

‘Tragedy and Performance’

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Despite the fact that theatres of Shakespeare’s age did not make use of scenery, and so could offer little embellishment of fictional location, they could be arranged, visually, to make statements about genre. References bear witness to the way playhouses might be adorned with hangings that emphasised tragic stories, ‘The Stage all hang’d with the sad death of Kings, / From whose bewailing story sorrow springs’.¹ More often, though, they made outright statements of tragic genre through colour – ‘A spacious *Theatre* first mee thought I saw, / All hang’d with black to act some tragedie’; ‘when the stage of the world was hung in blacke, they jettied uppe & downe like proud Tragedians’; ‘The stage is hung with blacke: and I perceive / The Auditors preparte for Tragedie’.² Marston advises audiences who dislike tragedy to ‘hurrie amaine’ from what he is offering in *Antonio’s Revenge*: ‘black visag’d shoves’.³ This décor borrows the black hangings used to decorate great houses and churches during funeral rites; it thus comes with suggestions of death and mourning as well as ‘the social assumptions inherent in this kind of social display’.⁴ There are mentions, too, of an enveloping stage blackness that may extend beyond hangings: writers often allude to the tragic ‘sable Stage’, or, as Shakespeare put it in *Rape of Lucrece*, describing night, ‘Black stage for tragedies and murders fell’ (766), perhaps implying that the dark-stained wood of the stage-floor, visible when rushes and matting were removed, had been purposefully revealed.⁵ Sometimes, then, from the moment an audience entered a playhouse, and before the play actually began, ‘tragedy’, had already started. In such instances ‘tragedy’ did not need to be part of a title, or a direction in which a play tended – it could, rather, be a look, an atmosphere,

a theatrical mood. 'Tragedy', was a kind of performance as well as a kind of drama, as this chapter will explore; the formality and insistent bleakness of the theatrical space was, on occasion, part of the interpretative meaning of what was put on there.

As genre was one of the few wordless comments regularly made by staging, it was obviously of keen importance to the theatrical thinking of the period. But of course, authors will not always have adopted such pointed staging. Shakespeare, like other writers, seems to have flirted with placing, and not placing, additional statements in stage decorations. *I Henry VI's* 'Hung be the heavens with black' (1.1.1) states a tragic metaphorical intention – the sky should be darkened, as a tragedy is to ensue – and, almost certainly, a tragic stage fact – the 'heavens', the internal roof of the playhouse, were presumably adorned with black tragic hangings on this occasion, or the reference would be semi-redundant. On the other hand, some plays switch unexpectedly to tragedy in ways that are unlikely to have been predicted by staging. Examples include moments of generic confusion, as when, for instance, at the end of the comedy *Love's Labour's Lost*, Marcade enters, presumably in mourning black, to announce 'the King your father –', and the Princess realises 'Dead, for my life' (5.2.712-13). This is a tragic turning point within what has hitherto seemed to be a straightforward comedy; but stating either comedy or tragedy through stage hangings would predict or query this moment. The suggestion, then, is that writers could choose to make visual statements in stage décor to bolster (or profitably confuse) their verbal one – and, equally, could choose not to.

When an author did not wish to proclaim genre from the moment the audience entered the playhouse, he could insert tragic signs later, during the performance itself. Tragedy could be placed in costume. Hamlet's black illustrates his mourning, but also declares 'tragedy', recalling the colour of tragic hangings. It draws attention to

Hamlet's theatricality – does he know the kind of play he is in (or bring about the kind of play he is in)? It should be borne in mind, though, that Olivia, in the comedy *Twelfth Night*, also wears black as a private tragic statement. Characters, then, could carry personal 'tragedy' in a way that did not necessarily comment on the play beyond themselves.

Tragedy could additionally, or alternatively, be located in a bleak actor's adornment, usually imposed at some point deep within the play. This was the ultimate tragic prop, blood – a liquid so fundamental to the plot of many tragedies as to form a major part of their staging appeal: 'Goe tell the Authors of high Tragedies, / That bloudlesse quarrels are but merry fights'.⁶ Highly appreciated tragic writers were said to be those whose 'Verses fits the bleeding Tragedie'; or whose tragic moment could be mawkishly anticipated – 'This Scene will anon swimme in blood'.⁷ Blood was much relished by audiences, and Shakespeare's company seems to have developed a name for it. In *A Warning for Faire Women*, a play staged by the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1599, the emblematic figure of Tragedy signifies her nature by entering with 'a bowle of blood in her hand'.⁸

Shakespeare's own bloody staging, in particular, was legendary. An epitaph for Richard Burbage, Shakespeare's lead actor, famous for his performances of Lear, Hamlet, Othello, as well as Hieronimo in *The Spanish Tragedy*, dwells on the way, when Burbage acted:

spectators and the rest
of his sad crew, whilst hee but seemd to bleed
amazed thought evn that hee died indeed.⁹

Throughout his writing career, Shakespeare used blood, probably bought from nearby meat markets, as a prop: he was perpetually taking the tragic theme of violent death to its most visual, most literal and most performative.¹⁰ From the removal of hands in *Titus Andronicus*, to the handkerchief stained with young Rutland's blood, and given to mop his father York's eyes in 3 *Henry VI*, Shakespeare's early plays were lavishly drenched with the tragic substance.

