at his death is the synthesis of sensuousity and imperial grandeur that he himself could never quite sustain.

If individual voice is one of Shakespeare’s great achievements – taking voice to be style, when it is attached to an individual – that achievement is a precarious one for his speakers. They move in and out of one another’s fields of imitative influence, while vying for position on a grid of formal, rhetorical possibility. Features of style cross between scenes and acts, too, and it is possible to speak of the sound that pervades individual plays. In *Macbeth*, that sound is portentous, hypnotic antithesis: ‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’ (1.1.12), ‘To know my deed, ‘twere best not know myself’ (2.2.76), ‘it makes him, and it mars him’ (2.3.26). You could say that it is the sound of the play thinking, obsessively, about divided consciousness and divided time. Other plays have comparable devices, which sublimate a particular rhetorical figure into an encompassing atmosphere: hendiadys in *Hamlet*, as George T. Wright has shown (‘the trappings and the suits of woe’ (1.2.86)), or what John Porter Houston identifies as the fragmentary, dissociated copia, the

‘inelegant abundance’, of *Coriolanus*.⁹ Style plays its role in world-making as it does in self-making. For just this reason, it recedes as a self-conscious category; or at least, it isn’t as forward as the performative artificiality that pervades some earlier plays. The change is consistent with a phase of Shakespeare’s career in which his great work is tragedy. The virtuosity of these plays it is not the kind that invites the wits in the audience to play along. The tragic predicament is always that we can only listen and watch.

Hamlet himself, that most charismatic of enigmas, is ever at the centre of all of such questions. His lines are a constant syntactic experiment. He is given to infolded brevity, but he can be garrulous and charming, as he is in welcoming the players. He sounds so modern, but has an apparent weakness for the fustian rhetoric of the old repertoire. He is a nimble mimic, whether he is ridiculing a slower wit like the foppish Osric or ‘out-Herod[ing] Herod’ (3.2.111). There are names for what his sentences do, like the anacoluthon of their self-interruption or the catachresis, the metaphorical abandon, of his more extreme conceits. Still there is something anti-rhetorical about the way it comes out, especially in the soliloquies: ‘the syntax of shifting consciousness, not of logical development’ (91), as Houston puts it. Puttenham reminds us that style is

of words, speeches, and sentences together a certain contrived form and quality, many times natural to the writer, many times his peculiar by election and art, and such as either he keepeth by skill or holdeth on by ignorance, and will not or peradventure cannot easily alter into any other. (233)

Is style at Hamlet’s command, an artful choice; or is it something he cannot change, at the mercy of habit or mood or ancient injury? Is it artificial, or all too natural? A skill or a symptom? Does Hamlet sound like himself, or helplessly, variously like the world he so despairs of? In this sense the problem of Hamlet is also the problem of style.

Interlude: Counting Style

The *dramatis personae*, the juxtaposition of scenes, the sequence of plays: they are all fields for the perception of stylistic difference. The question so far has been how Shakespeare constructs these networks of affinity and distinction inside his fictions. What of the playwright himself, in the larger field of the language, where style can be a key to what he wrote, when he wrote it, and the place he made for himself among other playwrights? English as he had it over his lifetime was much less standardised than it would be even fifty years later. The first monolingual English dictionary was not printed until 1604. There was an English grammar in 1586, but it had

no wide circulation, and there would not be another for thirty years. The language, meanwhile, was changing rapidly, carried into new tasks and territories by the rise of printing, widening trade networks, and the vernacular impulse of reformed religion. Many humanists, protectors of a culture of classical learning in the schools and universities, doubted that English could achieve the eloquence or poetic power of their Roman heroes. Others, like the poet George Gascoigne, defended its vulgar eloquence: ‘You shall do very well to use your verse after thenglishe phrase, and not after the maner of other languages.’¹⁰ The climate of debate and change meant that English was an instrument of great historical sensitivity. Expressive choices not only mapped the social landscape, but implied different visions of the national past and the national future.

