



Type: Book Chapter

---

## Language, Humour, Character, and Persona in Shakespeare

Author(s): Arthur Henry King

Source: *By Study and Also By Faith, Volume 2*

Editor(s): John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks

Published: Provo, UT/Salt Lake City; Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies/Deseret Book, 1990

Page(s): 456-482

---



The Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies (FARMS) existed as a California non-profit corporation from 1979 until about 2006, when it was allowed to go into involuntary liquidation, at which time copyrights held by FARMS and its authors and/or editors reverted back to their original author and/or editors. This chapter is archived by permission of editor Stephen D. Ricks.

# 15

## Language, Humour, Character, and Persona in Shakespeare

*Arthur Henry King*

Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah

The first *Oxford English Dictionary* (hereafter *OED*)<sup>1</sup> use of “character” as “a personality invested with distinctive attributes and qualities by a novelist or dramatist” is in Fielding’s *Tom Jones* (1749). *OED* does not list the Theophrastian<sup>2</sup> use reflected in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century character-sketches, for example Ben Jonson’s play, *Every Man Out of His Humour*, “the characters of the persons” (1599),<sup>3</sup> those in the then current satires, and in translations and collections.<sup>4</sup>

Another *OED* entry under character, “personal appearance” (entry 10) correctly interprets *Twelfth Night* 1.02.51 “outward character”; but that phrase implies “inward character” too, and *OED* misinterprets *Coriolanus* 5.04.26 as the outward sense; but “I paint him in the character” refers to this description of Coriolanus (16-28):

He no more remembers his mother now than an eight-year-old horse. The tartness of his face sours ripe grapes. When he walks, he moves like an engine, and the ground shrinks before his treading. He is able to pierce a corslet with his eye, talks like a knell, and his hum is a battery. He sits in his state, as a thing made for Alexander. What he bids be done is finish’d with his bidding. He wants nothing of a god but eternity and a heaven to throne in. . . . I paint him in the character. . . . There is no more mercy in him than there is milk in a male tiger.

Compare *Coriolanus* 2.01.46-65, where Menenius sketches an ironical "character" of himself and makes "character" statements about the tribunes:

I am known to be a humorous patrician, and one that loves a cup of hot wine with not a drop of allaying Tiber in't; said to be something imperfect in favoring the first complaint, hasty and tinder-like upon too trivial motion; one that converses more with the buttock of the night than with the forehead of the morning. What I think, I utter, and spend my malice in my breath. Meeting two such wealsmen as you are (I cannot call you Lycurguses), if the drink you give me touch my palate adversely, I make a crooked face at it. I cannot say your worships have deliver'd the matter well, when I find the ass in compound with the major part of your syllables; and though I must be content to bear with those that say you are reverend grave men, yet they lie deadly that tell you have good faces. If you see this in the map of my microcosm, follows it that I am known well enough too? What harm can your beesom conspectuities glean out of this character, if I be known well enough too?

So Shakespeare knew this use of "character," just as he was familiar with "humour." But to which, if any, of his own *dramatis personae* would he have applied the terms? Which would have been taken so by his audience? Which could we now agree to be "humour" or "character"? How do the terms affect our view of what we now call "characters" (in the sense in which Fielding used it in *Tom Jones*, 1749, and as it has been used since)?

The character-sketch *genre*, strictly Theophrastian or not, ethical, social, or both, combines typical traits (often "humorous" in at least two senses) with generalizations, and reaches its highest expression in La Bruyère<sup>5</sup> (whose link with Molière is clear). The genre descends through *Spectator*, *Tatler*,<sup>6</sup> and Fielding to a nineteenth-century situation in which the word "character" could cover Flora

Finching in Dickens' *Little Dorrit* and Eugene Wrayburn in his *Our Mutual Friend*—far too broad a category and one from whose breadth we still suffer. It is what we today would call a caricature or even a cartoon.

Though both derive from Greek physiology and psychology, we can probably agree that the "humour" differs from the "character" by having a dominant trait, whereas the "character" represents a number of traits embodied in a portrait. Though I dare not say that Shakespeare would have found this abstract distinction worth making, I will try to exemplify it as a sketch for some temporary scaffolding that may prove useful.

The dominant trait is normally expressed through a linguistic one. Examples:

Pistol (bombastic scraps).

Nym (the word "humour" in possible and impossible senses).

The Host of the Garter (exclamatory allocution and epanalepsis—compare Juniper in Ben Jonson's play, *The Case is Altered* [ca. 1597-98], Tucca in Jonson's play, *Poetaster* [1601], and in Thomas Dekker's play *Satiromastix* [1602], and Lucio's parody in *Measure for Measure* 3.02.43-85 of "this tune, matter, and method" [48]).

