METRICAL EXPLORATION

Mend Your Speech: Shifting between Verse and Prose

As Verse and Prose (page 48) showed you, Shakespeare primarily wrote in iambic pentameter – lines of ten syllables, broken into five beats, in an unstressed-stressed pattern. As his career went on, however, he began experimenting with different forms more often, from the four beats of trochaic tetrameter in plays like A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Macbeth to the more prose-heavy plays like The Merry Wives of Windsor and Much Ado about Nothing. Even within iambic pentameter, the later plays tend to have more irregularities – six-footed lines, caesuras, shared lines, etc – than the earlier plays do. King Lear, written around 1606, falls towards the later end of Shakespeare’s career, and it displays many variations on regular verse. It also includes a number of shifts between verse and prose in key scenes.

A quick search on Google shows that many scholars and teachers of Shakespeare adhere to the idea that high status characters speak in verse while low status characters speak in prose. While this pattern more-or-less holds in some plays, such as Julius Caesar, it is not broadly true. In many of Shakespeare’s plays, high status characters speak in prose – large portions of As You Like It and Much Ado about Nothing, for example – and low-status characters such as Pistol in Henry V sometimes speak in verse.

Giles Block, Master of Words at Shakespeare’s Globe, suggests that the difference has more to do with head vs heart than with high status vs low status. Block suggests that verse comes from the heart, the seat of emotion and passion, while prose comes from the head, the seat of logic and wit. This division can also pose some problems, however, as characters are certainly capable of being witty and logical in verse or of being emotional and passionate in prose.

In Lear, the change between verse and prose may have multiple connotations for a character’s mindset, emotions, and even sanity. In the following activities, your students will explore the differences between prose and verse sections of King Lear and will investigate character clues based on those revelations.

Activity:

- Review how to scan and mark both iambic pentameter and prose sections of a Shakespeare play from Verse and Prose, page 48.
- Give each of your students one of Handouts #11A-D: a variety of verse-prose shifts in King Lear.
- Each student should scan the piece, paying attention to verse-prose shifts and other irregularities.
- Have your students choose a reason for the verse/prose shift – whether it relates to the character’s status, to head vs heart, or to an emotional shift of some kind – and perform that shift using Choices, page 28.
  - For example: A shift from verse to prose may involve a change in speed, volume, or physical posture. Or, it might cause the actor to move from one kind of Laban movement to another, or from one part of the body (in Head/Heart/Gut/Groin) to another.
  - Make sure the shift is clear and distinct. Have your students try delivering their pieces more than once if necessary.
o Instruct your students to pay careful attention to classmates who are working with the same text as they are. Ask them to see if they can identify how their co-characters chose to key the verse-prose shift.

o You, a teaching aide, or another student may stand in to read the conversation partner in each passage.

• Discuss:

  o How easy was it to tell when each actor moved from verse to prose? Whose choices were the biggest? Whose were the subtlest?

  o For students working with the same text: Did they all make similar choices? What was different? Whose choices ended up telling different stories?

  o There is also the possibility that some of these verse-prose shifts were the result not of authorial intent or any acting reason, but because of errors in the print shop. Since printers set multiple pages at the same time, if they found themselves running short on space, they might put verse lines together to look like prose, or if they had too much space, they might break up them up, causing them to look like verse. Do your students have any lines they think might have been affected in that way?

    ▪ You may wish to examine the facsimiles of the quarto and folio (see Textual Variants, page 88) to further explore this possibility.

Creative Writing Prompt:
Have your students choose a 10-20 line section of verse and turn it into prose, and a 10-20 line section of prose and turn it into verse. They should not simply add or delete line breaks; rather, encourage them to consider
Handout #11A – EDMUND, 1.2

EDMUND
Thou, nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I
Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen moon-shines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? wherefore base?
When my dimensions are as well compact,
My mind as generous, and my shape as true,
As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
With base? with baseness, bastardy? base, base? 10
Who, in the lusty stealth of nature, take
More composition and fierce quality
Than doth, within a dull, stale, tired bed,
Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops,
Got 'tween asleep and wake? Well, then,
Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land:
Our father's love is to the bastard Edmund
As to the legitimate: fine word: legitimate.
Well, my legitimate, if this letter speed,
And my invention thrive, Edmund the base 20
Shall top the legitimate. I grow; I prosper:
Now, gods, stand up for bastards.