Over time, however, Shakespeare sophisticated his use of the blood prop, so that a compelling theatrical device also became a literary one. *Richard II*, named a tragedy on its quarto title page, is a drama alert to the metaphorical import of physical blood. In this play obsessed with problems of inherited kingship, stage blood comes to mean both blood the substance and the royal bloodline. Richard II, anxious to avoid the shedding of literal blood – 'Let's purge this choler without letting blood' (1.1.153) – is equally trying to keep his bloodline intact. When, at the end of the play, he is bloodily killed, the blood metaphorically stains land and killer: 'thy fierce hand / Hath with the King's blood stained the King's own land' (5.5.109-10) indicts Richard II as he dies; 'I'll make a voyage to the Holy Land / To wash this blood off from my guilty hand' says Henry IV (5.6.49-50). The blood, now symbolic, becomes a prominent motif – a physical representation of the curse on the house of Henry IV – explored in Shakespeare's related history plays. In *Macbeth*, too, blood is both a constant prop – the bloody man, the bloody baby, Banquo's bloody head, the blood-soaked hands of the Macbeths – and a symbol of the evil that forced it to be spilled. In some of the most important moments in *Macbeth*, therefore, blood is referred to (it is a constant refrain in the play) but is not actually there: the bloody dagger of the mind, or the damned spots on Lady Macbeth's clean hand.

Shakespeare, then, was alert to the staging possibilities raised by tragedy and subsumed them into his literary constructions. This chapter will look at the performative side of ‘tragedy’ – ‘tragic’ ways of walking (‘strutting’, ‘jetting’ and ‘stalking’), ‘tragic’ ways of speaking (‘ranting’ and ‘canting’ in a tragic ‘tone’ or ‘key’) and the revelation of tragic passions -- arguing throughout that Shakespeare's consciousness of the staging of tragedy dictates his choice of metaphor and symbol; enacted tragedy, it will argue, helped form Shakespeare's tragic sensibility.

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The word ‘tragedian’ had two meanings. It denoted a *writer* of tragedies – Phillips defined ‘Tragedian, or Tragediographer’ as ‘a writer of ... a sort of Dramatick Poetry ... representing murthers, sad and mournfull actions’, and a *player* of tragedies – Nashe writes of the way ‘the Tragedian that represents [Talbot]’ seems ‘fresh bleeding’ to spectators.¹¹ Tragedy straddled writing and performance, then; hardly surprisingly, Shakespeare, as a writer-player, was said to combine the two: when he is praised for his ‘tragic’ skills, it is not even always clear whether his writing or acting is being extolled. In ‘Friendly Shake-speares Tragedies’ wrote Scoloker, ‘the Comedian rides, when the Tragedian stands on Tip-toe’ – meaning both that, in writing terms, comic and tragic matter were combined and, in performance terms, the comic actors traversed a stage over which the tragic actors towered.¹² Even as a metaphor, if that is what this is, the language used for tragedy was rooted in performance.

Shakespeare himself, however, was particularly alert to the theatrical rather than writerly connotations of tragedy. In fact, he only ever used the word ‘tragedian’

as he used the word ‘comedian’, for an actor, not a playwright. Thus Rosencrantz tells Hamlet of the arrival of ‘the tragedians of the city’ (*Hamlet*, 2.2.330) in whose productions the prince had once taken great delight; while Cleopatra fears ‘the quick comedians’ (*Anthony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.212) will stage her story extemporally. For Shakespeare, then, tragedians and comedians, though they differed from one another, were similarly performative: tragedy and comedy, for him, denoted different forms of staging as much as different genres of writing.

It becomes important, then, to ask how tragic performance differed from comic performance, a question enlightened, though complicated, by classical precedent. In Hellenistic Greek theatre – notionally a model for early modern theatre – tragic actors had moved entirely differently from comic ones. Greek actors of tragedies had performed wearing raised boots known as ‘buskins’; actors of comedies had played in low thin shoes known as ‘socks’. As a result, tragedians and comedians had, of necessity, walked in genre-specific ways: there was literally a tragic and a comic pace.

In the early modern period the buskin and sock were not literally used, yet they conveyed enough meaning to be regularly mentioned as metaphors. Tragedy, like the buskin, was viewed as a raised and artificial form of performance; comedy as a lowered and homely form, like the sock. Thus when Abraham Wright addressed Ben Jonson’s skill in comic and tragic writing, he wrote ‘Yet was thy language and thy stile so high / Thy Sock to the ancle, Buskin reachd to th’ thigh’; while, had playwrights known that a war would close their theatres, ‘*Shakespear with Chapman*’ it was said, would have ‘grown mad, and torn / The gentle *Soc*, and *lofty Buskins* worn’.¹³ What ‘buskin’ and ‘sock’ also add to the description of the genres tragedy

and comedy, however, is a continued sense that the two played differently – in particular, that each employed different methods of walking.

Though not wearing actual buskins, early modern players of tragedy seem to have stridden across the stage in particular ways, defined sometimes as ‘stalking’, sometimes as ‘jetting’ and sometimes as ‘strutting’. The words, ‘stalk’, ‘jet’ and ‘strut’, are close enough in meaning as, perhaps, to be getting at the same motion, or at subtle variations of it: a stiff, pompous gait, with, analogies suggest, bird-like prinking – perhaps in its careful placing – about it. Post-Restoration accounts, which show how heightened tragic walking had become, help explain the formality and ridiculous nature of what they called the ‘tragic gait’:

THEATRIC Monarchs in their tragic Gait

Affect to mark the solemn Pace of State.

One Foot put forward in Position strong,

The other like its Vassal dragg’d along.

