

Crafting Shakespeare

building quality performances
from the text up



Jill K. Swanson

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To Daniel and Jackson, who put up with me; and to Beth Burns, who never lets me forget I'm a secret weapon.

Contents

Chapter 1: This Magic Moment	1
The New English Theatre	1
Iambic Pentameter Verse Form, As The Wits Wrote It	2
Verse Mimics Speech	3
Shakespeare's Evolution	4

Chapter 1: This Magic Moment

It's easy to think of Shakespeare and "iambic pentameter" as dry, dusty concepts that are etched in stone. But that's not the way Shakespeare experienced theatre in Elizabethan England.

The New English Theatre

Plays performed in a proper theatre was a fairly new concept by the late 1580s, when Shakespeare came to London. Before this, what we think of as theatrical entertainment (stagecraft and performance) was split up between the towns, civic groups, and churches on the one hand, who put on elaborate festivals and displays with intricate stagecraft, and traveling groups of players performing in inns, private homes, and town squares with meager sets, minimal costumes, and a wagon for a stage on the other. The first real theatre (The Theatre) was built only in 1576, after the traveling players were restricted by law from performing in the city, due to plague fears. Shakespeare comes to town roughly ten years later.

Compare this to our lives. As of this writing, it's 2013. The internet has been a major factor in our lives for less than 15 years. Web series first began as rickety affairs, under-appreciated for what the medium could do. Original series created only for online services are just beginning to bubble to the surface. In Shakespeare's time, theatre was just as new. He and his contemporaries *were* the pioneers of this new English medium. (New to England, that is. Theatre on the European continent had already gotten its start.)

English itself was changing, too. It had long been considered a "backwater dialect", a mutt language made up from influences from all directions, but the English desired to be taken more seriously.

For England itself was doing rather well. This was a boom time for the economy and for London's growth. A wave of bright young men went off to university and studied the classics. These "University Wits"¹, as they were known, came home full of ideas about how to elevate the English language into one of importance, namely through proper theatre. Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, John Lyly (known for his comedies), and a few others set about writing plays in English that had the same formal style as those they read in other languages. (Thomas Kyd, famous for his *Spanish Tragedy*, ran with this crowd although he didn't go to university.) The traveling players, whose tradition had come down from the traveling Bards, also tended to perform in verse, but it was loose and ragged, with everyone cribbing together their own scripts, and no proper "playwrights" as Shakespeare will become. The Wits set about to change all that.

It's Christopher Marlowe, with his wildly popular play *Tamburlaine*, that sets iambic pentameter as the popular "beat". You can think of this time like the time of disco— someone does it, it becomes popular, and suddenly the airwaves are filled with this same beat because everyone's doing it. It might even seem like it will last forever, but then it's gone. In the case of iambic pentameter

¹http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/University_wits

verse plays, this pop culture moment ended when the theatres shut down in 1642. When they reopened in 1660 (what we call “Restoration plays”), plays were in prose. The University Wits were all gone by that point, and a new wave of theatre folk propelled the pop culture forward in a new way.

So we’re looking at a living moment, in which a form is established by Marlowe which is taken up by all the other playwrights of the day. Will Shakespeare comes to town and does what everyone is doing– writing verse plays in this new form. ([New evidence](#)² indicates he contributed to Kyd’s *Spanish Tragedy* as he got in with the scene.)

While Shakespeare is a poet beyond compare, he struggles with iambic pentameter for plays. It doesn’t give him the right sound. It restricts his characters into all sounding the same. And so he monkeys around with it, he bends it and twists it. He changes over time, trying this way and that way. By 1598 or so, he hits his groove with a string of plays we all know– *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo & Juliet* among them– and in them he does much to solidify the way he wants to use verse. But he keeps stretching the possibilities, and by 1605 he’s writing much looser, more wild verse in the last plays of his career like *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Tempest*. (His company also started to use one of the first indoor theatres around this time, which changed the space he was writing for, giving him the opportunity to expand and evolve.)

So take note of the year when you’re working on a Shakespeare play. His style changes over time, sometimes more “Marlovian” in form, while at other times he’s evolved considerably past what the Wits were attempting. That evolution is not entirely linear, it’s experimental. (In one scene from an early play, two characters speak in nothing but rhyming couplets. He doesn’t attempt this again.) The general grouping of “early plays” (until about 1598 or so) “great plays” (about 1598 to 1602), and his “late canon plays” (about 1602 to his retirement in 1611) is only a rough guidepost, but it does help you understand the lay of the land a bit. (Just as you might categorize the works of a band, as in “early Beatles” vs. “late Beatles”.)

