

## I

*Shakespeare and Dramatic Prose*

*Jaques.* Nay, then, God b'wi' you,  
an you talk in blank versel

Shakespeare's prose is beyond question the finest body of prose by a writer in English. The idea may at first appear strange; one grants that Shakespeare wrote prose, but one may hesitate to admit him to the company of prose writers, for, after all, he wrote dramatic prose. Any roster of artists in English prose is likely, however, to include not only novelists but historians, biographers, critics, philosophers, scientists, and theologians—and who would take it upon himself to exclude Congreve or Shaw? And Shakespeare leads them all. His prose is the richest and most various in the language; it draws its greatest strength and suppleness from the fact that it was written to be spoken by characters in plays. At its best, it contributes enormously to the depiction of personality, and it is an indispensable element in the creation of atmosphere. And even at its least interesting, as in the journeyman scenes of exposition, it is less obtrusive than the purely utilitarian verse, which can range from neutral to downright distressing.

It was Shakespeare's good fortune to write prose in an age which made no sharp stylistic demarcation between literary dramatic prose and the prose of common speech. Like John Middleton Synge, Shakespeare was free to draw on the prose of the city and hamlet for its vigorous natural rhythms and its unconscious beauty. We may imagine, with Bernard

Shaw in *The Dark Lady of the Sonnets*, that Shakespeare assiduously jotted down for later use the felicitous phrases of beefeaters; but whether or not we commit ourselves to such a theory, we can hardly fail to recognize, in the excellence of Falstaff's prose, Shakespeare's delighted awareness of Elizabethan speech. The racy language of the London streets figured significantly in the development of the finest dramatic prose that our language—or any other—has ever known.

Prose has for so long been the unquestioned medium for English drama that one conceives only with difficulty of a truly popular drama in verse, or in a combination of prose and verse. Yet the ascendance of dramatic prose is a relatively recent phenomenon, as the history of European drama demonstrates; prose first found its way into the verse play by fulfilling certain functions which dramatists were for some reason unwilling to delegate to verse. This development appeared in a highly concentrated form in the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and above all in the plays of Shakespeare. For he, more than any other playwright, successfully combined the media of prose and verse. He was, moreover, fully aware of his achievement: his brilliant blending and contrasting of the two forms should alone serve to confute that curious scholar who suggested that Shakespeare actually wrote only verse and incomprehensibly permitted almost forty per cent of it to be printed as prose.

The beginnings of English dramatic prose are veiled in obscurity; in the Elizabethan drama before Shakespeare, Lyly and Marlowe stood almost alone in regarding prose as useful for any purpose more elevated than the speech of clowns. The most typical conventional uses of prose—for letters and proclamations, madness, and comic matter—were well established by 1590. They were grounded in a more or less conscious awareness of the nature of

poetic drama, and also, perhaps, in simple imitation of life. Proclamations, for example, were known from common experience to be written in prose; and only a very imaginative dramatist would have written a proclamation in verse. In a verse play, a letter or a proclamation is an intrusion from the world without, and the symbolic representation of such intrusion is heightened by that marked formal differentiation which the use of prose supplies. In the same way, the verse play used prose to represent madness or derangement; the normal mode of speech in the play was verse, and the introduction of prose signified the failure of a character to conform with the prevailing mode of his world. This doubly satisfying convention was one of the most artful developed by the English drama. For the madman is expressly marked off from other characters by his prose, and his disintegration is forcefully represented by his speaking irregular prose while the other characters continue to speak regular verse. Comedy, in the earlier drama, is also little more than a fall into absurdity from the heights of the serious verse action, a fall which could be appropriately mirrored in prose.

These conventions Shakespeare knew, and, after his fashion, utilized. He rarely violated them, for he must have realized how solidly they were based in the very structure of the prose-verse play. But his development of the conventions was extremely subtle and skillful; the simple division of verse for serious matter and prose for comic matter which prevailed in the pre-Shakespearean drama is meaningless when applied to *Hamlet* or *King Lear*. The several conventions of the pre-Shakespearean drama ceased to exist as discrete rules and were assimilated into the structure of the Shakespearean play.

For the use of prose in the mature Elizabethan drama may be considered, in its totality, a single convention. The meaning of this convention is the establishment of dramatic

i\*

contrast between the prose and the dominant verse. Shakespeare and his fellow dramatists all employed prose according to their tastes and abilities, and a knowledge and evaluation of their individual achievements is essential if one is to make a comprehensive judgment of Shakespeare's practice. Shakespeare's success is great not only because of his superior technical invention, but because of the extraordinary beauty and richness of his prose. In the works of many of his fellows, prose remained always an inferior medium, something that would serve for clowns but that was hardly worthy of a dramatist's best efforts. Shakespeare evidently held prose in no such contempt, or he could hardly have put so much art into the prose of Hamlet and Falstaff. He already had a vigorous and brilliant prose style when he was still far from his peak as a verse writer. George H. W. Rylands has even maintained that Shakespeare developed his mature verse style through his study of dramatic prose.<sup>1</sup> The colloquial and realistic quality of much of Shakespeare's finest verse may well owe not a little to his work in prose.