Those choices begin with words, of which Shakespeare’s dramatic vocabulary includes about twenty thousand. There has been a running argument among critics about how many he invented, as high as 2,200 if you count first recorded uses in the *OED*, though estimates have declined steadily as more period texts have been digitised and rendered searchable.¹¹ What can still be said with certainty is that he was an unusually vigorous participant in a culture of new coinage. Where to get the new words was a controversial question, with humanists tending to promote the archive of the ancient languages, Latin and Greek; others standing by the native, Anglo-Saxon roots of what Gascoigne called ‘auncient English’ (457). George Puttenham was a polemicist in the second camp. He offered new, English terms for the rhetorical figures, like *sage-sayer* for *sententia* and *trespasser* for *hyperbaton*. The humanists’ Latinity was disparaged as ‘inkhornism’. The diagnosis suits Holofernes: ‘This is a gift that I have, simple, simple – a foolish extravagant spirit, full of forms, figures, shapes, objects, ideas, apprehensions, motions, revolutions’ (*LLL* 4.2.59–61).

Shakespeare seems to have shared that scepticism about the inkhorn, and the plays often go in for mocking pedants. That is not to say he does not avail himself of a higher style. Holofernes’s multiplication of near-synonyms is a parody of Erasmian *copia*, the humanist ideal of a various and plentiful eloquence. Claudius’s parallelisms are a more controlled example; fat Falstaff incarnates an exuberant, vernacular translation. Doublings of the Anglo-Saxon and Latin arbitrate between these language-worlds, phrases like ‘dull and long-continued’ (*Tro.* 1.3.259) or ‘wise saws and modern instances’ (*AYLI* 2.7.156), often pairing a common and a hard word by way of definition on the fly. The nativist impulse is audible in inventive compounds, like Lear’s ‘thought-executing’ or ‘pent-up’ (*Lear* 3.2.4, 55). Compounds tend to sound more German, less French or Italian or Latinate. (These modern romance languages are often treated, for comic effect, as

pretentious.) Shakespeare also uses archaic forms, like Dromio's 'strucken', mostly to mark a speaker as un-cosmopolitan. He will occasionally put regional dialect in the mouth of a character like *King Lear*'s Poor Tom, who seems to come from the southern shires. There is little of what we would now call slang in the plays. Uneducated speakers, however, deform the language in haplessly ingenious ways.

Shakespeare is the master of a particular moment in the history of English vocabulary, one that was formative for the double nature of the language. He bounces Anglo-Saxon and Latin or romance lineages off one another in a constant play of high and low, abstract and concrete, fluent and terse. For all his free command, however, a couple of tendencies emerge. First, his vocabulary is somewhat less Latinate than that of his contemporaries, at least his contemporaries among the learned playwrights. If the Latin shows to effect, that is partly a consequence of vigorous and constant contrast. Second, in cases where older and newer forms are in free variation, Shakespeare has a discernible preference, throughout his career, for the past. The verb ending *-eth*, an older and outgoing form for the third person singular, is a good example. It is of service metrically, giving the poet an extra syllable when he needs it, but Shakespeare uses it more than other poets do. Something similar could be said about his syntax. Jonathan Hope and others have studied his use of auxiliary *do*, a grammatical construction that was unregulated in the period, meaning that it could be used, or not, in place of the simple past in phrases like 'mine eyes did see' or 'our ship did split' (*TN* 1.1.18, 1.2.8). In modern English, the form is used only for questions and specific emphasis (Did she go? – she *did* go!). The historical trend is strongly towards regulation even in 1600, and Shakespeare's contemporaries among the poets mostly went along. Shakespeare continued to use these auxiliaries all his life.¹²