So grave each Motion, so exact and slow,

Like wooden Monarchs at a Puppet-show.¹⁴

In Shakespeare’s time, ‘stalking’, the oldest word for tragic walking, was already out of date; often it was used to refer specifically to the gait adopted for Marlovian performance. Thus Middleton/Dekker conceives of Death, personified, as ‘rather like stalking *Tamberlaine*’; Hall thinks of the man who imagines himself to be ‘the Turkish Tamberlaine’ and ‘conceives upon his fained stage / The stalking steps of his greate personage’; and Middleton describes spiders ‘stalking’ on the ceiling, ‘as if they had bene conning of Tamburlayne’.¹⁵ In Shakespeare, ‘stalking’ carried with it

too the idea of brittle pride. He applied it to the over-proud – Ajax in *Troilus and Cressida*, ‘stalks up and down like a peacock’ (3.3.244) – but also to ghosts. So the ghost of Hamlet’s father in *Hamlet* is said to have a ‘martial stalk’ (1.1.65), and when he takes umbrage as Horatio tactlessly describes him as ‘usurp[ing]’ the night, he ‘stalks away’ (1.1.44, 48). Perhaps Shakespeare used this term because Hamlet’s ghost moved in a way that looked, befitting his nature, tragic; perhaps he used the term to imply that the ghost moved in a way redolent of past, Marlovian, acting styles. If the ghost of Hamlet’s father, in his very gait, looked old-fashioned, then it becomes important that Hamlet regularly fulminates against mannered and ‘old’ over-acting when he sees it in the players. Could it be that Hamlet dislikes in performative terms what he daren’t dislike – or perhaps is incapable of recognising – in real terms? The play continually compares performance with reality throughout, within the irony of being itself an enacted play, of course, but it seems that Shakespeare may here have employed historical acting style to give his drama further ironies.

‘Jetting’ was directly associated with actorly pride so intense that passages that describe the movement conflate the fictional pride of the character with the factual pride of the actor performing him. So ‘proude players jett in their silkes’; ‘they on stage, in stately sort ... jet;’ ‘they jetted uppe & downe like proud Tragedians’.¹⁶ This word, which may also contain an internal pun on the jet-black clothes worn sometimes by tragedians, was used by Shakespeare parodically. He applies it to people who take themselves too seriously to have a sense of context. So Malvolio, reading the letter in the comedy *Twelfth Night*, is described as ‘a rare turkeycock’ who ‘jets under his advanced plumes!’ (2.5.29-30): Malvolio is the outsider, not only because he is a puritan, but also because he, like Olivia in her black, is performing wrongly for the genre for which his role is written.

Finally, there was ‘strutting’, which again signified self-importance and an overblown sense of superiority. It was what actors did in contrast to what real people did: ‘His gate ... is sage and grave, not affected and strouting like a stage-plaier’.¹⁷ This was the word most associated with bad acting for Shakespeare. Indeed, whenever he addressed the forced walking style of the professional actor, it was the strutting that he singled out. The kind of players hated by Hamlet ‘strutted and bellowed’ and ‘imitated humanity ... abominably’ (*Hamlet*, 3.2.32-5); Macbeth’s ‘poor player’ ‘struts and frets his hour upon the stage’ – fretting meaning ‘chewing’, a description of the mouthing of words that will be considered later in this essay (*Macbeth*, 5.5.23-24); Achilles is ‘like a strutting player, whose conceit / Lies in his hamstring’ (*Troilus and Cressida*, 1.3.153-4). Yet even then, some people are genuinely described as strutting by Shakespeare, again, often when taking themselves too seriously. Master Slender in *Merry Wives* is one who ‘hold[s] up his head, as it were, and strut[s] in his gait’ (1.4.27-8). More portentously, Anthony in *Anthony and Cleopatra*, observing how he and his paramour are striding to meet their fate, thinks that the gods are laughing at the two of them ‘while we strut / To our confusion’ (3.13.115-16). Here the point is that that their descent to chaos is, as the entire relationship has been, tragically ridiculous. Shakespeare confirms and queries genre through tragic steps, , though he may also have adopted them unambiguously for moments of ritualised, heightened drama. When characters are described as walking in telling ways, Shakespeare may even be prompting them to use a tragic gait: like the Fiends in *1 Henry VI* who ‘walk and speak not’ (sd 5.2.12), or Lear who questions what he himself is doing and what it might mean, ‘Doth Lear walk thus, speak thus?’ (*King Lear*, 1.4.221)

It is no surprise to learn that tragedy matched its special pace with a range of unique and special tragic sounds. Tragic speech could be pronounced in a fashion so musical that Camden refers to ‘speaking ... (as folke say) in a tragicke Key upon the stage’, while Davies writes of listeners who ‘believe all Sounds (how sweet so ere) / Are but the accents of a Tragicke voice’.¹⁸ Tragic speech, too, had its own vocabulary: ‘tone’ was used for its melodic quality of sound, and ‘accent’ for its melodic sense of emphasis. This distinctive vocal range was, like tragic pace, used, abused, parodied, and relied upon. Brome writes a play in which Philomel asks ‘Ha’ not I forgot my Actors tone?’ and later Philomel ‘*speaks in a vile tone like a Player*’; Collop refers to players who perform with ‘mimick gesture, and affected tone’.¹⁹ Yet the popular Bull playhouse, where crowd-pleasing plays were performed most, embraced aural extravagance, bearing witness to its popularity with the masses – ‘She looks high, and speaks in a *Majestick tone*, like one playing the Queens part at the *Bull* ...’²⁰

‘Accent’, with its reference to rhythmic emphasis, was related to the rhetorical skill of declamation. Yet ‘accent’ likewise extended into the speeches’ musical qualities: in glosses, ‘vocation’ is ‘a giving a word its right tone or accent’, ‘prosodie’ is ‘the art of giving words their due accent, or tone’ and ‘barbarism’ is ‘a fault in the pronouncing, tone or accent of words’.²¹ Hence musical accent is said to shape the sound of the tragic stage, from those who speak in ‘the dismall accents of thy tragedie’ to those who pronounce ‘with an harmonious Accent’.²²