Slender (the language of a provincial fool); a "la" man—he shares this with only one other male, Pandarus.

Evans and Fluellen (too busy being Welsh to be much else).

Caius (being French—cf. Doctor Dodypoll).

Shallow (senile recollections; epizeuxis and epanalepsis; NB this is Shallow in *Henry IV*, Part 2; his function in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* makes him less senile).

Dull, Dogberry, and Elbow (malapropisms).

Osric (periphrastic complement laboured to the absurd).

Probably Holofernes (as a synonymic pedant) but not Armado.

Probably Thersites (speaking in contemporary prose not unlike Jonson's, and using accumulatory invective with comparisons drawn largely from disease) but not Jacques.

Would it be true to say that we could introduce these into a Jonson play without disturbing the atmosphere?

I cannot imagine Shakespeare's thinking of the following as humours; but, in view of Menenius' remarks, he might well have called them "characters." They have not dominant traits, but are complete portraits in language consistent from beginning to end. They are, in fact, static; they end as they began:

Nurse, Mrs. Quickly, Casca, Jacques, Belch (but not Falstaff), Sir Andrew (very different from Slender), Malvolio, Polonius (but not Menenius), Lucio (he provides an interesting contrast between "character" and "humour" by the parody of Tucca I have already mentioned above).

Each of these "characters" has determined to be what he presents himself as, which means that there is a touch of caricature in them all.

Armando presents a problem: he apparently repents, but his language does not:

For mine own part, I breathe free breath. I have seen the day of wrong through the little hole of discretion, and I will right myself like a soldier (*Love's Labour's Lost* 5.02.722-25).

but contrast 882-87:

I will kiss thy royal finger, and take leave. I am a votary; I have vow'd to Jacquenetta to hold the plough for her sweet love three year. But, most esteemed greatness, will you hear the dialogue that the two learned men have compiled in praise of the owl and the cuckoo?

We may regard his repentance as his final posture.

Parolles' repentance is reflected in his language:

Yet am I thankful. If my heart were great,  
 'Twould burst at this. Captain I'll be no more,  
 But I will eat and drink, and sleep as soft  
 As captain shall. Simply the thing I am  
 Shall make me live. Who knows himself a braggart,  
 Let him fear this; for it will come to pass  
 That every braggart shall be found an ass.  
 Rust sword, cool blushes, and, Parolles, live  
 Safest in shame! Being fool'd, by fool'ry thrive!  
 There's place and means for every man alive  
 (*All's Well That Ends Well* 4.03.330-39).

Cf. also 5.02 and 5.03.238-66; he is not a "character."

To clarify our categories, may we regard Bodadilla as a humour, Armado as a "character," and Parolles as a person?

This brings us to *persona*. We have hitherto been dealing with matters that are major in Jonson and Molière, but minor in Shakespeare. Our consideration of *persona* is the reason for our preliminary consideration of the trivialities of humour and character.

I use the word *persona* to be able to retain the sense "mask," for which "person" has apparently not been used. I remember here Yeats's comment that we can be more ourselves with a mask on than without it. At the same time, the Latin form covers also the main English senses I have in mind: "role," "appearance," and "individual." "Person" also makes a distinction between ourselves and other animals.

The ancient Greeks had "characters" not only by Theophrastus, but before him by Plato in the *Republic* – for example, the stages of the character of the tyrant; and Aristophanes parodied real people (e.g., Cleon, Euripides, Socrates), making fun of their language. Such parts in Aristophanes appear to be static and may well be classed with "characters."

However, Aeschylus and Sophocles put on the stage *personae*, who are not particularly distinguished by their language (any more than are the people in Homer) but appear to live (Oedipus, Orestes) somewhat as Shakespeare's *personae* do. For the distinction that I am trying to make, therefore, I take the word "persona" to be a part for the interpretation of an actor or producer, covering, not a set of trait-dominated speeches, or of speeches "in character," but a sequence of varying stylistic experiences. Shakespeare's major parts are not linguistically consistent and their linguistic inconsistencies set up tensions, ironies, and ambiguities fundamental to their nature. We need to remain open-minded in our interpretations, and not to think of these parts, any more than we think of ourselves, as obviously consistent people. There may be consistency—it may ultimately be felt—but it comes after a full and open consideration of all the uncertainties and inconsistencies, after experiencing and living the part. It can be talked about but not formulated. And beyond each part, there is a relationship of the parts to the play as a whole, a whole which can be talked about, but not formulated. A *persona* and a play are never formulae.

We might think of two examples from artists at Shakespeare's own level of genius and not so distant from him in time: Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* with its inclusion of Charon's boat, a vigorous, beardless Christ, and the artist's own face attached to St. Bartholomew's flayed skin; or of Bernini's *St. Theresa* in coital/mystical ecstasy; or of Bernini putting his own head on the statue of slinging David. We ought to be neither so strong nor so crude as to say "either," "or," but rather to say "both." "Bothness" involves irony, but that is inevitable: where there is more than one set of values there is irony.

