CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43213-0 - The Janus of Poets: Being an Essay on the Dramatic Value of Shakespere's Poetry Both Good and Bad
Richard David
Excerpt
More information

PART I

POETRY AND DRAMA

It is perilously easy to think of a poet's artistic development not as a living growth, but as a tabulated sequence in a history book, in which each calculated event leads logically to its successor, and the stages are vividly distinguished. An artist's progress is nothing so deliberate and self-conscious; and all attempts to see it as such result—look at almost any critical study of Beethoven or Mozart—either in its crystallisation into a few grand periods with which the works obstinately refuse to correspond, or its resolution into as many phases and "manners" as there are opus numbers.

Such a treatment is even more misleading applied to a dramatist than to a musician. For the dramatist is concerned, technically, with the presentation of definite stage-effects, in the highest sense of the phrase; and to achieve them he will use any method that he has found successful, at whatever stage of his development he first conceived it. It is therefore impossible to fix and

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43213-0 - The Janus of Poets: Being an Essay on the Dramatic Value of Shakespere's Poetry Both Good and Bad
Richard David
Excerpt
More information

define Shakspere's technique at any one moment of his career, or to assign a play to an early date and immature practice simply on the ground, say, that certain scenes in it contain a large number of rhymed couplets; Shakspere was always prepared to write couplets if they would best effect his purpose.

Not that the dramatist necessarily thinks out the appropriate style of verse or prose for every mood, and then consciously employs each in its right place; to assume that is as serious a mistake as the other. It is more likely that he instinctively varies the tone-colour as the emotional atmosphere changes. But here again the business of playwriting is seen to be a very fluid thing, to which the rules of evidence and law-court procedure cannot be applied.

It will be most important to remember this caution in a later section, when dealing with the immense variety of verse-styles which Shakspere employs side by side in his mature plays. I insert it here to remind the reader that a poet's development is by no means such a direct affair as the critic, in searching for the chief influences and underlying impulses, is almost bound to make it. In pointing out what seems to be the main cur-

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43213-0 - The Janus of Poets: Being an Essay on the Dramatic Value of Shakespere's Poetry Both Good and Bad
Richard David
Excerpt
More information

rent, he disregards the innumerable eddies and backwashes which accompany it.

The attempt to distinguish Shakspere's first "periods" meets with even greater difficulties than such attempts usually do. About the order of composition of his early plays there can be no certainty; and the original problem is further complicated by the fact that more than one of them show signs of having undergone a drastic revision at a much later date than that of the first writing. There is, however, one common denominator discoverable for those plays which external evidence suggests are the earliest. The scheme and motive of them all is a poetical one; they are literary rather than dramatic; the form and turn of the phrases betray the fact that Shakspere was here setting down words which he saw written upon an ideal page rather than heard spoken by an ideal actor.

The plays which common sense would put first are the imitations, of the classics and of Marlowe: *Titus Andronicus* following Kyd and the Senecans, the *Henry VI* trilogy and its pendant *Richard III*, which copy the historical and semi-historical plays of Marlowe, Peele, and Greene, and *The Comedy of Errors* based on

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43213-0 - The Janus of Poets: Being an Essay on the Dramatic Value of Shakespere's Poetry Both Good and Bad
Richard David
Excerpt
More information

Plautus. There is very little poetry, good poetry, in any of these; what there is belongs either to the heaven-battle-thunder-devils or the rose-lily-ivory-and-gold school—in short to the Senecans or to the Sonneteers. There is very little that is distinctive of Shakspere; which is perhaps the reason why such a jostling crowd of dramatists, besides Shakspere, have at various times been admitted to their authorship. Yet they are competently written examples of their different genres, and the basic model upon which Shakspere is to found his first variations.

The verse of these early plays is adequate to the straightforward effects which are required of it, but has as yet little flexibility or power of variation. That of the historical series is boxed off into compartments as regular and precise as the heroic couplet; such lines as these, of Joan la Pucelle, seem to fall naturally into pairs:

> Dismay not (Princes) at this accident,
> Nor grieve that *Roan* is so recovered:
> Care is no cure, but rather corrosive,
> For things that are not to be remedy'd.
> Let frantic *Talbot* triumph for a while,
> And like a Peacock sweepe along his tayle,
> Wee'le pull his Plumes, and take away his Trayne,
> If *Dolphin* and the rest will be but rul'd;

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43213-0 - The Janus of Poets: Being an Essay on the Dramatic Value of Shakespere's Poetry Both Good and Bad
Richard David
Excerpt
More information

and in Gloucester's defence the regular service and return is even more noticeable:

> Vertue is choakt with foule Ambition,
> And Charitie chas'd hence by Rancours hand;
> Foule Subornation is predominant,
> And Equitie exil'd your Highnesse Land, etc.

where the rhyme emphasises the movement. Often, of course, this underlying couplet-rhythm breaks surface, and produces large patches of actual rhymed verse, as in the death scenes of Talbot and his son; island outcrops—single couplets, or groups of two or three—appear at frequent intervals, and for no obvious reason, throughout the blank verse scenes; and often, even when the rhyme does not follow immediately, its appearance a line or two later produces the same distinctive checking and clinching effect:

> From off the gates of *Yorke*, fetch down that head,
> Your Father's head, which *Clifford* placed there;
> In stead whereof, let this supply the roome,
> Measure for measure, must be answered.

Or, more blatantly:

> I have no Brother, I am like no Brother:
> And this word (Love) which Gray-beards call Divine,
> Be resident in men like one another,
> And not in me:

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43213-0 - The Janus of Poets: Being an Essay on the Dramatic Value of Shakespere's Poetry Both Good and Bad
Richard David
Excerpt
More information

Such a haphazard, almost accidental, use of rhyme is avoided by Shakspere in later plays, where the more compact couplet is still employed to make a point or emphasise a moral.