There is a deep feeling for the old world in Shakespeare's work, the world whose loss he dramatised again and again at the hands of Bullingbrook and Octavius and Edgar and even perhaps Hamlet. His innovations feel to modern readers as though they point to the future. This may be perhaps less because of his pointing than our following. Whether or not he became newer, he did become increasingly different, increasingly experimental. The syntactic resources of the plays steadily expand, enriched and complicated with new techniques of dilation, fragmentation, and interruption. His metre changes, too. The handling of the iambic line in the early plays is indistinguishable from that of his contemporaries – quite regular, with lines syntactically end-stopped and frequently rhymed. Metre never does become a technique for differentiating character, but the total rhythm of the plays is more and more adventurous as time goes on, with more short lines, more

lines shared between characters, more ambiguity in the scansion of syllables, and a general shift from the priority of the line to the priority of the phrase.¹³ Such changes have all been of use to scholars dating the plays. Across all the registers of style there are gradual changes, the career of Shakespeare's style, within the larger, shared stories told by the history of the language.

Out of these countless choices or dispositions or tics, across so many registers, lexical, syntactic, rhetorical, metrical, it is possible to gather a sense of the style of the playwright, a style particular to Shakespeare himself – a voice. Confidence that his voice is recognisable among the differences of his characters has often underwritten claims about what he wrote and what he did not. The who-was-Shakespeare-really industry argues for his sounding like everyone from Marlowe to Bacon to the Earl of Oxford. (Not always wrongly; but that is not because they wrote his plays.) More convincing research has focused on identifying Shakespeare's voice in works he shared with others. Co-authorship was common during his theatrical career, and as many as half of the surviving plays were the work of more than one hand. His last two plays are now widely agreed to have been written with John Fletcher; others, such as *Titus Andronicus* and *Henry VI, Part 1*, and even *Macbeth*, contain passages by other writers. The history of *Henry VIII* is exemplary. As early as 1758, the poet and editor Richard Roderick observed the unusual incidence in the play of weak line endings, lines ending with an unstressed syllable, many more than usual even in late Shakespeare. In 1850, James Spedding made a speculative division of the play's scenes between Shakespeare and Fletcher, in an act of connoisseurship that relied on 'a general effect produced on the mind, the ear, and the feelings by a free and broad perusal'.¹⁴ Style is an impression, after all. But he bolstered his hypothesis with a count of those weak endings, looking back to Roderick's observation, and his divisions have held up well.

Modern scholarship negotiates between intuition and quantification using an increasingly sophisticated set of computational tools for parsing the plays' language. The authorial signature can be tested by a variety of methods, including distinctive combinations of words, habits of grammar, counts of so-called 'function words', 'this's and 'with's. The computer can patiently weigh things that neither reader nor writer ever cared about, or knew they cared about, or at all events did not choose. Such tests have helped confirm, refine, and sometimes challenge traditional arguments about the dating of the plays. They have offered some evidence for the stylistic differences that obtain among characters. They also suggest that those differences begin to disappear in the later plays, that the traditional measures of style, bound up for a time with characterisation, begin to loosen those bonds.¹⁵ Here, too, counting provides new evidence for some old impressions. It was in 1808

that Charles Lamb said that Fletcher ‘lays line upon line ... adding image to image so deliberately that we see where they join. Shakespeare mingles everything, embarrasses sentences and metaphors; before one has burst its shell, another is hatched and clamours for this disclosure’ (Vickers 362).

Late Plays: Style and Time

Consider a modern critic who takes a similar view of this mixing in late Shakespeare, Anne Barton. ‘Over and over again’, she writes, ‘Shakespeare jettisons consistency of characterization because he is more interested in the impersonal quality of a moment of dramatic time’.¹⁶ She points to Leontes’s rant in *The Winter’s Tale*, when he cries, ‘I have drunk, and seen the spider’ (2.1.45). It is an extreme performance, in its broken torrent of self-rebuke, but one that epitomises larger changes in the way the plays sound. He is only slightly less heated when he accuses his counsellor Camillo of disloyalty:

To bide upon’t; thou art not honest; or,
 If thou inclin’st that way, thou art a coward,
 Which hoxes honesty behind, restraining
 From course required; or else thou must be counted
 A servant grafted in my serious trust,
 And therein negligent; or else a fool. (1.2.239–244)