Though visual examples are clearer, bearing in mind Michelangelo and Bernini is not enough. We might recollect also the ambivalence of the end of *Faust*, with its

juxtaposition of a Roman Catholic mysticism verging on the absurd, Mephistopheles' homosexual enthusiasm for young angels, and the final dubious remark about the influence of the eternal feminine; or the ambivalence of Ibsen's *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* (or for that matter most of his plays). Or which posturings of Beethoven's middle period are self-betraying romantic self-assertion, and which dramatic conveniences to convey a deeper irony than the romantic one.

This brings us to posturing. If we are to consider the *personae* of Shakespeare's own time we have to consider the dramatic posturing of that time. The most important element here is Seneca.<sup>8</sup> We are familiar with the crudities of those Elizabethan translations; we have admired Eliot for getting something out of them, and above all for drawing the line forward to what Marlowe made of Seneca and in particular that element of the grotesque which Eliot exemplified in "Cassandra sprawling in the streets," and "swung her howling in the empty air." Eliot might have gone further and indicated the series of evermore refined and varied effects that Shakespeare, knowing little of Greek tragedy, developed from the Senecan tradition. We may need to recognize that most of Shakespeare's work is "posturing." Is *Titus Andronicus* deliberately absurd? Or at least grotesque? What part has the Player's speech in *Hamlet* in the development? How much of Shakespeare's greatest parts may be described as super-Senecan rant?

As we bear in mind this unexampled progress of Shakespeare from *Titus Andronicus* to *Coriolanus*, do we not need to remember that Shakespeare's age made no distinction between aesthetic and moral judgments? Bad language is associated with bad conduct, good language with good. "Language most shewes a man: speake that I may see thee."<sup>9</sup>

I have been trying in this long parenthesis quickly to establish some universe of discourse among us before ex-

emplifying the sequencing of styles in the treatment of *personae*. Now let us go back to Menenius. He was wrong about Coriolanus: he painted Coriolanus in the character, but it was not Coriolanus's character, because Coriolanus is not a "character." His vituperative choler is given, as is its occasional incoherence. But they do not prepare us for 2.01.175-79,

My gracious silence, hail!  
 Wouldst thou have laugh'd had I come coffin'd  
 home,  
 That weep'st to see me triumph? Ah, my dear,  
 Such eyes the widows in Corioles wear,  
 And mothers that lack sons,

or the entirely reasonable political statements of 3.01.91-161, which are not opportunist but grimly true to an important political standpoint—and the language in which they are expressed is worthy of their importance. Coriolanus is also an imaginative and reasonable man.

Now consider his two soliloquies in 4.04 at Antium (the only time when he is alone with himself).

A goodly City is this Antium. City,  
 'Tis I that made thy widows; many an heir  
 Of these fair edifices 'fore by wars  
 have I heard groan and drop. Then know me not,  
 Lest that thy wives with spits and boys with stones  
 In puny battle slay me.

There is a grimly self-parodic humour in the last two lines. The second soliloquy,

O world, thy slippery turns! Friends now fast sworn,  
 Whose double bosoms seem to wear one hart,  
 Whose hours, whose bed, whose meal and exercise  
 Are still together, who twin, as 'twere, in love  
 Unseparable, shall within this hour,  
 On a dissension of a doit, break out  
 To bitterest enmity,

echoes in a *Midsummer Night's Dream's* (3.02.203-8) atmosphere of mechanical treachery.

We, Hermia,<sup>4</sup> like two artificial gods,  
 Have with our needles created both one flower,  
 Both on one sampler, sitting on one cushion,  
 Both warbling of one song, both in one key,  
 As if our hands, our sides, voices, and minds  
 Had been incorporate.

And indeed the soliloquy as a whole reflects a simplistic sense of fate and fortune (probably ironic) which is not at all the political maturity of *Coriolanus* 3.01.

But most remarkable is the stylistic sequence of *Coriolanus* 5.03: the contradictions of 22-37 with the grotesque of "as if Olympus to a molehill" should "In supplication nod" and "such a gozling"; his address to his wife he himself characterizes as "I prate" (48), if we are to accept Theobald's conjecture. The climax of his artificial self-protection comes in the ironic rant of his comment on his mother's kneeling to him (58-62),

Your knees to me? to your corrected son?  
 Then let the pibbles on the hungry beach  
 Fillop the stars; then let the mutinous winds  
 Strike the proud cedars 'gainst the fiery sun,  
 Murd'ring impossibility to make  
 What cannot be, slight work,

and the ironically exaggerated complement of his address to Valeria (64-67):

The noble sister of Publicola,  
 The moon of Rome, chaste as the icicle  
 That's curdied by the frost from purest snow  
 And hangs on Dian's temple – dear Valeria!