The "couplet-movement", if I may call it so, is responsible for the very short wavelength of the verse in these early plays. The voice rises in one line, subsides in the next. The mechanical return of each second line cuts short any attempt at a sustained period or a carefully prepared crescendo; the climaxes are abrupt, and follow each other with perfect timing and regularity at two-line intervals. It is only when the couplets are forgotten, and Shakspere is deliberately echoing Marlowe, that any sort of freedom or expansion is possible. Talbot, as a warrior-hero, inherits a trick of Tamburlaine's voice if no more; and consequently the climax of a battle scene has often a new breadth and vigour. Other emotional turning-points sometimes receive the same treatment; York, in his last agony, can utter a denunciation against Queen Margaret, parts of which have quite the Marlovian swing and drive; and the noble scenes between Suffolk and the Queen culminate in that great descriptive speech, often taken by the disinte-

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43213-0 - The Janus of Poets: Being an Essay on the Dramatic Value of Shakespere's Poetry Both Good and Bad
Richard David
Excerpt
More information

grators for the work of Marlowe himself, which preludes Suffolk's death and the end of an important stage in the history:

The gaudy blabbing and remorsefull day,
Is crept into the bosome of the Sea:
And now loud houling Wolves arouse the Jades
That dragge the Tragicke melancholy night;
Who with their drowsie, slow, and flagging wings
Cleape dead-men's graves, and from their misty Jawes
Breath foule contagious darknesse in the ayre: etc.

But such stuff as this is only a highly coloured patch in the general fabric of the play. Elsewhere the measured rise and fall persist, and, even in continuous speeches by a single character, there is an ever-present sense of question and answer, quip and repartee; so that a passage of genuine stichomuthia, such as that between Richard and Edward IV's queen, does not stand out at all strikingly from its surroundings, as it would in a later play.

In a lighter work, *The Comedy of Errors*, this rhythm is found less cramped. The verse is still built up of repetitive sections, but the intervals are now longer, of three or four lines, and the voice is able to wander a little further before drifting back upon itself. This creates a curiously

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43213-0 - The Janus of Poets: Being an Essay on the Dramatic Value of Shakespere's Poetry Both Good and Bad
Richard David
Excerpt
More information

sing-song movement, whose leisureliness is often emphasised by the "Kydian turns" which are almost its only ornament:

> DUKE. But had he such a Chaine of thee, or no?
> ANG. He had my Lord, and when he ran in heere,
> These people saw the Chaine about his necke.
> MERCH. Besides, I will be sworne these eares of mine
> Heard you confesse you had the Chaine of him,
> After you first forswore it on the Mart,
> And thereupon I drew my sword on you,
> And then you fled into this Abbey heere,
> From whence I thinke you are come by Miracle.
> EPH. ANT. I never came within these Abbey wals,
> Nor ever didst thou draw thy sword on me:
> I never saw the chaine, so helpe me heaven:
> And this is false you burthen me withall.

Here there is more freedom than in the verse of the first historical plays; but even here there is not that full power and lack of constraint that is found in the blank verse of Marlowe. I suggest, very tentatively, that this rhythm too is under domination; that it is shaped by another metrical form, less curt and definitive than the couplet-pattern of the Senecans, but still more or less rigid; that it is a development of the old semi-regular metre, which still survives in other parts

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

Cambridge

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43213-0 - The Janus of Poets: Being an Essay on the Dramatic Value of Shakespere's Poetry Both Good and Bad
Richard David
Excerpt
More information

of this play, and also in *Love's Labour's Lost*—as these couplets of Dromio of Ephesus:

Say what you wil sir, but I know what I know,
That you beat me at the Mart I have your hand to show;
If my skin were parchment, and the blows you gave were ink,
Your owne hand-writing would tell you what I thinke.

These lines have also the couplet-form, but without the precision of the true couplet. They too follow the boomerang flight, spinning out and up, checking, and returning to the thrower's hand; but the check is not so abrupt, and the return more dilatory. And it is exactly this delayed come-back which distinguishes the blank verse of *The Comedy of Errors* from that of *Henry VI*. The proof no longer follows the proposition immediately; the periods of the *Comedy* fall on the ear almost like an Aristotelian syllogism: All beasts that part not the hoof are anathema to the Jews; the camel's hoof is not parted: therefore the camel is anathema to the Jews.

This possibility of a primitive origin for Shakspere's early blank verse suggests that he, like

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-43213-0 - The Janus of Poets: Being an Essay on the Dramatic Value of Shakespere's Poetry Both Good and Bad
Richard David
Excerpt
More information

Greene, had written plays in irregular verse, which, like Greene's, have since disappeared. But however that may be, the type persists throughout the plays of his youth, being still the standard verse in the purely narrative and plot-forwarding scenes of *Richard II*, and also in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

Richard II presents the problem of two verse-styles, representing different stages of Shakspere's development, found side by side in the same play. Again and again the working verse, of the *Errors* type, gives way to sudden flights of a poetry which is more mature than anything written at the time of the play's composition, or for some years after, and which must therefore belong to a later revision. There was in fact a long addition to the deposition scene printed in the third Quarto, of 1608; but this does not contain the most striking passages, and was probably omitted from the two earlier editions only in deference to a political censorship. The revision that added the great rhetorical passages was made at a much earlier date. Even in the play as first issued in 1597, there are speeches of the King which, in energy and in control of movement, are strangely out of keeping with the

© in this web service Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org