Shakespeare, as player-playwright, was acutely accent-conscious. Unlike tragic movement, which he often parodied, he seems to have used the tragic vocal music available to him seriously, anticipating the use of tone and accent to beautify, heighten and embellish his poetry. So it is no surprise to find his characters also

obsessed, metatheatrically, with speaking correctly. Boyet in *Love's Labour's Lost* describes how he watched Moth preparing to act a part in the Pageant of the Nine Worthies. He remarks in particular how Moth was carefully taught two qualities, 'Action and accent' (5.2.99). Polonius in *Hamlet*, likewise, praises the player who spoke his words 'with good accent and good discretion' (2.2.469-70). As Shakespeare wrote for performance, a number of his word choices will have been made with sonorous intent as prominent as meaning. Ben Jonson, another actor-writer had done the same: to him 'the ... offices of a tragic writer' consisted of writing in a way he described in performance terms: with 'gravity and height of elocution, fulness and frequency of sentence'.²³ It was usual to write for the sound of performance.

Formal set passages are often in a different poetic register from the words around them, and are forthright about their musical qualities. Some moments in Shakespeare are as ornate in phrasing and rhythm as they are in lyricism:

O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!

It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night

As a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear –

Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear. (*Romeo and Juliet*, 1.5.43-46).

The gorgeousness of the visual depiction – with Juliet's radiance teaching torches to flame, then exuding light like a sparkling jewel when all around it is dark – is here enhanced sonorously. From the first line with its repetition of 't', 'ch', 'b', and 'r' in words chiastically arranged so that long varies with short vowels, sound is part of this quatrain's music. Alliteration softens as the couplets progress – 'teach'/'torches', yields to 'burn'/'bright', yields to 'Ethiop's ear'/'earth'; but the whole is also enriched

aurally with assonance ('seems'/'cheek', 'jewel'/'beauty'/'use'), and the ritualistic rhythm imposed by repetition: 'rich ... rich', 'too ... too', 'for ... for'. The quatrain is made up of two rhyming couplets that are perhaps also a theatrical metaphor for the act of coupling, so that the second line seems demanded by the first, and leads the listener first to the rhymed opposites of 'night' and 'bright', then to the inevitable ultimate fulfilment of 'dear' – with its combined meaning of 'expensive' and 'loved'.

It was, of course, tragical sonority that encouraged tragedians to write in verse as well as prose: they relished the distinction and the possibility it offered for heightened verse moments. As Sheppard, wrote, praising 'Mr. Websters most excellent tragedy, Called the White Devill', 'How pretty are thy lines, thy Verses stand / Like unto pretious Jewels set in gold, / And grace thy fluent Prose'.²⁴ Some tragic speeches were gorgeous, with rhythmic and a tonal possibilities that rendered them not unlike arias in operas: moments of sonorous beauty that soar over the recitative that heralds them. Soliloquies, in particular, not only exemplified skills in tragic writing, but also demanded skills in tragic speaking. Indeed, the importance of soliloquies to tragedy is not only that they give privileged insight into the mind of the speaker, but also that they are set pieces for tragic sound.

At the same time, writing tragic verse was thought of as slightly cheap: or, rather, iambic pentameter was seen as crowd-pleasing and easy. Joseph Hall patronizingly describes the type of audience who are lured by 'pure *Iambick* verse', particularly the tragic verse facilely adopted by all writers: 'Unbid *Iambicks* flow from carelesse head'.²⁵ By indulging in sensual, sonorous verse, Shakespeare was playing to the crowd, which is perhaps why his soliloquies vary from the obviously lyrically pleasing, to the designedly spiky. Compare the sensuousness of *2 Henry 4*'s beautiful paean to sleep to the slow rhythms and spitting plosives of Lady Macbeth:

... O gentle sleep,
Nature's soft nurse, how have I frightened thee,
That thou no more will weigh my eyelids down
And steep my senses in forgetfulness?
Why rather, sleep, liest thou in smoky cribs,
Upon uneasy pallets stretching thee,
And hushed with buzzing night-flies to thy slumber,
Than in the perfum'd chambers of the great,
Under the canopies of costly state,
And lulled with sound of sweetest melody? (2 *Henry IV*, 3.1.5-14)

The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty. (*Macbeth*, 1.5.37)

Yet writing to iambic rhythm was not the only way in which Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, courted the aural possibilities of language. Another was by coining or picking up words – the longer, the better. This was not entirely connected to the fact, often stated, that Shakespeare thought beyond language: though he did do that. It was because he was being populist, and looking to the same linguistic possibilities that brought audiences streaming to the Bull theatre. Spectators attended

playhouses partly to hear and learn the newest, the sharpest, and the most magnificent words; the lengthier the word and the more elongated the line that contained it, the more it would be valued, particularly by the uneducated:

I have heard, that the Poets of the Fortune and the red Bull, had alwayes a mouth-measure for their Actors (who were terrible teare-throats) and made their lines proportionable to their compasse, which were *sesquipedales*, a foot and a halfe.²⁶