Modern editors are driven to desperate ingenuities of dash, semicolon, and comma to parse what is ultimately an unparsable onrush. Camillo begins his answer in a different style, making a list out of the king’s rant – ‘I may be negligent, foolish, and fearful’ (247) – and then returning to each term in order, a careful *correlatio*: ‘If ever I were wilful-negligent, / It was my folly; if industriously / I played the fool, it was my negligence ... if ever fearful ... ’twas a fear / Which oft infects the wisest’ (252–259). But here he is in Act 4, trying to persuade the prince Florizel to go to Sicilia:

A course more promising
 Than a wild dedication of yourselves
 To unpathed waters, undreamed shores – most certain
 To miseries enough; no hope to help you,
 But as you shake off one to take another;
 Nothing so certain as your anchors, who
 Do their best office if they can but stay you
 Where you’ll be loath to be. (4.4.545–552)

Camillo claims to recommend the safer path, but his language has his old master’s wildness. It seems to be something about the play that makes him sound this way.

What this wildness means is the great question of the romances. Some of Shakespeare's most radical experiments take place in the almost retrograde context of what Ben Jonson would call his 'moldy tales'. There is more of a consensus about how the late plays sound. The metre has become ever less regular, more freely enjambed, more phrasal in its rhythms. The syntax is more convoluted. As Russ McDonald puts it, 'the number of deformed phrases, directional shifts, and intricately constructed sentences is exceptional'.¹⁷ McDonald also identifies such hallmarks as dropped connectives between clauses (as with 'miseries enough – no hope'); a heavy dependence on parenthesis; insistent, almost obsessive, repetition of letters, words, phrases, and rhythms; and a copia of dissociated metaphors, the hatching and clamouring of Lamb's account, like Leontes's whiplash transition above from hoxing (or hamstringing) an animal to grafting a plant. Modern critics turn again and again to that word 'experimental' to capture these changes, but if it fits, it is not exactly our idea of experiment, with its purposes and controls; more a kind of limit-seeking that remembers the etymological bond between 'experiment' and 'peril'.

It is tempting to take the mage Prospero as the avatar of this late transformation. He is the solitary maker writing the play of his own abdication, ventriloquising as best he can the other characters in pursuit of a resolution that embraces and transcends them all. His voice is the most prominent in *The Tempest*, and if the other characters sound alike, you could say it is because they sound like him. (Consider Miranda rebuking Caliban, incarnating all her father's anxious rage: 'When thou didst not, savage, / Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like / A thing most brutish, I endowed thy purposes / With words that made them known' (1.2.355–358).) Prospero gives us the late style beloved of Theodor Adorno and Hermann Broch: Shakespeare as a kind of Beethoven, finally deaf to the world and listening only to himself; a man whose argument now is only with time, the still-unvanquished demon of the tragedies.¹⁸ The compressed, elliptical, unpredictable lines are little models of the compressed, elliptical, unpredictable plots by which all the late plays find their way back to some chastened version of the consolations of comedy.

That said, *The Tempest* is not Shakespeare's last play. *Henry VIII* and *The Two Noble Kinsmen* were yet to come, the plays he wrote with John Fletcher. Brian Vickers, in his study of co-authorship, puts Fletcher and Shakespeare side-by-side to remind us of the difference in their voices (362–363):

He counsels a divorce, a loss of her
That like a jewel has hung twenty years
About his neck, yet never lost her lustre. (H8 2.2.29–33)

His highness, having lived so long with her, and she
 So good a lady that no tongue could ever
 Pronounce dishonour of her – by my life,
 She never knew harm-doing. (H8 2.3.2–5)

