

Cambridge University Press

0521641918 - Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters

Lynne Magnusson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## *Introduction*

This book focuses on verbal interaction in the language of Shakespeare's plays and Elizabethan letter-writing. I argue that to make further advances in understanding Shakespeare's verbal achievement, it is necessary to turn attention away for a time from his private craftsmanship in words and to develop a better understanding of social invention in language – and of the richly complex rhetoric of social exchange in early modern England. We need to take a closer look at how language is organized as interaction, how dialogue and other verbal exchanges can be shaped by the social scene or context as much as the individual speakers, how “the word in living conversation” – in Bakhtin's intriguing formulation – “is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word.”<sup>1</sup> We need to know more about what everyday speech genres Shakespeare had to draw upon; how language demarcated class, social position, and relative power in Elizabethan England; how friendship, subjection, authority, intimacy, alienation, enmity and the like were constructed and inflected in words; how the language scripts for early modern relationships might have constituted and reproduced patterns of social organization on the one hand or of individual psychology on the other; how relational scripts for friendship or service might have changed over time and changed, with them, the repertoire of available personal relationships. The Elizabethans enacted their personal relationships with a rhetorical complexity and eloquence that Shakespeare assimilated, a historically situated eloquence that has been largely neglected in the formalist study of Shakespeare's stylistic artistry. To learn to read the socially situated verbal interaction of his time is to make a good start at understanding the fascinating social life of the languages that Shakespeare appropriated and embedded in dramatic writings. I employ two principal means to this end: a methodological use of modern-day discourse analysis (including linguistic pragmatics) and a comparative study of the theory and practice of Elizabethan letter-writing.

Cambridge University Press

0521641918 - Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters

Lynne Magnusson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

As one key strategy, this book makes a selective use of recent interdisciplinary developments in discourse analysis, an approach to language which places its accent on dialogic interaction and on the situated use of language in its varied contexts and which chooses conversational discourse and other types of socially situated verbal exchange as its object of study in preference to decontextualized sentences from written texts.<sup>2</sup> Given the primacy of dialogue representing conversation in Shakespeare's plays and the social orientation to language use evident in his time, discourse analysis is better suited to the goal of making the eloquence and the politics of these early modern exchanges visible than are formalist or affective stylistics, deconstruction, semiotics, Chomskyan grammar, or the other available methods. The appropriateness of the emergent discipline of discourse analysis to this study has been enhanced in the late 1980s and early 1990s by an increased awareness of its points of intersection with politically inflected social theory.<sup>3</sup> In this book, I bring some tools for practical criticism from discourse analysis together with theoretical perspectives on discourse as a social phenomenon, drawing especially on the work of M. M. Bakhtin and Pierre Bourdieu. A politeness model developed out of speech-act theory by cultural anthropologists Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson is the practical tool I have found most useful to make visible how verbal exchanges figure the complex and variable power dynamics of historically specific social relationships.<sup>4</sup> Linguists have long since identified one isolated feature of verbal exchange in early modern English that can serve as an index to social relationships. It is generally accepted that the selection of "thou" or "you" (T/V), the pronouns of address, can register relations of power and solidarity, although the other contextual factors governing selection seem to be so complicated that no one can be said to have entirely cracked this code.<sup>5</sup> What is so exciting about the Brown and Levinson politeness model is its capacity to demonstrate how verbal exchange inscribes the complexities of social relations at many different levels of message construction, making it a matter of much more general interest and significance to the interpretation of Shakespeare's discourse than the alternation of two pronouns, however mysterious, could ever be. Drawing on other resources from discourse analysis, in this book I also make some recent theories about how conversation works the starting point for arguing that such Shakespeare plays as *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Othello* exemplify a sophisticated rhetoric based not so much upon literary artifice as upon the potentialities of conversation.