The use of such words resulted in a common term of opprobrium for author and actor alike, ‘widemouths’, for the fact that their mouths were said to need engorging to fit in or let out the enormous words. Hall writes of verses that an actor ‘sees fitly frame to his wide-strained mouth’; Overburie mentions ‘a wide-mouth’de *Poet*, that speakes nothing but bladders & bumbast’; Greene is obsessed with playwrights who turn ‘to the spacious volubilitie of a drumming decasillabon’.²⁷ This habit was also often seen as easy, thoughtless and crude – particularly if the length of word, rather than its meaning, was most attractive. Writes Thomas Randolph,

I cannot fulminate or tonitruate words
To puzz’le intellects my ninth lasse affords
No sycophronian buskins, nor can straine
Gargantuan lines to Gigantize thy veine.²⁸

So Shakespeare’s urge to coin substantial words, or to insert newly minted words into his plays, was an example of his writing in a sound-conscious fashion (it is

not always clear what his long words mean) as well as an example of his shaping his text to suit the tastes of the audience. He employed his long words both in comedies and tragedies, but in comedies he critiqued what, in tragedies, he employed. He has comic clowns represent the types who crave long words, from the foolish Costard in *Love's Labour's Lost* who becomes delighted by 'remuneration' without ever understanding what it means – 'Remuneration – O, that's the Latin word for three-farthings: ... / why, it is a fairer name than French crown. I will / never buy and sell out of this word' (*Love's Labour's Lost*, 3.1.133-39) – to Don Armado in *Love's Labour's Lost*, 'a man of fire-new words' (1.1.175), who writes a letter in which he glosses 'the posteriors of this day' with the explanation 'which the rude multitude call the afternoon' (5.2.84-5). When, in that same play, Holofernes uses the word 'peregrinate', and the impressed Sir Nathaniel takes out his table-book to record it for future use (5.1.13-15), Shakespeare is probably cocking a snook at the table-book-wielding audience who went to theatres primed to capture the newest words. Yet in tragedies he fell for the charm of audience-pleasing, mouth-stretching neologisms, creating, as a result, characters who seriously used them – 'conspectuities' (*Coriolanus*, 2.1.63), 'empiricitic' (*Coriolanus*, 2.1.115), 'exsufflicate' (*Othello*, 3.3.186), 'fustilarian' (2 *Henry 4*, 2.1.61) are all Shakespearean coinings. No wonder, then, that Shakespeare in particular was criticised for the tragic length of some of his terms. Ben Jonson, who claimed in *Every Man Out*, that he would never write the kind of play in which men 'with three rustie swords, / And helpe of some few foot-and-halfe-foote words, / Fight over Yorke, and Lancasters long jarres' seems to have been making a direct attack on Shakespeare.²⁹ In Shakespeare's *Richard III*, the play to which Ben Jonson is apparently referring, lengthy and often compound epithets

abound: ‘childish-foolish’ (1.3.141), ‘senseless-obstinate’ (3.1.43), ‘mortal-sharing’ (5.3.43).

When Shakespeare placed the strangeness and musicality of rare and difficult words into the mouths of tragic speakers, he illustrated characters who were distanced from others, but often had not chosen to be sidelined. Rather, they were types who had unwittingly isolated themselves because their language; their very method of conveying content renders them exotic rather than explains them. Othello speaks gorgeously, often choosing single, outstanding, grandiloquent words in an otherwise explicable poetic context. The result is a detached, stately language that conveys what G. Wilson Knight years ago identified as ‘the Othello music’. Othello’s words, however, reflect ‘not a soldier’s language, but the quality of soldiership in all its glamour of romantic adventure’; it, like much else that he does, conveys passion and intensity over meaning, for his words, then and now, were as beautiful as they were inaccessible: ‘Anthropophagi’ (1.3.143), ‘chrysolite’ (5.2.152), ‘mandragora’ (3.3.334), ‘Propontic’ (3.3.459), ‘Hellespont’ (3.3.459), ‘promulgate’ (1.2.21, ‘provulgate’ in Q).³⁰

There was also an alternative form of tragic speaking that Shakespeare used: it was the reverse of the sonorous one, and was exploited for moments of high, urgent, enraged passion. Again, this has something to do with the very flavour of tragedy as opposed to comedy, for the two forms were sometimes crudely defined as ‘comick Mirth and Tragick rage’.³¹ Tragic rage, or ‘furious vociferation’, was described in a number of ways – including ‘railing’, ‘ranting’ and ‘roaring’. Shakespeare employed dramatic *furor* regularly, and adopted all its various terms to describe the performance of heightened and enraged emotions: railing (‘let me rail so high / That the false hussy Fortune break her wheel’, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, 4.16.45), raging (‘Abate thy rage,

great duke!’ *Henry V*, 3.2.25), ranting (‘Nay, an thou’lt mouth, / I’ll rant as well as thou’, *Hamlet*, 5.1.280-1), and roaring (‘we shall make our griefs and clamour roar / upon his death’, *Macbeth*, 1.7.78). He employed high poetic anger (‘Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow, / You cataracts and hurricanoes ...’ *Tragedy of King Lear*, 3.2.1-2), and also the specific features of that anger, swearing.

Swearing and the making of oaths offered a variant of raging, just as word coining offered a variant of tone. Dekker refers to ‘tragicall and buskind oaths’, and Hall describes a successful tragedy as being full of ‘thrundring threats / That his poore hearers hayre quite upright sets’.³² Thus when Kent in *The Tragedy of King Lear* starts a battle of oaths with Oswald, he is raging in tragic fashion. In his instance, the oaths have particular resonance. Kent has, of course, already referred to the way he will adopt a special ‘accent’ as his disguise – ‘if ... I other accents borrow / That can my speech diffuse, my good intent / May carry through itself’, 1.4.1-3 – this accent he accentuates with tragic oaths that are, additionally, also fresh coinings (or, at least, fresh amalgamations). Kent hence merges a number of tragic forms to make up a rant that is humorous but also tragically excessive:

Oswald: What dost thou know me for?