Two different characters, Norfolk and Anne Boleyn, are speaking of Queen Katherine; but also two different playwrights. They are not easy to confuse: Fletcher's is perfectly good poetry, a thought evenly sustained through a lucid image; in Shakespeare, the language breaks midway, tumbling from the poised Latinity of 'pronounce dishonour' to the urgent, Anglo-Saxon compound 'harm-doing'. It is all style, but by no means all surface. There are ways, to be sure, in which these late plays might be said to show the influence of Fletcher on Shakespeare. Bart Van Es argues that the younger man was associated with a growing fashion for an 'aestheticised, experimental'¹⁹ drama; the plays he wrote before his collaborations featured elements of masque, magic, and meta-theatre that become especially important to Shakespeare after *Pericles*. Such large-scale matters of plot and atmosphere are part of style too, how we locate the plays in their social and professional surroundings. The late Shakespeare is a playwright among playwrights, in some ways a literary dramatist again. Still, he sounds different, and line by line, he sounds like himself.

Which is to say that however it may be explained, the problem of style comes forward again at the end of Shakespeare's career. The skill of the early plays is no longer an adequate measure. The late plays are transgressive, and at their most characteristic they unfold without criterion. They may still exploit the differences in style that partition the England of his audience into its ways and stations, and they may still activate the principles by which the rhetorical order of that society was understood. But their sound, in its strange, pervasive music, is the sound of another world. The achievement of the late plays is to overcome the antagonism between style and fiction, the law by which awareness of style's surface suspends our imaginative immersion. Style in a play like *The Winter's Tale* is a second nature, in something like Philip Sidney's sense, how the poet by the force of breath brings forth things far surpassing nature's doings. 'Lie there my art' (*Temp.* 1.2.25), says Prospero; he means his magical *techne*, his skill. But he never lays down his style.

NOTES

- 1 Ian Michael observes, however, that the subordinate clause was rarely singled out in the grammatical theory of the period; *clausula* could refer to any part of a sentence. See *English Grammatical Categories and the Tradition to 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 43–44.

- 2 All dates for Shakespeare's works are taken from Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery (eds.), *The Oxford Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 69–144.
- 3 These performances are the subject of Lynn Enterline's *Shakespeare's Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).
- 4 George Puttenham, *The Art of English Poesy*, ed. Frank Whigham and Wayne A. Rebhorn (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 234.
- 5 David Wilson-Okamura, *Spenser's International Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 79–85.
- 6 David Daniell makes this observation in his edition of *Julius Caesar*, Arden Third Series (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1998), pp. 60–62.
- 7 Cicero, *On the Orator: Book 3. On Fate. Stoic Paradoxes. Divisions of Oratory*, tr. H. Rackham (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1942), pp. 22–23.
- 8 G. Wilson Knight, 'The Othello Music', *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930), pp. 97–119.
- 9 George T. Wright, 'Hendiadys and Hamlet', *PMLA* 96 (1981): 168–193; John Porter Houston, *Shakespearian Sentences: A Study in Style and Syntax* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), p. 162.
- 10 George Gascoigne, 'Certayne Notes of Instruction', *A Hundreth Sundrie Flowres*, ed. G. W. Pigman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 454–462; p. 459.
- 11 David Crystal, *Think on My Words: Exploring Shakespeare's Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 8–11.
- 12 Jonathan Hope, *The Authorship of Shakespeare's Plays: A Socio-Linguistic Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 11–26.
- 13 George T. Wright, *Shakespeare's Metrical Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 249, 116, 157, 213.
- 14 Brian Vickers, *Shakespeare, Co-Author: A Historical Study of Five Collaborative Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 336.
- 15 Michael Witmore and Jonathan Hope discuss the late plays holistically in 'Shakespeare by the Numbers: On the Linguistic Texture of the Late Plays', *Early Modern Tragicomedy*, ed. Subha Mukherji and Raphael Lyne (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2007), pp. 133–153.
- 16 Anne Barton, 'Leontes and the Spider: Language and Speaker in Shakespeare's Last Plays', *Essays, Mainly Shakespearian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 161–181; p. 167.
- 17 Russ McDonald, *Shakespeare's Late Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 33.
- 18 Gordon McMullan discusses the category of late style, with some scepticism, in *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
- 19 Bart Van Es, *Shakespeare in Company* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 266.