His freedom is your freedom, because you’re not locked into Marlowe’s dry iambic pentameter form. And performers will find that they can tinker with what Shakespeare was already messing with, bending the verse to create character.

Iambic Pentameter Verse Form, As The Wits Wrote It

Let’s take a quick look at the form that Marlowe and The Wits championed, because while Shakespeare evolves past them, it’s still disco. That is, there are certain elements of the form that still remain no matter what he does.

First, the form is called “iambic pentameter”. For those of you not up on your obscure poetry terms, this describes one line of verse. In Marlowe’s plays, it describes *every* line of verse– that is, (nearly) every single line forms this pattern (more on this in a moment).

Second, the sound the Wits were going for was “heroic”. They wanted to tell all the great old heroic stories, such as the life of Timur Khan (Tamburlaine) but in English this time. And so the stories must be grand, with strong declarations, vivid descriptions, and thundering verse. The lines are structurally strong, and drive to the end, with the last word of each line being the

²http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/13/arts/further-proof-of-shakespeares-hand-in-the-spanish-tragedy.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

most important. The speeches are long and bombastic, with characters taking turns giving these speeches rather than using snappy dialogue. The speeches end in rhyming couplets, indicating the end with a “button” on it. Scenes often end with a series of rhyming couplets (I call this the “Marlovian stack”) uttered by each of the characters onstage as they have their last word in turn.

For a great example (of how tedious this can be) in Shakespeare, look no further than *Henry VI, Part 1*, which is mostly the general Talbot and Joan of Arc taking turns barking long, bombastic speeches. And as everyone knows, his plays are full of speeches, although they evolve into the eloquent soliloquies such as we see in *Hamlet*, and silly prose speeches such as the Nurse’s in *Romeo and Juliet*. That’s a good example of how Shakespeare retains much of the popular form, while still changing it and turning it on its head at times.

Verse Mimics Speech

Verse, as Marlowe and the Wits wrote it, was all in “iambic pentameter”. We will get down into the nuts and bolts of this later, but for now, just know that syllables are arranged in patterns of two or three that are called “feet”. The feet are arranged in patterns of lines. Iambic pentameter describes a verse line which has five feet (*penta*-meter) of iambs, which are made of up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable (“da-DUM”).

That all sounds very artificial, but there’s a reason the Wits chose it: blank verse (as opposed to other, more rigid verse forms) mimics the way people actually talk, making the lines feel more natural.

First, using iambs (“da-DUM”) for the metrical feet fits well with English. Anglo-Saxon words are short, fat, stubby things (“to be or not to be”) that we tend to say in an alternating rhythm of stressed beats and unstressed beats. Words built from short Latin root words do the same (“discontent”). Words borrowed from other languages tend to be “Anglicized” until they fit that pattern (“question”). So bouncing up and down in iambs fits our language well.

That isn’t to say you “do the bouncy version”, but rather as you speak the verse, the inherent, natural stresses of the words and phrases just come out. And you can choose certain stressed words to emphasize more to get your point across (“to *be* or **not** to *be*”).

Second, the line length of ten syllables (five of those iambs) is also good for English speakers. It’s common for us to speak in burst of about that long, whether in sentences about that length, or clauses of that length, breaking up the sentence with pauses. Sometimes we pause after an important word to let it resonate. Sometimes we go straight from one sentence to another, yet still break up those sentences with pauses in the middle.

Iambic pentameter mimics this by having lines that are ten syllables which place the most important word at the end, allowing you to pause to let it resonate even if it’s not the end of a sentence, and still have it seem completely natural. While some sentences end at the end of the verse line, sometimes they end in the middle of a verse line, causing you to run sentences together.

This is a completely artificial construct that is there to mimic natural speech.

The best analogy I can think of are the [space battles in Syfy’s *Battlestar Galactica*](#)³. While entirely

³<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1Id9rIaWnY>

CGI, the “camera” that is showing us the action is shaky, has trouble focusing, and pans quickly to catch something happening. All of this is entirely faked, an artificial construct to make it seem like there is an actual camera following live action. The “mistakes” copy the mistakes a human would make.

What may seem like artificial verse on the page (speaking in a proscribed rhythm and breaking up your words every ten syllables), it becomes much more natural when you speak it, because the words and lines are arranged in a way that copies our human speaking habits. Pauses that you would normally take (for whatever reason) are placed where they should be by ending the verse line in that spot.

Shakespeare takes this even farther by expanding the possible rhythms for a line (leaving iambic pentameter behind), and playing around with line lengths to create even more natural sounds.

Shakespeare’s Evolution

If Shakespeare had stuck with Marlowe’s “perfect form”, we wouldn’t need a book about it. But while he works within the form’s basic system, he also expands it.