Cambridge University Press

0521641918 - Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters

Lynne Magnusson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

As a second strategy, I set Shakespeare's language in relation to the theory and practice of Elizabethan letter-writing. The most widely available epistolary handbooks, including handbooks Shakespeare made use of, are the main rhetorical texts which conceptualize interpersonal exchange in language. These texts have not been adequately studied from this point of view. The significance of Erasmus's treatise "On the Writing of Letters" (*De conscribendis epistolis*), for instance, goes far beyond the immediate goal of teaching letter-writing.<sup>6</sup> For Erasmus, the dialogic forms of address developed in the epistolary scripts for various occasions are not just forms in words: they are forms of life, the material substance of relationships. For him, the language of the letter is always primarily determined by the situated event taken together with the relative positioning of the addressor and the addressee, which is imagined as almost infinitely various, depending on the relative ages, temperaments, moods, wealth, education, and a multitude of other factors. For Angel Day in *The English Secretary*, the language of the letter is also a function of relative positioning but primarily determined by the social superiority or inferiority of the addressee. The world he represents, like the Elizabethan court, is a world of vertical relations, in which one is almost always negotiating one's position within a graduated hierarchy, and all the while reproducing the forms of symbolic domination and subordination that reinforce the hierarchy. Epistolary handbooks by William Fulwood and John Browne address social groups distinct from the gentlemen or aspiring gentlemen reading Erasmus and Day: addressing merchants, burgesses, and citizens, they offer insights into the social stratification of Shakespeare's universe of discourse, the languages of its diverse classes and occupational groups.<sup>7</sup> Elizabethan epistolary rhetoric presents its own version of "discourse analysis," and this study aims to build a practical criticism of interaction around their points of intersection.

We cannot hear the Elizabethans speak, but, for early modern England, letters – what Erasmus called "mutual conversation between absent friends"<sup>8</sup> – give us access to the written language of social exchange. While we must always remember the degree to which any historical understanding is mediated through various linguistic and cultural frames of reception, letters exchanged in Shakespeare's day nonetheless give the clearest idea of how relative social positioning affected language and style in ways that have seldom been discussed. Few studies of Shakespeare's language have tried to read the dialogue within the historical context of verbal exchange in early modern Eng-

Cambridge University Press

0521641918 - Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters

Lynne Magnusson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

land: “historicizing” Shakespeare’s language is usually confined to glossing word meanings or, in the more specialized work of linguists, mapping grammatical shifts. Nonetheless, this study does not read Elizabethan letters merely as background for Shakespeare’s plays, as contexts for “the text.” My point is not to show that Shakespeare’s artistry builds up complex structures out of more primitive verbal forms such as letters but to show that Shakespeare’s prized artistry partakes of the sophisticated social creativity also on display in the Elizabethan language of letter-writing. In this book, I am also making a beginning at the serious rhetorical study of early modern administrative letters, treating them as texts in their own right, an agenda suggested by new historicist assertions about the rhetoricity of historical documents but generally left undeveloped.

This book about the rhetoric of social interaction in Shakespeare’s works and in Elizabethan letters began as a study of dialogue in Shakespeare’s plays. Despite the commonplace observation that dialogue is a basic element of drama, it struck me that Shakespeare studies had neglected the interactive features of Shakespeare’s language.<sup>9</sup> Instead, approaches to Shakespeare’s language have been restricted by two tendencies: to focus on the speech rather than the exchange as the unit of dramatic discourse; and to regard the speech as issuing from within the character rather than from interactions among characters. But even as I worked to develop a new approach to thinking through how Shakespeare’s dialogue is organized as interaction, how words answer preceding words and anticipate “answer-words,” and how addressor and addressee are shaped as subjects within these exchanges, the problem began to change shape. I soon came to see that a study of dialogue could turn out to be as decontextualized as a study of individual dramatic speeches, for what shapes answer-words is never wholly given in the immediate speech situation, in the dynamics of the interpersonal exchange. To think about two individuals exchanging speeches – however one might construct them as listening and responding, or emphasize the coordination of their efforts, or consider the specific context of the speech event – can still be to hold on to ideologically loaded assumptions about how the inner world of the character or the private craftsmanship of the author shapes utterances.<sup>10</sup> It can be to look at dialogue essentially as monologue, to shift the accent back from social interaction to individual expression. The challenge, it became apparent, was to take a broader view of social discourse: to learn to look closely at

Cambridge University Press

0521641918 - Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters

Lynne Magnusson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

collective invention in language – at how and to what extent speech and other verbal activities shape and are shaped by social organization and by social relations.