Note also the contrast between the register of his address to his son (70-75), and the register of the boy's own later comment on the situation (127-28):

70. The god of soldiers,  
 With the consent of supreme Jove, inform  
 Thy thoughts with nobleness, that thou mayest  
     prove  
 To shame invulnerable, and stick i' th' wars  
 Like a great sea-mark, standing every flaw,  
 And saving those that eye thee!  
 127. 'A shall not tread on me;  
 I'll run away till I am bigger, but then I'll fight.

Coriolanus's self-defense is marked as futile by its artificiality. He collapses into simplicity at 182-89.

O mother, mother!  
 What have you done? Behold, the heavens do ope,  
 The gods look down, and this unnatural scene  
 They laugh at. O my mother, mother! O!  
 You have won a happy victory to Rome;  
 But, for your son, believe it—O, believe it—  
 Most dangerously you have with him prevail'd,  
 If not most mortal to him (cf. *Hamlet* 2.02.122).

We cannot believe after this sequence of very different styles and the development which it connotes that Coriolanus could merely revert to vituperative choler in 5.06.102-29 too. We can only presume that he allows his mechanical rage to take over as a means of inciting the Volscians to kill him: he sets his own mousetrap. This interpretation fulfills the development that Shakespeare's variations of style seem to point to and allows Coriolanus a "successful" death instead of one forced upon him by infantile regression.

A few comments on the stylistic variety that is given to Hamlet. We are all familiar with the way in which he plays the Fool with Polonius, with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and with Claudius. Not all of us perhaps would agree on how serious his monologues may be. The exclamationally confused if not actually anacoluthic syntax of *Hamlet* 1.02.129-59 appears to point to a confused spontaneity,

but in that case what are those classical references to Hyperion, to Niobe, and to Hercules doing? And above all why is he making a deliberate joke about himself in “but two months dead, nay, not so much, not two” (138), “within a month” (145), “a little month” (147), and “within a month” (153), particularly since he carried that joke further in 3.02.127: “and my father died within ‘s two hours.” The syntactical confusion is repeated again in “So oft it chances” (1.04.23-38) – all one sentence and probably incomplete at that. What about the reference to “my tables” in 1.05.107? The grotesque interview reported by Ophelia in 2.01.74-97? The deliberately affected letter which fits in with that grotesque appearance (2.02.109-28), a letter which the Queen finds it hard to believe, came from Hamlet (114). There is the player’s speech with its kitchen imagery: “Bak’d and impasted” (459), “roasted” (461), and “mincing” (514); its compounding of pedantic and Anglo-Saxon: e.g., “coagulate gore” (462); and “see . . . a silence” (483-85) – compare *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* 5.01.192-93:

I see a voice! Now will I to the chink,  
To spy and I can hear my Thisby’s face –

Do these point to an example of Hamlet’s taste or may his attitude be regarded as “camp”?

“O that this” (1.02.129-59) and “O all you hosts” (1.05.92-106) are exclamatory and lead to nothing. A third exclamatory monologue, “O what a rogue” (2.02.550-87), apparently leads to an excited decision but one already taken: Hamlet has already considered in some detail what to do with the forthcoming play (540-43).

Three of the monologues are in a reflective rather than an exclamatory style. Two of them seem to be tryings-on-for-size of an attitude (“To be” – 3.01.55-87 and “Now might I do it” – 3.03.73-95). “How all occasions” (4.04.32-66) does lead to a decision on a posture (“from this time forth, My thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth!”)

which Hamlet seemingly for the purpose of contrasting himself with Fortinbras? "Now might I do it" (3.03.75-96), if it was Senecan, might lead to assassination; but instead it is a frivolous piece of reasoning for taking no action. "To be" may be compared with the Duke-Friar's speech in *Measure for Measure* 3.01.1-41, a speech which provides completely unchristian advice and is ineffective (cf. Claudio's reaction, 117-31). The fundamental point about the "To be" speech is not whether he is knowingly doing it in front of Ophelia and possibly other listeners, but whether he is posturing or not; and the answer is that he is posturing—to himself or others, and certainly to the audience.

Hamlet's super-Senecan element (which he shares with his father in 1.05) comes out in 92-106 ("O all you hosts of heaven"), 2.02.550-81 ("O what a rogue and peasant slave am I"), 3.02.388-96 (" 'Tis now the very witching time of night"), a good deal of 3.04 (the interview between mother and son); but not in the final interchanges while he is dying (5.02.331-58). Hamlet reacts vigorously against an earlier stage of Senecanism in Laertes's outburst at the grave of Ophelia (5.01.246-54) by parodying it (254-58, 269-71, 274-83). I think everybody is agreed about this, but they may not be agreed about recognizing the style of this as that of the player's speech Hamlet purports to admire.