Kent: A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats, a base, proud,
 shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy worsted-
 stocking knave; a lily-livered, action-taking, whoreson, glass-
 gazing, super-serviceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting
 slave; one that wouldst be a bawd in way of good service, and
 art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward,

pander, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch (*King Lear*,
2.2.13-21)

It was, perhaps, complex approaches such as this that led others to praise Shakespeare for expanding rather than simply embracing tragic railing. In ‘To our English Terence Mr. Will: Shake-speare’, Davies congratulates the writer for advancing beyond railing to wit itself, much as the passage above does: ‘Thou hast no rayling, but, a raigning Wit’.³³

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Naturally, actors preparing their performances had to have ways of knowing, from their text, how and when to walk or speak appropriately. For this, they had to study carefully. As is well known, for tragedy and comedy alike, actors received scripts in the form of ‘parts’ that they would learn at home.³⁴ These parts supplied all their speeches in full, but preceded each with only a short ‘cue’ – the last two or three words spoken by the interlocuter – for which the actor was to listen out. How, then, did an actor select genre, and how did he decide how to play his text correctly?

As performing from parts alerted actors more to *moment* than narrative arc, an actor, looking through his text, would divide it into units that would determine which actions he should use. These units were called ‘passions’: an actor receiving his speeches would determine what passion they were demanding when, and would pay close attention to moments when one passion transitioned into another. This is why Hamlet, when he wants to see how talented the player king is (to have ‘a taste of [his] quality’), suggests hearing ‘a passionate speech’ (2.2.435). That is why, too, when the

player responds with the passionate Hecuba speech, and Hamlet is scornful – he speaks of players who tear passions ‘to tatters’ (3.2.10) – he is being disingenuous. One of the earliest recorded references to performances of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, written in 1604, describes the way Burbage played the lead character: it mentions a man who ‘Puts off his cloathes; his shirt he onely weares, / Much like mad-*Hamlet*; thus [at] Passion teares’.³⁵ Burbage’s own performance was ratcheted up to a passionate extreme; indeed Hamlet himself comments on the way ‘the bravery of [Laertes’] grief did put me / ... into a tow’ring passion’ (5.2.80-1; F only). So Hamlet admires, asks for and despises the very passions that he himself displays. This is a metatheatrical moment that is also at the heart of *Hamlet*’s tragedy. Hamlet is a consummate player: that he cannot himself differentiate between playing and reality is one of his problems.

An actor’s way of analysing a text, then, was totally emotional. Yet he interpreted those emotions through the rules of rhetoric for *pronuntio* and *actio*. His aim, in ‘conning’ or learning his part, was to decide the appropriate motion the part required – its ‘action’ or ‘gesture’, of which pace was an aspect; and the appropriate vocal range the part needed – its ‘pronunciation’ or ‘emphasis’, of which tone was a part. So ‘the *Actor* ... puts life into ... mimicall Artillery by motion and voice’; and players who perform well ‘are ... deserving both for true action and faire deliverie of speech’.³⁶ As an actor established appropriate action and emphasis, so tragic or comic performance would emerge. This did, of course, allow for moments of tragedy in comedies and comedy in tragedies, for the actor would perform the lines he was given, rather than the feel of the whole play (as modern actors working from entire texts sometimes do). That is why certain phrases tell him to walk tragically, or sigh

tragically, or both, like ‘Twice for one step I’ll groan’ (*Richard II*, 5.1.91), and also for the tragic characters stranded in comedy.

Shakespeare’s *penchant* for writing the passions gave him structures on which to hang his tragic devices. He was famous for larding his plays not just with passionate moments, but also with their speedy alterations. These are immediately clear from looking at plays in the parts that actors would receive, where a switch in passion is marked by a change in rhetorical tone. So Macduff, in *Macbeth*, will have seen a transition in the music of his speech from when he enters Duncan’s room to when he leaves it.

-----[is] [the] door

I’ll make so bold to call,

For ‘tis my limited service.

-----[fellow] [to] it.

O horror, horror, horror! Tongue nor heart

Cannot conceive nor name thee! (2.3.49-63)

His first speech is unemotional and deferential; his second speech illustrates its new negative passion not just with repetition of ‘horror’ but also musically: the twice-spoken ‘nor’; the further emphasis of ‘not’, heightened by its alliteration with ‘name’.

This interest in providing passionate transitions for actors is presumably behind Shakespeare’s fascination with instant, extreme emotions. The suddenness with which tragic characters become entirely jealous (*Othello*, *Leontes*), entirely mad (*Lear*, *Ophelia*), entirely in love (*Romeo*, *Juliet*) is an aspect of writing for transitions. Shakespeare’s characterisation is partly encoded in simple transitions, or at least

grows out of them. Edmund has a speech in *King Lear* that not only contains a number of transitions, but also predicts some of the major emotional switches that the play will explore:

I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing. [*Enter Edgar*] Pat he comes, like the catastrophe of the old comedy. My cue is villainous melancholy, with a sigh like Tom o' Bedlam. O, these eclipses do portend these divisions! (1.2.128-34).

Edmund here is confessional, 'I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star ... twinkled on my bastardizing'; he describes Edgar's arrival as the 'cue' to 'villainous' melancholy that it is indeed, going on to say that he will accompany it with a mock 'sigh like Tom o'Bedlam'. Then he transitions to phony portentousness: 'O, these eclipses'. But within this speech, the larger transitions of the play itself are encoded. Edmund's brother Edgar will indeed be 'cued' into action by the villainous mock-portentousness of Edmund; it is he who will later be seen on stage literally sighing like 'Tom o'Bedlam' – for that is the role in which he will disguise himself. Shakespeare's structure, his concept of play itself, is encoded in or even arises out of the performance possibilities for which he writes.