Enter GLOUCESTER

GLOUCESTER
Kent banish'd thus? and France in choler parted?
And the king gone to-night? Prescribed his power,
Confined to exhibition? All this done 25
Upon the gad? Edmund, how now? what news?

EDMUND
So please your lordship, none.

GLOUCESTER
Why so earnestly seek you to put up that letter?

EDMUND
I know no news, my lord.

GLOUCESTER
What paper were you reading?

EDMUND
Nothing, my lord.

GLOUCESTER
No? What needed, then, that terrible dispatch of
it into your pocket? the quality of nothing hath
not such need to hide itself. Let's see: come,
if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles. 35

EDMUND
I beseech you, sir, pardon me: it is a letter from my
brother, that I have not all o'er-read; and for so
much as I have perused, I find it not fit for your
o'er-looking.

GLOUCESTER
Give me the letter, sir.

EDMUND
I shall offend, either to detain or give it. The
contents, as in part I understand them, are to 40
blame.
Handout #11B – KENT, 2.2

KENT

What a brazen-faced varlet art thou, to deny thou knowest me? Is it two days ago since I tripped up thy heels, and beat thee before the king? Draw, you rogue: for, though it be night, yet the moon shines; I'll make a sop o' the moonshine of you: draw, you whoreson cullionly barber-monger, draw. [...] 

OSWALD
Help, ho, murder, murder. [...] 

CORNWALL
Keep peace, upon your lives: He dies that strikes again. What is the matter? What is your difference? speak. 

OSWALD
I am scarce in breath, my lord. 

KENT
No marvel, you have so bestirred your valour. You cowardly rascal, nature disclaims in thee: a tailor made thee. 

CORNWALL
Thou art a strange fellow: a tailor make a man? 

KENT
Ay, a tailor, sir: a stone-cutter or painter could not have made him so ill, though he had been but two hours at the trade. 

CORNWALL
Peace, sirrah, You beastly knave, know you no reverence? 

KENT
Yes, sir; but anger hath a privilege. 

CORNWALL
Why art thou angry? 

KENT
That such a slave as this should wear a sword, Who wears no honesty. Such smiling rogues as these, Like rats, oft bite the holy cords a-twain Which are too intrinse t' unloose; smooth every passion That in the natures of their lords rebel; Bring oil to fire, snow to their colder moods; Renege, affirm, and turn their halcyon beaks With every gale and vary of their masters, Knowing nought, like dogs, but following. A plague upon your epileptic visage; Smile you my speeches, as I were a fool? Goose, if I had you upon Sarum plain, I'ld drive ye cackling home to Camelot. 

CORNWALL
Why, art thou mad, old fellow? 

GLOUCESTER
How fell you out? say that. 

KENT
No contraries hold more antipathy Than I and such a knave. 

CORNWALL
Why dost thou call him a knave? What's his offence? 

KENT
His countenance likes me not.
KING LEAR

It shall be done; I will arraign them straight.

Come, sit thou here, most learned justicer;

Thou, sapient sir, sit here. Now, you she foxes—[...]

KENT

How do you, sir? Stand you not so amazed:
Will you lie down and rest upon the cushions? 5

KING LEAR

I'll see their trial first. Bring in the evidence.

Thou robed man of justice, take thy place;

And thou, his yoke-fellow of equity,

Bench by his side: you are o' the commission,

Sit you too.

EDGAR

Let us deal justly.

Sleepest or wakest thou, jolly shepherd?
Thy sheep be in the corn;
And for one blast of thy minikin mouth,
Thy sheep shall take no harm.