Another aspect of Hamlet's stylistic changes which may not sufficiently have been dealt with is the gusto of the passage in 3.02.271-95 ("the strooken deer," etc., shared with Horatio), of the letter about the pirates in 4.06, and above all of the "Up from my cabin" account to Horatio in 5.02.12-70 (which covers not only his intense pleasure in success, but also his parody of his uncle's style, his gloating over the fate of Guildenstern and Rosencrantz, and his need to defend to Horatio what he has done about them). We may well have in these scenes Hamlet's own straightforward style, but it is not one that distinguishes

him from others. What distinguishes him as a *persona* is the variation in sequencing of the styles he adopts, though none of these is by itself peculiar to him; for example, his style as a Fool is mostly of the "absolute" kind that links him with Feste, Lear's Fool, and to some extent with Touchstone. As a Fool he has a higher absoluteness paralleled by the lower absoluteness of the First Gravedigger. And his syntactic complexity (at times almost turgidity) he shares with Fincentio, with Claudius, and with Prospero in Prospero's account of his dethronement (though the cause of that complexity may in each case be different).

Complex as Hamlet's series of rhetorical stances is, critics seem more able to accept his lack of dignity than they are willing to admit the dubiety of Othello's rhetoric. On the whole, Othello remains the prisoner of his own rhetoric from 1.02 to his very last speech (the comment on which by Lodovico is "O bloody period," which can hardly not be a quibble). Iago's characterization of Othello's wooing of Desdemona as "fantastical lies" (2.01.223-24) is not incorrect. There appear to be threatening lies in 3.04.55-75, when Othello gives an account of a handkerchief which, in contrast to the grim, witchlike atmosphere that Othello weaves around it, has a strawberry pattern (3.03.435).

There are, however, points in the development of Othello that take him beyond the region of a "Character," a mere superbraggart at the top end of the scale beginning with Bobadilla and passing through Armado and Parolles. There is the unfortunate disclaimer of Desdemona's marital affection (1.03.248-59) by his favorseeking 261-74 ("Vouch with me heaven I therefore beg it not"). The jargon of this is striking: "Comply with heat (the young affects in me defunct)," "serious and great business," "light wing'd toys of feather'd Cupid," "wanton dullness," "speculative and offic'd instruments," "my disports corrupt and taint my business," etc. There is Othello's determination (apparently based on pride and a sense of inferiority) not to

confront Desdemona with the accusations against her infidelity. There is his outburst of intense vicious rage when Desdemona has been "raised up" (2.03.250-51). There is the pact between Othello and Iago which mounts from low-Senecan ("Arise, black vengeance, from the hollow hell," 3.03.447) to the super-Senecan of "Like to the Pontic Sea . . . I here engage my words" (453-62). Iago enters the pact in the same register (463-69), and it is problematic whether this is to be regarded as parody, or whether Iago has lost himself with Othello in the enthusiasm of hate. There is certainly a special bond between Iago and Othello in the sense that the one is satanically passionate to tempt and the other infernally eager to be tempted. There is the inability of Othello to go outside his rhetorical stance except into chaos. This happens at 4.01.35-43, where it ends in a fit; and again at 5.02.276-82, where he descends from super-Senecanism to standard declamation ("O cursed slave. . . . O Desdemon! Dead"); and declines into mere rolling exclamation. As for his final speech, we have been familiar with the alternatives since Eliot wrote about it, but Eliot's "cheering himself up," though a keen pointer, does not cover the consonance of this final speech with the whole of the play.

We are given the revelatory contrast with all this rhetoric in Desdemona's simple final words (5.02.124-25): "Nobody, I myself. Farewell! Commend me to my kind lord. O, farewell!"

Othello's sequence is thus very different from that of Coriolanus or Hamlet: he opens up to a potential experience with Desdemona, he can match her simplicity (4.01.195-96, "but yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!"); but reverts to his Senecan savagery ("I will chop her into messes. Cuckold me!" 197) and to the rhetorical carapace by which he conceals himself from others and from himself.

It is easier to accept the stylistic sequencing in *Lear*. In

Lear himself the super-Senecan rant is shown up by the Fool's running commentary and by Kent's realism. The height of this rant is reached in 3.02.59-60: "I am a man more sinn'd against than sinning," which is a simple statement, but a hardening and not a softening one; followed immediately by "my wits begin to turn." Before entering the Fool's world, which is the way to mental health, Lear shows sympathy with the outcasts (one of whom he now is), but in the wrong register – his own injustice and that of the heavens are mixed up in his mind and these are not the words of a broken heart and a contrite spirit (3.04.28-36). The Fool's role extends to Edgar's simulated role at the bottom of the world; but Lear's criticism is still directed at society and still alternates with self-assertion (4.06.83-187). However, the posturing ends in 4.07.43-84, a simplicity shared between father and daughter.