A look at what were said to be the primary skills of Richard Burbage, the actor, summarises his talents with making transitions from one passion to another, love, to fear, to revenge, to rage:

Burbage ...when his part

He acted, sent each passion to his heart;

Would languish in a scene of love; then look
Pallid for fear; but when revenge he took,
Recall his blood; when enemies were nigh,
Grow big with wrath, and make his buttons fly ...³⁷

Like all actors, Burbage will, of course, have had to prepare his parts with keen alertness to the emotional clues they offered which he would manifest through a number of means, walking and speaking being some of the major ones. 'The praises of Burbadge', though written by Flecknoe some years after the actor's death, says that when Burbage intended 'on the Stage t'appear with greater grace' he employed in particular the arts of speaking and walking: he

Weigh'd every word, and measur'd every pace,
And finally did on the Stage appear
*Beauty to th'Eye and Musick to the Ear.*³⁸

As this has it, Burbage's way of analysing a text allows him to perform it appropriately: steps or 'pace' have an ideal measurement that Burbage can gauge; words have a heaviness that Burbage correctly evaluates, resulting in the 'music' of his voice and 'beauty' of his movement.

Late as this epitaph is, it speaks of particular talents for which Burbage was also famous in his own time. A much copied manuscript epitaph written when Burbage died, made precisely the same points, concentrating on the actor's amazing ability to calculate and then stage both words and pace 'correctly': when the result is

said to be that he gave ‘music’ to the ear, it becomes obvious that the sing-song quality of tragic speech was one Burbage wholly embraced:

how did thy speech become thee? and thy pace
sute wth thy speech, and every action grace
them both alike, while not a word did fall
wthout just weight to ballast it wthall.

The epitaph even goes on to demand that playwrights, in the light of Burbage’s death, cease to write tragic plays altogether, because they will not be performed appropriately. Other actors might manage comedies still, but only Burbage had the correct tragic action:

Poets whos glory whilome twas to heare
yor leines so well expressd, from hens forbear
and write noe more, or if you doe, let’t bee
in Comick sceanes, since tragick parts you see
dy all in him.

Finally, it suggests that the theatre itself become fixedly and permanently ‘tragic’, to display the fact that Burbage is no more, suggesting adopting tragic black hangings for every play: ‘hang all yor round wth black ... and if you ever chance to play againe / Let nought but tragedies afflict your scene’.³⁹

When Shakespeare was praised, it was partly for writing the kind of text that brought about the performances Burbage produced. As Jasper Mayne had it in ‘On

Worthy Master Shakespeare and his Poems', Shakespeare's tragedy was informed by Clio, muse of history but also muse of proclaiming, and Calliope, muse of epic poetry, but also the muse of the beautiful voice – and his handling of both melodious pairs was determined by the 'foote', here both pace (it is compared with the 'nimble hand') and metre. '*Shakespeares ... cunning braine*' was 'Improv'd' by

The buskind Muse, the Commicke Queene, the grannd
And lowder tone of Clio; nimble hand,
And nimbler foote of the melodious paire,
The Silver voyced Lady; the most faire
Calliope, whose speaking silence daunts:
And she whose prayse the heavenly body chants.⁴⁰

As this chapter has suggested, Shakespeare's plays arose out of methods of performing tragedy, and were angled towards the performance skills of certain actors, Richard Burbage being a supreme example. This is because Shakespeare worked closely with actors and, of course, acted with them. Indeed, when John Davies singled out two players for his poem 'Players, I love yee', he picked 'W.S.R.B.', William Shakespeare and Richard Burbage, both of whom, he maintains, were consummate performers who also had additional strings to their bows, 'painting, poesie' respectively. Burbage (R.B.), was known for his artworks (he could 'both lime' [paint a picture or portrait], 'and act' explains the epitaph);⁴¹ and Shakespeare (W.S.), was known for his poetic writing – 'poesie' – as well for his roles on the stage. Both men, suggests Davies, suffused their other talents, writing and painting, with their primary talent, performing. And perhaps this is what Shakespeare thought too. The playwright

in the epilogue to *Henry V*, claims his little worth as an author has been enhanced by performance: though he has a 'rough and all-unable pen', the next part of the tale, the *Henry VI* plays, 'oft our stage hath shown' (epilogue, 1, 13). Almost certainly performed by Shakespeare, the 'bending author' begs 'acceptance' for *Henry V* in the light of the success of *1, 2, 3 Henry VI* in performance (epilogue, 2). For Shakespeare, this chapter has argued, performance was all-important; his tragedies arise from his theatrical sense of what his stage and his fellow players could convey.

Further Reading

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John Harold Wilson, 'Rant, Cant, and Tone on the Restoration Stage', *Studies in Philology*, 52 (1955), 592-98

¹ John Taylor, *The Water-Cormorant his Complaint* (1622), A4r.

² Richard Verstegan (alias Richard Rowlands), 'Visions of the Worlds Instabilitie', in *Odes in Imitation of the Seaven Penitential Psalmes* (1601), 109; Thomas Dekker, *Lanthorne and Candle-light* (1609), L1v; *A Warning for Faire Women* (1599), A3r.

³ Anthony Marston, *Antonios Revenge* (1602), A2v.

⁴ Michael Neill, *Issues of Death* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 282.