To meet this challenge is also to speak to an impasse that developed within Renaissance and Shakespeare studies with regards to close verbal analysis as the new historicism or cultural poetics took hold in the 1980s – for it drained much of the energy and interest out of language-oriented studies. The traditional equipment available for analyzing Shakespeare’s language and style – the new critical and formalist models – met with serious criticisms. New historicism together with other poststructuralist theories challenged the orientation of close readings to traditional conceptions of literary texts as autonomous and unified wholes, separated from other texts of the culture; of authors as largely independent originators of the verbal intricacies in texts; and by extension of dramatic characters as individuated by stylistic demarcators. A gap was developing between the newer theories underlying current critical practices and the long-standing taxonomies for close verbal analysis. With the widespread repudiation of formalism and the new criticism and with the questioning of traditional categories that formerly directed close readings (text, author, and character), we were left to a large extent without adequate ways of engaging the complex language of Shakespeare’s plays or of other Renaissance texts. Despite the frequent invocation of “discourse,” recent work in Shakespeare studies has tended to avoid language-oriented close reading, moving instead outward from the text to look at its relations to other cultural formations.

When Stephen Greenblatt opposed his “poetics of culture” to readings attentive “to formal and linguistic design,” he observed that “textual analyses . . . convey almost nothing of the social dimension of literature’s power.”<sup>11</sup> Yet in constructing this opposition, Greenblatt was not entirely condemning verbal analysis, or even formalism, *per se*: he was, instead, criticizing the usual privileging by formalist critics of individual artistry over collective invention as the principal agent in literary production – that is, the ideology informing even apparently descriptive practices. It is not surprising that the titles of such important books of the 1970s and early 1980s as *Shakespeare’s Grammatical Style*, *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Language*, *Shakespeare’s Styles*, *The Making of Shakespeare’s Dramatic Poetry*, *Shakespeare’s Universe of Discourse*, and *Shakespeare’s Metrical Art*<sup>12</sup> tend to confirm Greenblatt’s point: that however different the approaches, the shared orientation was at that time to the agency of

Cambridge University Press

0521641918 - Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters

Lynne Magnusson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the individual author. What is surprising is, on the one hand, how few stylistic studies of Shakespeare's work since the emergence of the new historicism have taken up the challenge to relate linguistic texture to social, cultural, and ideological practices and, on the other hand, how few historicist studies have found ways to reengage linguistic detail or texture in any sustained way that accords with their theoretical principles and political enterprise.

Among stylistic studies, Juhani Rudanko's stance in his recent book on *Pragmatic Approaches to Shakespeare* exemplifies a prevailing tendency to bracket off language study from social and historicist concerns. The book takes the view that "man is an essence and not a construct of 'special discourses' or of 'social context.'" <sup>13</sup> Yet Rudanko's conceptual orientation, with its dissociation of the linguistic from the social, is strangely at odds with the analytical tools he has selected from linguistic pragmatics, for the explicit concern of pragmatics is with how language works in social contexts. If the analytical techniques of the new criticism and of formalism presumed an orientation to the writer as private craftsman, one would certainly expect the tools from pragmatics that Rudanko is innovative in introducing to orient the analyst towards the social context of a writer's discourse. A similar tension between conceptual orientation and analytical tools is increasingly encountered in close readings of Shakespeare, but the tension is usually between newer outlooks and older tools – between the transformed scene of political and contextual criticism and the largely unchanged practices of close reading. The collection of essays, *Shakespeare Reread: The Texts in New Contexts*, stands apart, with Russ McDonald's lucid articulation of the fortunes of close reading in an age of politically inflected cultural criticism, and yet the tension between historicist criticism and close reading is strongly marked in opening essays by such masterful analysts as Helen Vendler and Stephen Booth, essays which nonetheless stay very much within the confines of recognizable formalist practice. <sup>14</sup> Despite the battle lines drawn when early new historicist critics set up language-oriented analysis as a defining Other, the impulse towards a synthesis has also found expression among cultural theorists. According to Louis A. Montrose in "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," for example, cultural studies does not oppose "the linguistic and the social" but instead "emphasizes their reciprocity and mutual constitution": "On the one hand, the social is understood to be discursively constructed; and on the other, language use is understood to be always and necessarily dialogical, to be socially and materially

Cambridge University Press

0521641918 - Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters

Lynne Magnusson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

determined and constrained.” While this formulation places issues of language at the center of Montrose’s project, there is nonetheless no further treatment of language in the essay beyond the comment that “The propositions and operations of deconstructive reading” (often argued to be ahistorical) “may be employed as powerful tools of ideological analysis.”<sup>15</sup> As with Rudanko’s stance, a gap opens up, here one between the conceptual orientation to language as a social phenomenon and the analytical tools: the demonstration of how deconstructive readings manifest social determination or constraint in language use is missing. In more general terms, the frequent references within historicist criticism to discourse and to discursive practices have seemed at times to gesture towards a sophistication of linguistic concept that is not always carried over into practical analysis.