Pur! the cat is gray. 15

KING LEAR

Arraign her first; 'tis Goneril. I here take my oath
before this honourable assembly, she kicked the poor king her father.

FOOL

Come hither, mistress. Is your name Goneril?

KING LEAR

She cannot deny it. 20

FOOL

Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool.

KING LEAR

And here's another, whose warp'd looks proclaim
What store her heart is made on. Stop her there,
Arms, arms, sword, fire, corruption in the place,
False justicer, why hast thou let her 'scape? 25

KENT

O pity sir, where is the patience now,
That thou so oft have boasted to retain? [...]

KING LEAR

The little dogs and all, Tray, Blanch,
and Sweet-heart, see, they bark at me.

EDGAR

Tom will throw his head at them. Avaunt, 30
you curs. [...] Tom will make them weep and wail:
For, with throwing thus my head, dogs leap the hatch, and all are fled, loudla doodla, come, march to wakes and fairs and market-towns. Poor Tom, thy horn is dry.

KING LEAR

Then let them anatomize Regan; see what breeds about her heart. Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts? You, sir, I entertain for one of my hundred; only I do not like the fashion of your garments: you will say they are Persian attire: but let them be changed.

KENT

Now, good my lord, lie here and rest awhile.

KING LEAR

Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains:
so, so, so. We'll go to supper i' he morning.
Nature's above art in that respect. There's your press-money. That fellow handles his bow like a crow-keeper: draw me a clothier's yard. Look, look, a mouse: Peace, peace; this piece of toasted cheese will do 't. There's my gauntlet; I'll prove it on a giant. Bring up the brown bills. O, well flown, bird: i' the clout, i' the clout: hewgh.

Give the word.

GLOUCESTER
I know that voice.

KING LEAR
Ha! Goneril, with a white beard? They flattered me like a dog; and told me I had white hairs in my beard ere the black ones were there. To say 'ay' and 'no' to every thing that I said--'Ay' and 'no' too was no good divinity. When the rain came to wet me once, and the wind to make me chatter; when the thunder would not peace at my bidding; there I found 'em, there I smelt 'em out. Go to, they are not men o' their words: they told me I was every thing; 'tis a lie, I am not ague-proof.

GLOUCESTER
The trick of that voice I do well remember: Is 't not the king?

KING LEAR
Ay, every inch a king:
Teacher's Guide – Verse and Prose

EDMUND, 1.2

EDMUND

Thou, na|ture, art | my god|dess; || to | thy law
My ser|vices | are bound. || Wherefore | should I
Stand in | the plague | of cus|tom, and | permit
The cur|iosity | of na|tions to | deprive me,
For that | I am | some twelve | or four|teen moon-shines
Lag of | a broth|er? || Why bas|tard? || where| base?
When my | dimen|sions are | as well | compact,
My mind | as gen|erous, and | my shape | as true,
As hon|est mad|am's iss|ue? || Why brand | they us
With base? || with base|ness, bas|tardy? || base, base?
Who, in | the lust|y stealth | of na|ture, take
More comp|osition and | fierce qual|i ty
Than doth, | within | a dull, | stale, ti|red bed,
Go to | the crea|ting a | whole tribe | of fops,
Got 'tween | asleep | and wake? || Well, then,
Legit|imate Ed|gar, I | must have | your land.
Our fath|er's love | is to | the bas|tard Edmund
As to | the legit|imate: || fine word: || legit|imate.
Well, my | legit|imate, if | this let|ter speed,
And my | invent|ion thrive, | Edmund | the base
Shall top | the legit|imate. || I grow; | I prosper:
Now, gods, | stand up | for bastards.

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And the king gone to-night? Prescribed his power,
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No? What needed, then, that terrible dispatch of it into your pocket? the quality of nothing hath not such need to hide itself. Let's see: come, if it be nothing, I shall not need spectacles.