There is no more posturing in Lear after this, unless his endeavor to comfort his daughter in 5.03.8-25 should be so regarded; but if so, it is a posture of a very different kind. There is posturing in the rest of 5.03, especially by Edgar, but that demands treatment on another occasion; as does the question of the button (5.03.310). I would confine myself here to saying that utter simplicity has its interpretive difficulties as much as extreme complexity. However, rhetorically speaking one would need to take the most famous epizeuxis in all literature ("Never, never, never, never, never" 311) as a slow one, and note that the epanalepsis and alliteration of 311-12 ("Do you see this? Look on her! Look her lips. Look there, look there!") express a quickening and an excitement. The alliteration emphasizes lips and the question narrows down to "What is to be looked for on her lips?" My own belief is that the button is not Lear's but Cordelia's, that its undoing releases some pent-up breath from the dead lungs, that there is some movement of the lips in consequence, and that Lear dies in the belief that Cordelia is alive (a matter that has symbolic

importance for the play). But to dispute about this final passage is unnecessary: the climax of the play is not here, but in 4.07.43-84.

I suggested that the sequencing of Lear's part was exemplary. I say so because the development is carefully monitored, can be made clear dramatically in the part on the stage, and issues in one of the supreme scenes (if not the supreme scene) of all literature: 4.07.

In Lear the sequencing has an upward movement. The movement in Macbeth's part is downward and this may well have been the main reason why Lear has been regarded as the greater play and indeed as Shakespeare's greatest. However, that should not disguise the fact that in many points the sequencing of Macbeth's part is more subtle than that of Lear.

I have hitherto been talking artificially about the sequencing in isolation of a part, in order to simplify what I am trying to show. It was almost impossible to do this in *Lear*, since the sequencing of Cordelia's part needs to be seen in parallel with that of her father; but when we come to *Macbeth*, it is impossible to handle the sequencing of Macbeth's part without dealing with Lady Macbeth also. Here, again, I must confine myself to points that are not usually stressed.

Senecan rising to super-Senecan is dominant for them both, and that is no wonder since Macbeth is introduced to us in 1.02 as a butcher (22, "He unseam'd him from the nave to the chops") and is dismissed as a butcher in 5.09.25 – "this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen." Lady Macbeth's "Come, you spirits" (1.05.40-54), although far more imaginative and linguistically rich than Seneca, nevertheless resembles Seneca's *Medea* and through it the source in Euripides.

About the sensitivity in Macbeth's earlier monologues: a good part of it is fear of being found out and apprehension of public opinion against the dead. "If 'twere done, when

'tis done" (1.07.1-28) moves from an apparently rational consideration of disadvantages into a much-admired chaotic hyperbole; but note the oxymoron of a "naked newborn babe *Striding* the blast," and the grotesque fancy that blowing "the horrid deed in every eye" will produce enough tears to drown the wind (it takes a heavy rainstorm to do that). The oxymoron, the irrelevance of "sightless," the Baroque "blowing," and the hyperbole add up to something grotesque rather than noble: "Pity" is Macbeth's enemy in working up public opinion against the deed. Blake's illustration only succeeds in accentuating the posture. And indeed the tone of the monologue immediately drops to Macbeth's reflection about his own inadequacy as an excuse for not daring to do what he wants to do.

The theatricality of "Is this a dagger" (2.01.33-64) shows Macbeth's imagination helping his resolution rather than detracting from it. Having dismissed the dagger as an illusion, he proceeds to paint a night-picture which fills him full of dramatic importance (the posture is not merely super-Senecan in language but Senecan in implied stage-directions). Thus both monologues emphasize sensitiveness by its suppression. True sensitiveness would have conjured up the image of Duncan on arrival at the castle, at the banquet, and now in sleep.

The sense of pleasure in his own importance which is adumbrated in 2.01.49-64 — "Now o'er the one half world," is carried further and made more clear when he makes his bloody hands bearable by envisioning the crime on a cosmic scale and discovering in so doing that he is beginning to take pleasure in slaughter (2.02.57-60).

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red.

"The multitudinous sea incarnadine," with its two neo-

logisms, shows a pleasure in language which denote this deeper pleasure, and enables us to see more than artificiality and suspectness in 2.03.111-15:

Here lay Duncan,  
His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood,  
And his gash'd stabs look'd like a breach in nature  
For ruin's wasteful entrance; there, the murderers,  
Steep'd in the colors of their trade, their daggers  
Unmannerly breech'd with gore.