⁵ Francis Quarles, *Divine Fancies* (1632), 171; Matthew Parker, *A True and Terrible Narration* (1638), A4v; Samuel Daniel, *The Civile Wars* (1609), 154. Quotations from Shakespeare are taken from *The Oxford Shakespeare: Second Edition* ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: OUP, 2005).

⁶ Nicholas Breton, *Pasquils Mad-cap* (1600), 36.

⁷ Anthony Scoloker, *Daiphantus* (1604), C1v; Justus Lipsius, *Two Bookes of Constance* (1595), 91.

⁸ *A Warning for Faire Women* (1599), C4v. For more on blood as an emblem of tragedy, see Andrea Stevens, 'Cosmetic Transformations' in Farah Karim-Cooper and Tiffany Stern eds, *Shakespeare's Theatres and the Effects of Performance* (London: Methuen, 2013).

⁹ 'On Mr Richard Burbidge an excellent both player, and painter', Folger Shakespeare Library MS, v.a.97, 90v.

¹⁰ For the use of animal blood as a tragic stage prop, see Lucy Munro, 'They eat each others' arms': Stage Blood and Body Parts' in Farah Karim-Cooper and Tiffany Stern eds, *Shakespeare's Theatres and the Effects of Performance* (London: Methuen, 2013), 73-93.

¹¹ Edward Phillips, *The New World of English Words* (1658), 2P3r; Thomas Nashe, *Pierce Penilesse* (1592), F3r.

¹² Anthony Scollocker, *Daiphantus* (1604), A2r.

¹³ [Abraham Wright?] *Parnassus Biceps* (1656), 132; James Howell, 'Upon the great Drammatical Work of B and Fletcher, publish'd 1646', *Poems* (1664), 26.

¹⁴ Robert Lloyd, *The Actor* (1760), 6. For more on the Restoration tragic strut, see Alan S. Downer, 'Nature to Advantage Dressed: Eighteenth Century Acting', *PMLA*, 58 (1943), 1002-37 (1009-10).

¹⁵ Thomas Dekker, *The Wonderfull Yeare* (1603), D1r; Joseph Hall, 'Satire III', *Virgidemiarum* (1598), 7; Thomas Middleton, *The Blacke Booke* (1604), D1r. For the idea that these references may refer to the specific acting style of Edward Alleyn, see Andrew J. Gurr, 'Who Strutted and Bellowed', *SHS*, 16 (1963), 95-102.

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- ¹⁶ Letter from a soldier to Sir Francis Walsingham, Jan 25 1586/7, quoted in E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923), 4: 304; Stephen Gosson, *Pleasant Quippes for Upstart Newfangled Gentle-women* (1595), A3r; Thomas Dekker, *Lanthorne and Candle-light* (1609), L1v.
- ¹⁷ Thomas Walkington, *The Optick Glasse of Humors* (1607), 80v.
- ¹⁸ William Camden, *Britain* (1637), 78r; John Davies, *The Holy Roode* (1609), G4v. Very little has been written about tone on the early modern stage, and this section has been influenced by accounts of tonal speaking in the Restoration, in particular, John Harold Wilson, 'Rant, Cant, and Tone on the Restoration Stage', *Studies in Philology*, 52 (1955), 592–98.
- ¹⁹ Richard Brome, *The Court Begger* (1653), S3r-S3v; John Collop, *Poesis Rediviva* (1656), 36.
- ²⁰ R. F. [Flecknoe] *Fifty Five Enigmatical Characters* (1665), 63.
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- ²² Charles Fitz-Geffry, *Sir Francis Drake his Honorable Lifes Commendation* (1596), G2v; Charles Sorel, *The Extravagant Shepherd ... Translated out of French* (1653), 54.
- ²³ Ben Jonson, *Sejanus his Fall* (1605), π2r.
- ²⁴ Samuel Sheppard, *Epigrams* (1651), 133.
- ²⁵ John Hall, 'Satire IIII', *Virgidemiarum*, 10.
- ²⁶ Edmund Gayton, *Pleasant Notes upon Don Quixote* (1654), 24.
- ²⁷ Hall, 'Satire III', *Virgidemiarum*, 7; Sir Thomas Overburie, 'An Hypocrite' in *His Wife With New Elegies* (1616), G6r; Robert Greene, *Greenes Arcadia, or Menaphon* (1599), A2v.

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- ²⁸ Thomas Randolph in James Shirley, *The Gratefull Servant* (1630), A3r
- ²⁹ Ben Jonson, 'Prologue' to *Every Man in his Humour* in *Workes* (1616), 3.
- ³⁰ George Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (London: Methuen 1961), 106.
- ³¹ Thomas Jordan, *A Nursery of Novelties* (1665), 79.
- ³² Dekker, *Wonderfull Yeare*, C2v; Hall, 'Satire III', *Virgidemiarum*, 7.
- ³³ John Davies, *The Scourge of Folly* (1611), 76-77.
- ³⁴ For more on actors' preparation generally, see Tiffany Stern, *Rehearsal from Shakespeare to Sheridan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) and Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford: OUP, 2007).
- ³⁵ Anthony Scolocker, *Daiphantus* (1604), E4v.
- ³⁶ John Gee, *New Shreds of the Old Snare* (1624), 17; *Ratseis Ghost* (1605), A3v.
- ³⁷ Thomas Bancroft, *Time's Out of Tune* (1658), 44.
- ³⁸ Richard Flecknoe, *Epigrams* (1671), 56-57.
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- ⁴⁰ I. M. S., 'On Worthy Master Shakespeare and his Poems' in *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies* (1632), *3r.
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