It is time to negotiate some common ground between close reading and cultural poetics and, in particular, to propose taxonomies for verbal analysis that can address the place of collective invention in the production of Shakespeare’s complex texts. A first step is to acknowledge that the separation described above between linguistically oriented criticism and historicist criticism may not be entirely, or even primarily, a matter of ideological difference. It may be instead a matter of uncoordinated resources among disciplines, of mismatches between concepts and analytical tools that are not particular to Shakespeare studies, and even of timing differences in how related ideas develop in different fields. If Greenblatt was right to claim that close textual analyses in the 1980s conveyed “almost nothing of the social dimension of literature’s power,”<sup>16</sup> it was not because the linguistic and the social are inherent opposites. Language is a complicated – an inexhaustible – subject. Efforts to explain or contain it have always met with competing claims and been subject to endless revision, and yet the pace of that revisionism is at times slowed by the level of complexity demanded by investigation of language and at times diffused by the fragmented dispersal of the investigation across many disciplines. This study does not propose to synthesize interdisciplinary work bringing together the linguistic and the social but instead to identify some productive points of intersection that can take the practical criticism of Shakespeare’s language in a new direction. As an important example, it will identify some points of contact between the empiricist research into politeness undertaken by Brown and Levinson on a social-science model and the theoretical insights into linguistic exchange developed by thinkers such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Pierre Bourdieu to develop a practical analysis of how



Cambridge University Press

0521641918 - Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters

Lynne Magnusson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

social relationships are constructed both in dramatic dialogue and in epistolary exchanges.

Underlying my project is an effort to think about verbal discourse as a social phenomenon. “Social discourse” has gathered so many different resonances – some complementary and others contradictory – in deconstruction, cultural studies, post-colonial studies, and linguistic discourse analysis that it becomes important to situate one’s use of the term and offer some preliminary identification of key issues. The new historicist ideas about social discourse draw most heavily upon the work of Foucault, but Foucault’s “discourse,” while enormously productive for sociohistorical reading, is not primarily a linguistic concept. In this study I am primarily concerned with language use – with the actual words exchanged among speakers and writers. For this reason, some of the basic distinctions made by Bakhtin provide a more immediately relevant point of departure. Furthermore, theorizing discourse as a social phenomenon, Bakhtin’s work anticipated by about thirty years the first steps in discourse analysis and anticipated by about forty-five years the recognition among its practitioners of a need to interrogate theoretical presuppositions that were limiting the interpretive power of its descriptions.

For Bakhtin, to argue that verbal discourse is a social phenomenon was to oppose a “stylistics of ‘private craftsmanship’” prevailing when he wrote “Discourse in the Novel” and long afterwards.<sup>17</sup> It was also to interrupt the Saussurian binary opposition between *langue* and *parole*, between a unified language system and individual language use. Verbal production cannot be accounted for by imagining the “speaking individual” drawing for his or her utterance on a “unitary language system.”<sup>18</sup> To understand discourse as a social phenomenon is to imagine a multi-linguaged world – a plenitude of colliding and overlapping discourses – discourses associated with the huge range of human enterprises specific to any time and place, discourses of groups, discourses of classes, of professions, of generations, and the like. Language is stratified, plural, heteroglossic. Discourses are specific to their historical, institutional, relational – and other – contexts, but they are also migratory, hybridizing, shape-shifting, continuously changing.

Discourse, so conceived, is neither the product of individual invention nor a mere derivative from a general system of language. Instead, the word, as Bakhtin puts it, is always oriented towards encounters with other jostling discourses. Discourse is *social* in that it is *dialogic*. In Bakhtin’s writings, “dialogic” takes on a number of different meanings.