The affectation in this last passage has long been seen as evidence of Macbeth's guilt; all that I maintain now is that the same kind of evidence is present in various kinds of artificiality in Macbeth's language throughout; and that we may extend, by careful rhetorical inspection, this category of artificial language, revealing the buried intent of many speeches in Shakespeare's plays that may in the past have been admired "for themselves."

Macbeth's almost gloating trend is carried still further by the twilight meditation of 3.02.46-56. The language in which he describes the scene enables him to consider the process of nature as assistant to the crime he is having committed. The reaction to Banquo's ghost in 3.04. is not pity for what Banquo has been reduced to, as a mangled piece of flesh, and not repentance at having ordered this transformation, but a combination of fear and anger at being disturbed, an accusation to the ghost for behaving unnaturally, indignation that ghosts should be allowed to do these things, and an attempt to exorcise the phenomenon. All these posturing processes enable him to hide from himself the real horror: not what the ghost of Banquo looks like, not his threat to Macbeth, but the mere fact that Macbeth has had him murdered.

From now on Macbeth's paranoid posture of defiance and destruction is fixed, any compunction unreal nostalgia (5.03.22-28 — "I have lived long enough"), combined with

self-pity. A posturing self-pity combined with cheap philosophizing celebrates his wife's death ("Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" 5.05.19-28) and leads to the final part of the sequence—the pseudo-heroic man of battle on the field as he was described to us at the beginning of the play.

It remains to bring out more clearly than is usually done the struggle for power between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth. Lady Macbeth appears to be the dominant figure at the beginning, but it was not she who took the initiative in broaching the question, and it is not she who carries out the deed. As soon as Macbeth is ensconced as king he withdraws his confidence from her and proceeds to plot on his own (and from then on she lives in constant fear of their being found out). He apparently has a relapse at the banquet and she has to sustain him; but actually he is in a state of defiance beyond being found out. After the banquet scene, in any case, he keeps himself entirely to himself, and it is the apparently more courageous Lady Macbeth who collapses: she turns out to be more dependent on him than he on her. In the sleepwalking scene she uses the simplest of language, but it is not the language of repentance or even remorse; she is concerned in her dream with getting rid of the evidence and that seems to be the main reason for saying, "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him," (5.01.39-40) which is a coarse rather than a pitying remark. In saying "the Thane of Fife had a wife" (42-43) with its kind of rhyming tag, she is more likely to be drawing a parallel between herself and Macduff's wife than pitying her: she may even be apprehensive that Macbeth's next step will be to get rid of herself because she is now more likely to give the game away than he. There is also a touch of narcissistic self-pity in "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (5.01.50-101). Simple though

Lady Macbeth's language is, it does not by any means reveal a simple state of mind.

The complex sequencing of Cleopatra's part is well known to us all, but I would wish to concentrate on two passages where I think this complexity has not been sufficiently brought out, the first of which involves one of Shakespeare's developments of Senecan style.

In 4.15.9-11 she reaches the highest level of super-Senecan declamation

O Sun,  
Burn the great sphere thou mov'st in! darkling stand  
The varying shore o' th' world!

But levels change quickly in this scene and when Antony asks to "speak a little" Cleopatra interrupts at 43-45, "no, let me speak, and let me rail so high, That the false huswife Fortune break her wheel, Provok'd by my offense." Note "rail" and the Fortune image. Her interruption is a distinctly comic point followed by the comic point of Antony's recommending Proculeius to Cleopatra, whereas he is going to be Cleopatra's betrayer (5.02.9-64). At the death of Antony, Cleopatra has lines which we all agree have the poet's full musical endorsement (4.13.62-68).

O, see, my women:  
The crown o' th' earth doth melt. My lord!  
O, wither'd is the garland of the war,  
The soldier's pole is fall'n! Young boys and girls  
Are level now with men; the odds is gone,  
And there is nothing left remarkable  
Beneath the visiting moon.

When she recovers from her swoon she continues in the same tone.

No more but e'en a woman, and commanded  
By such poor passion as the maid that milks

And does the meanest chares (73-75).

But this is immediately followed by a Senecan passage at a much lower level which recurs to railing (75-82).

It were for me  
 To throw my sceptre at the injurious gods,  
 To tell them that this world did equal theirs  
 Till they had stol'n our jewel. All's but naught:  
 patience is sottish, and impatience does  
 Become a dog that's mad. Then is it sin  
 To rush into the secret house of death  
 Ere death dare come to us?

This is again succeeded by a few lines of simple and natural language that in its turn modulates once more into super-Senecanism (86-89):

and then, what's brave, what's noble,  
 Let's do't after the high Roman fashion,  
 And make death proud to take us. Come, away,  
 This case of that huge spirit now is cold.