Some of the things that Shakespeare keeps are:

- a downbeat to start the first line of a scene (the first foot of the line flips around so it’s “DUM-da”)
- each line “drives to the end”, which means you’re opening yourself up to whatever your acting impulse is over the course of the line, and the last word of the verse line is the most important
- each line is meant to stand on its own, so you need to “play the white space” (meaning, the brief break between the lines is put in that specific place *for a reason*, to mimic the way we actually speak)
- few if any scenes involve more than two people speaking to each other at a time, and long speeches are common
- the base “beat” of the verse is iambic pentameter

How much Shakespeare stays with the form and how much he deviates from it depends on the play, or even the scene. For example, while you can assume that it’s standard for the first line of a scene to start with a downbeat (useful for getting the audience’s attention), any given scene could start without one. (Scene breaks were added by editors later, so it could be that Shakespeare didn’t even think this *was* a new scene starting, so he didn’t use the flipped foot, or he just didn’t want to this time.) While the lines still usually drive to the end (and we should think of that as our goal), occasionally he will create an interesting moment by having the most important word in the line (the “operative”, which we’ll learn about later) *not* be at the end. Sometimes it’s better to not play the white space but “enjamb”, or roll right into the next line, and it’s hard to say if that’s you doing it or Shakespeare telling you to. Gradually he lets go of the giant speeches and saves them for critical moments. Eventually he gets the hang of a group scene in which more than two people are all contributing to the dialogue, although he doesn’t use it that often even once he figures it out.

But most important of all, he regularly ditches the iambic pentameter for something else. Sometimes, he just goes into prose (which has no meter, it's like the paragraphs you're reading now). But most of the time, he takes the verse in hand and by switching out the iambs for different kinds of feet, he bends it and twists it.

There's a good reason for this: in iambic pentameter, everyone sounds the same, no matter what's happening. (And it's boring. Elizabethans may have liked the clean, measured sound of Marlowe's *Tamburlaine*, but there's a reason it's Shakespeare's *Hamlet* we remember. To be fair to Marlowe, however, he died at the tender age of 25, and he might have evolved as a writer as well, had he lived.)

Shakespeare needed to make people sound different:

- in *personality* (Juliet and her father),
- in *dialect* (Juliet and her country Nurse)
- when they are in *different emotional states* (happy Juliet vs. scared Juliet)

I like to think of Marlowe's verse like an iPhone, all sleek and perfect, and Shakespeare as your iPhone cover. Steve Jobs may have, like Marlowe, desired to create a clean, simple design— the perfect black box with one button— but how can we tell our phones apart, or put our personality onto them, without a little bling?

Shakespeare's "bling", as it were, is the way he changes the lines. Sometimes they have more stresses, or fewer. Sometimes they're too long, or too short. It's like changing the music behind the lyrics. When you line up the meter against the content of the lines, you'll find that the more the stakes are raised and the emotional temperature of the character rises, the more the meter breaks to reflect that.

So what we're doing, as verse actors, is deciphering what Shakespeare wanted for this moment based on what he did to the verse. You can think of this as Shakespeare "directing" you towards a moment, or you can think of it as Shakespeare giving you the beats you need to play that moment to the fullest. Either way, he left us clues. We need to find them and interpret them.

In this way, Shakespeare is no different than a modern playwright, who also contributes his take on the moment by using stage directions like "(pause)", or "(interrupts)" or "(angrily)". Actors know those stage directions are important messages from the playwright, and it's your job to work out *how* to play that— to "justify" or "load" it with actions and intentions. Shakespeare does exactly the same thing, but he does it in the verse, not in stage directions. And we have to respond exactly the same way, by seeing what he gave us, understanding what it means, and finding a way to play it and justify it.

For those of you who are readers and watchers of Shakespeare but not performers, it's important to learn that without understanding verse structure, it's like reading the lyrics to songs without hearing them. You're getting the content, but not the feeling behind it that the music, or in this case the verse, is giving you. When you watch a performance, you're finally hearing it all come together. This book is aimed at performers, but I'm glad you readers and watchers are here to peek behind the scenes and learn about how we create the sound that goes with the lyrics you're already familiar with.

For performers, this book will help you understand the form you're working in and how to decipher Shakespeare's clues. But understand this was a living, breathing, ever-changing pop culture moment. What Shakespeare did by taking the verse in hand, you can do also. Once you get how to play verse, *you* can manipulate the structure to reflect how you want to play the moment. First, learn to interpret what you find, and then, once you're adept and really confident that you've got something better, change the meter to reflect what you want to do and play that instead.

Looking Ahead

Next we'll check in with the difference between verse and prose (and make sure you know which you've got in your lines), and then take a closer look at how verse functions.