Realism, wit, common sense make up the quintessence of comedy, and the characteristic idiom of comedy is prose—"common speech artistically heightened." Without prose, Shakespearean comedy would be unthinkable; and, from the start, Shakespeare's progress as a writer of dramatic prose can be best charted in his comedies. One encounters difficulties, to be sure: the contrast of prose and verse is characteristically more striking in tragedy than in comedy, for the opposition of the two media may be blurred in comedy by the sheer volume of prose and by the relatively greater fluidity of both prose and verse. The typical balance of prose and verse may actually be reversed, as in *Much Ado About Nothing*, in which it is the verse that is contrasted with the dominant prose. The element of contrast remains basic and omnipresent, nevertheless, although it may exist in combi-

nation with such factors as the delineation of character in prose. Falstaff is surely the most striking example of characterization in prose. He speaks verse only to mock it, for it is totally foreign to his personality. In the two parts of *King Henry IV*, the simple and familiar contrast of prose and verse within a single scene is expanded to a larger conflict between Falstaff's world of prose realism and the world of verse and nobility, whose ideals and whose very language he derides.

Prose is also used effectively in the characterization of the tragic hero. Hamlet, for example, is created in both prose and verse partly in order to symbolize his inner conflict. After his initial encounter with the Ghost, Hamlet can reveal himself in verse only in soliloquy or to Horatio; Hamlet, at grips with a hostile and dangerous court, communicates with it in prose. His chief motive for speaking prose is to feign madness, but it is not his sole motive: Hamlet with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern satirizes the world, maintains a suspicious reserve, admits the fact of his melancholy but conceals its cause; Hamlet with the Players anatomizes the art of acting; Hamlet with Horatio and the Gravediggers jests about mortality and moralizes on the skull of Yorick—all in prose.

Within the individual scene, both in comedy and in tragedy, prose may be contrasted with verse in at least two ways. Parts of the same scene may be set off against one another, or a character may be opposed to the prevailing tone of the scene in which he figures. Cleopatra's dialogue with the clown, in the final scene of *Antony and Cleopatra*, stands significantly between Cleopatra's preparations for death and the very spectacle of that death. Similarly, the Porter's prose monologue in *Macbeth* follows the verse conversation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth after the murder of Duncan, and is itself followed by the dialogue in verse attendant on

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-62408-5 - Shakespeare's Prose  
Milton Crane  
Excerpt  
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the discovery of the murder. On the other hand, the isolation of a character by the use of prose appears strikingly in all the scenes of *Troilus and Cressida* that show Thersites at loggerheads with the Greek heroes. Virtually all satirical commentators in the plays, for that matter, speak prose, as an emblem of their separation from the action that they criticize. Prose performs a parallel function for Hamlet in the play-scene; he alone among the spectators annotates the action of *The Murder of Gonzago* with his edged comments in prose. Verse as well as prose may single out an individual in a group: Lord Say, in the hands of Jack Cade's men in *2 Henry VI*, defends himself in a verse which conflicts nobly with the revolutionists' disjointed and scurrilous prose.

In the present study I have considered those histories of Shakespeare whose prose is preponderantly comic together with the comedies, and those histories whose prose is chiefly serious together with the tragedies. Within these categories, the plays are examined chronologically. In justification of this division, it should be pointed out that the development of prose in the tragedies and that in the comedies are not parallel. That a difference should exist is entirely understandable, for the large proportion of prose in even the earliest comedies must have invited or required greater inventive efforts in prose than did the substantially smaller quantities of prose in the early tragedies and histories. An examination of *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Titus Andronicus* reveals that the prose in the early comedy is quite sophisticated and mature, whereas that in the early tragedy is of the most primitive. The application of a rigidly chronological method would portray a wholly incredible and misleading development. Within the categories I have employed, a consistent development can be traced under relatively constant conditions. The progress from comedy to comedy and

from tragedy to tragedy, although occasionally blurred by gaps of time, is on the whole clearly discernible.

In attempting to define the function of prose in the Shakespearean play, one must guard against imposing purely theoretical rules that cannot survive a pragmatic test. Most earlier writers on Shakespeare's prose either propounded broad and vague theories, which obliged them to rationalize or ignore the numerous exceptions in which Shakespeare abounds, or offered fantastically exhaustive lists of specific explanations. Thus, Henry Sharpe was obliged to establish as a rule that "Ladies speak prose when alone, or nearly alone, with female relations . . ." <sup>2</sup> The value of such theorizing is at best doubtful. Whether Shakespeare's intention can be divined at all is open to question, of course; but it is effectively clear that any attempt to explain his practice must be specific enough to endure application, and not so minute as to become preposterous.