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KENT, 2.2

KENT

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Ay, a tailor, or a stone-cutter or painter could not have made him so ill, though he had been 15 but two hours at the trade.

CORNWALL
Peace, sirrah,
You beastly knave, know you no reverence?

KENT
Yes, sir; but anger hath a privilege.
CORNWALL
Why art thou angry?

KENT
That such | a slave | as this | should wear | a sword,
Who wears | no hon|esty. | Such smi|ling rogues | as these,
Like rats, | oft bite | the hol|ly cords | a-twain
Which are too | intrinse | t' unloose; | smooth ev|ry passion
That in | the na|tures of | their lords | rebel;
Bring oil | to fire, | snow to | their cold|er moods;
Renege,| affirm, | and turn | their hal|cyon beaks
With ev|ry gale | and var|y of | their masters,
Knowing nought, | like dogs, | but foll|owing.
A plague | upon | your epile|ptic visage;
Smile you | my speech|es, as | I were | a fool?
Goose, if | I had | you up|on Sar|um plain,
I'ld drive | ye cack|ling home | to Cam|elot.

CORNWALL
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GLOUCESTER
How fell you out? say that.

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No con|traries | hold more | anti|pathy
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CORNWALL
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KENT
His coun|tenance likes | me not.
LEAR, 3.6

KING LEAR

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Will you lie down and rest upon the cushions? 5

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Thou robbed of justice, take thy place;

And thou, his yoke-fellow of equity,

Bench by his side: you are o' the commission,

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before this honourable assembly, she kicked the

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She cannot deny it.

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Cry you mercy, I took you for a joint-stool.
KING LEAR

And here's another, whose warp'd looks proclaim
What store her heart is made on. Stop her there,
Arms, arms, sword, fire, corruption in the place,
False justicer, why hast thou let her scape? 25

KENT
O pity sir, where is the patience now,
That thou so oft have boasted to retain? [...]

KING LEAR

The little dogs and Tray, Blanch, and Sweet-heart, etc., they bark at me.

EDGAR
Tom will throw his head at them. Avaunt, you curs. [...] Tom will make them weep and wail:
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KENT
Now, good my lord, lie here and rest awhile.

KING LEAR

Make no noise, make no noise; draw the curtains: so, go, go. We'll go to supper 't he morning.
LEAR, 4.6
KING LEAR

Nature’s above art in that respect. There’s your press-money. That fellow handles his bow like a crow-keeper: draw me a clothier’s yard. Look, look, a mouse! Peace, peace; this piece of toasted cheese will do’t. There’s my gauntlet; I’ll prove it on a giant. Bring up the brown bills. O, well flown, bird: ‘t the clout, ’t the clout: hewgh. Give the word.

GLOUCESTER
I know that voice.

KING LEAR
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GLOUCESTER
The trick of that voice I do well remember: Is ’t not the king?

KING LEAR
Ay, ev’ry inch | a king:
When I do stare, see how the subject quakes.

I pardon that man's life. What was thy cause?

Adultery?

Thou shalt not die: die for adultery? No:
The wren goes to 't, and the small gilded fly.

Does lecher in my sight.

Let copulation thrive; for Gloucester's bastard son
Was kinder to his father than my daughters.

Got 'tween the lawful sheets.

To 't, luxury, pell-mell, for I lack soldiers. [...] 

There's hell, there's darkness, there's the sulphurous
pit, burning, scalding, stench, consumption; be, be,
for; put, put; Give me an ounce of civet, good
apothecary, to sweeten my imagination: there's
money for thee.

GLOUCESTER
O, let me kiss that hand!

KING LEAR
Let me wipe it first; it smells of mortality.

GLOUCESTER
O ruin'd piece of nature, This great world
Shall so wear out to nought. Dost thou know me?

KING LEAR
I remember thine eyes well enough. Dost thou squiny at me? No, do thy worst, blind Cupid, I'll not love. Read thou this challenge; mark but the penning of it.