

PART I

Basic Elements

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Excerpt
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I

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Shakespeare and the Problem of Style

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Early Plays: Style and Skill

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Middle Plays: Style and Voice

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

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

Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
 Th'imperial jointress of this warlike state,
 Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,
 With one auspicious and one dropping eye,
 With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage,
 In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
 Taken to wife. (1.2.8–14)

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

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

RICHARD

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

A brittle glory shineth in this face.
As brittle as the glory is the face,
[Smashes the glass.]
For there it is, cracked in a hundred shivers. (4.I.282-288)

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

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