It seems ironical that Shakespeare, the greatest master of the prose-verse drama, should bear much of the responsibility for the decline of the form in which he wrote his masterpieces. For the dramatic prose which Shakespeare and his colleagues so richly developed offered a valuable dramatic idiom for the growing realism of the Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, as well as for the comedy of manners. The encroachments of prose produced such notable all-prose plays as Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, one of the great realistic comedies, and Jonson's *Epicœne*, which was inferior in neither elegance nor polish to the Restoration comedy it helped to launch. Naturalism need not always seek its expression in prose, nor symbolism in verse, as both the Elizabethans and we can bear witness: who would call Hotspur's verse less naturalistic than the prose of Lyly's *Endimion*? The Elizabethans were learning that the form of *The Spanish Tragedie* was hopelessly inappropriate for the matter of *The*

*Shoemaker's Holiday*. But their new art form cost them the prose-verse drama.

Other influences, to be sure, contributed to the decline of the older form. The break in English dramatic tradition that came with the closing of the theatres in 1642; the diversion of interest to non-dramatic poetry in Stuart and Commonwealth England; and the very character of Restoration drama all helped to undermine the prose-verse play. And yet one finds even in Wycherley's *The Plain Dealer* the curious verse soliloquies of the passionate Fidelity, indicating that vestigial elements of the Elizabethan tradition lived on. On the one hand, the realism of Restoration comedy found a perfect medium in the prose it had inherited from Jonson and Dekker; on the other, the heroic play of the Restoration continued to restrict prose to comic scenes. Experiments in the combined use of blank verse, rhymed verse, and prose, as in Etherege's *Love in a Tub*, were not unknown. But a basic self-consciousness vitiated all the attempts of the Restoration to revive the mixed form, and subsequent efforts have been no more successful. T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* and Maxwell Anderson's imitations of Elizabethan drama have not heralded a popular revival of the poetic drama; nor has prose proved an unsatisfactory medium for symbolist drama. The problem can obviously not be resolved in merely formal terms; only a great conception can find great expression in either prose or verse.



## II

*English Dramatic Prose before Shakespeare*

Prose was well established in the Elizabethan drama long before Shakespeare came to London. In order to understand the background against which Shakespeare worked during his entire career, it will be necessary to examine in some detail the use of prose made by his most significant predecessors and fellow-playwrights. An appreciation of their reasons for introducing dramatic prose into their plays will permit a fairer assessment of Shakespeare's indebtedness to accepted convention and of his innovations. The earliest appearances of prose in the drama, in George Gascoigne's translation of Ariosto's *I Suppositi* and in Henry Medwall's *Nature*, are not strictly germane to this study. Gascoigne may have chosen prose for his translation because he deemed it more appropriate to the matter of the play or to his artistic purpose than verse; but, in the absence of such information, his prose version can play no part in the history of dramatic prose in English.

Among Shakespeare's predecessors, Lyly, Marlowe, and Kyd were most imaginative in their use of prose, and their plays will be treated here in some detail as representative of the pre-Shakespearean drama. Other playwrights will be considered more briefly.

1. *Lyly*

R. Warwick Bond, in his edition of Lyly's works, sums up in the following words Lyly's contribution to English dramatic prose:

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-62408-5 - Shakespeare's Prose  
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[Lyly] resolved to throw the whole of his matter into prose, prose which he made now serious and dignified, now bright and witty, but such as always gave the sense of selective skill and controlling power. He asserted his freedom from mechanical slavery, but only that he might better obey the higher laws of dramatic and literary effect. He was not the first dramatist to use prose; but he was the first to demonstrate, by persistent and successful use of it, its claim to be the received vehicle for English comedy.<sup>3</sup>

This statement of Lyly's achievement is unexceptionable, but surely Mr. Bond's explanation of Lyly's decision to adopt prose is incomplete. A study of the plays reveals the dramatist's steadily developing maturity of technique, but can hardly make one feel that when Lyly forsook the novel for the drama he was already a seasoned master of his new art.

*Euphues, or the Anatomy of Wit*, was published in 1578, *Euphues and his England* in 1580; and although *Campaspe*, Lyly's first play, was not published until 1584, Bond presents evidence to show that it was written either before or concurrently with the second novel. *Campaspe* is, therefore, the work of a man who became overnight the darling of Elizabeth's court, the chief exponent in English of a most extraordinary and ornate prose style. For some reason (and modern parallels may here prove instructive) Lyly determined to try his hand at a play. His subject differed radically from the familiar matter of the English play, and in its essentials recalled the courtly subjects of the interminable conversations of *Euphues*.

Lyly's great reputation, as may be seen from the echoes of his work in the writings of his contemporaries and successors, was based not on his narrative or philosophical gifts but on his unique style. It was entirely natural, therefore, for him to wish to capitalize on his fame and to extend it in his new medium. The slightest effort to employ the Euphuistic style in verse must have shown him at once the futility