Cambridge University Press

0521641918 - Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters

Lynne Magnusson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

It does not usually refer primarily to verbal exchange, to one person speaking to another person in consecutive turns – what in “Discourse in the Novel” he calls “intra-language” or external dialogue. For Bakhtin, all language use is caught up in the “internal dialogism of the word” – a concept he explains in terms of two ways that the “word” is oriented toward “alien words.”<sup>19</sup> First, he develops what is the foundation of “intertextuality”: the idea that discourse is oriented toward the “already uttered,” that the word “is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in the object.”<sup>20</sup> That is, no subject matter, no topic for discourse, presents a blank sheet for the individual’s marking or invention. Invention is collective in that competing and jostling discourses are already in place for every topic, and discourse has always to situate itself in relation to this ongoing conversation or dialogue. Our discourse, as Bakhtin puts it, is made up largely of quotations: words are somebody else’s words – discourse is invariably quotation and hence appropriation – and such an encounter of the word with others’ words is an integral part of what makes discourse social.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the speaking subject is formed partly out of this unceasing play of dialogue, for the language helping to shape subjectivity always “lies on the borderline between oneself and the other.”<sup>22</sup>

It is Bakhtin’s account of how the word is oriented not merely to alien words in the object but also to the alien word of the listener which first drew my attention. I quoted part of it earlier: “The word in living conversation is directly, blatantly, oriented toward a future answer-word: it provokes an answer, anticipates it and structures itself in the answer’s direction.”<sup>23</sup> In this formulation, anticipation of an answer-word is conceived as a fundamental feature of social discourse production. A dialogic utterance is not, surprisingly, structured to answer a preceding utterance; instead, it is structured to answer its own future answer. This idea of social discourse as anticipatory is borne out and developed in the theorizing of some later writers: Pierre Bourdieu, for example, emphasizes how the anticipated conditions of reception shape discourse production, constraining the speech of dominated speakers and enabling the speech of dominant speakers;<sup>24</sup> politeness theory, as another example, emphasizes how the mitigating strategies of politeness anticipate potentially threatening effects of speech acts, repairing damage – so to speak – before it occurs.<sup>25</sup> My study focuses a good deal of attention on forms of “external dialogue,” and, despite Bakhtin’s disclaimer of attention to external dialogue, this concept of anticipation is an extremely fruitful one for the analysis of verbal exchanges.

Cambridge University Press

0521641918 - Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Language and Elizabethan Letters

Lynne Magnusson

Excerpt

[More information](#)

I have reviewed two senses in which Bakhtin construes social discourse as words oriented to the words of others. For Bakhtin, social language is also a matter of repetitive forms. In producing discourse, we are not always merely quoting, or replicating and appropriating, the words of other individual speakers; in doing so, we draw on collective repertoires, what Bakhtin calls social speech genres, routinized verbal behaviors appropriate to particular situations and relations.<sup>26</sup> As forecast by Erasmus, speech genres can be conceived as fragmentary scripts, the stuff out of which life's diverse activities, roles, and relationships are improvised. In placing emphasis on repetitive form, an understanding of language as a social phenomenon places significance on the maintenance work done by discourse – on its construction of the quotidian and on its reproductive role. Through the part language plays in the elaboration of repetitive social practices, discourse can be said to contribute to the construction and reproduction of subject positions and personal identities, relationships, and systems of knowledge and belief.<sup>27</sup> The idea that language is instrumental in creating and maintaining the social order has a long history. For much of that long history, the idea had a eulogistic cast, as in Cicero's celebration (much "quoted" in Shakespeare's time) of how oratory and civil conversation first brought people together in communities and subsequently sustained the bonds that keep people working together. More recently accounts tend to have a dyslogistic cast: Althusser's work, for example, brought home how language supports and sustains social formations perpetuating oppression. For political criticism, social discourse, together with other recurring material practices, produces and reproduces social relations – with social relations being conceived primarily as power relations, relations of domination and subjection. Ideology works out its gentle violence in language use. These ideas are commonplace today, and yet it is far from common to hear particular accounts of how ideology, or social relations, are figured in the grain of particular discourses – and this provision of practical tools for such analysis is one of my aims in seeking common ground between cultural criticism and close reading.

For all Bakhtin's insistence on quotation and repetition, he nonetheless is less concerned to emphasize the conservative and reproductive dimension of discourse than to accent the potential for creativity and invention. Is it possible, he asks, to talk about social or collective invention in language? Or, to talk about creativity in language, does one need to fall back upon the idea of the private craftsman, the individual