The railing is still there in the protest to Proculeius (5.02.49-62),

Sir, I will eat no meat, I'll not drink sir;  
 If idle talk will once be necessary  
 I'll not sleep either. This mortal house I'll ruin,  
 Do Caesar what he can. Know, sir, that I  
 Will not wait pinion'd at your master's court,  
 Nor once be chastis'd with the sober eye  
 Of dull Octavia. Shall they hoist me up,  
 And Show me to the shouting valotry  
 Of censuring Rome? Rather a ditch in Egypt  
 Be gentle grave unto me! rather on nilus' mud  
 Lay me stark-nak'd, and let the water-flies  
 Blow me into abhorring! rather make  
 My country's high pyramides my gibbet,  
 And hang me up in chains!

and in the attack (or pseudo-attack) on Seleucus (154-58).

The second passage is quite different. It has the Senecan hyperbole about it, but it seems to combine Seneca with a touch of Rabelais and one wonders whether Cleopatra is not, for part of this passage at least, trying to bemuse Dolabella.

His face was at the heav'ns, and therein stuck  
 A sun and moon, which kept their course, and  
     lighted  
 The little O, th' earth . . .  
 His legs bestrid the ocean, his rear'd arm  
 Crested the world, his voice was propertied  
 As all the tuned spheres, and that to friends;  
 But when he meant to quail and shake the orb,  
 He was as rattling thunder. For his bounty,  
 There was no winter in't; an autumn it was  
 That grew the more by reaping. His delights  
 Were dolphin-like, they show'd his back above  
 The element they liv'd in. In his livery  
 Walk'd crowns and crownets; realms and islands  
     were  
 As plates dropp'd from his pocket (5.02.79-92).

Note in particular "stuck A sun and moon" which is certainly grotesque as a comparison to two similar eyes. "His legs bestrid the ocean, his rear'd arm Crested the world" is an interesting reminiscence of Cassius' description of Caesar and both seem to have a ring of irony in them. The Rabelaisian touch is rather "in his livery Walk'd crowns and crownets"; realms and islands were "As plates dropp'd from his pocket." But in between we have

For his bounty,  
 There was no winter in't; an autumn it was  
 That grew the more by reaping. His delights  
 Were dolphin-like, they show'd his back above  
 The element they liv'd in.

Here Cleopatra modulates not into super-Senecanism but

a strain of the poet's musical endorsement in praise of generosity, including erotic generosity.

The musical endorsement of Cleopatra's end from the entry of Iras with the robe crown, etc., down to Charmian's last words to the soldier I dare say none of us will deny; but it is worth pointing out two humorous touches of a kind which in his other passages of the highest musical endorsement Shakespeare does not use. One is the humorous eroticism of 312: "Nay, I will take thee too" in the midst of the murmurings by which Cleopatra equates death and coitus; and the other is made by Charmian, who produces an ironical parallel in matching "ass unpoliced" (307-8) with "lass unparallel'd" (316). This is one of Shakespeare's finest effects in his combination of high music with the placing of Octavius definitely in a low world; a placing confirmed immediately afterwards by Octavius' entering and pursuing the cause of death like a less effective Lord Peter.

The syntactically, if not lexically, conversational simplicity of Shakespeare at his highest points does not flourish in solitude. This kind of experience can be had only by sharing – not singly between a *persona* and the audience, but between a *persona* and others on the stage and audience. The height of Cleopatra's death scene could not be reached without Iras, Charmian, and the entry of the guard. Indeed, it may well be that the climax of the whole thing and the best contrast with the Senecanism and the super-Senecanism with which we have had to deal is, "It is well done, and fitting for a princess descended of so many royal kings" (5.02.326-27).

The experience of a shared simplicity is also the essence of the reconciliation scene between Cordelia and Lear, as it is of Prospero's repentance at *The Tempest* 5.01.20: "Mine would, sir, were I human" (Ariel), "And mine shall" (Prospero). The sharing widens in 200-213 when Gonzalo (who, not Prospero, is the moral center of the play) bestows a

blessing and praises the ways of providence. His comments lead us readily to the most prolonged of these shared scenes of simplicity, heightened by its being a kind of anagnoresis: the passage 5.03.21-128 in *The Winter's Tale's* final scene. The *Pericles* anagnoresis in 5.01.101-235 is not so convincing except for the passage 190-97 ("O Helicanus, strike me, honored sir"). But it does have a great deal of the simplicity we are talking about, and it is shared between father and daughter on stage and with an audience.

The most important point of this paper is to bring out the stylistic sequencing of a *persona* and consequently we have been concentrating artificially on protagonists. More important than the protagonists, however, is the rhetorical pattern of the play as a whole. This invariably follows the main line of the protagonist's part. It may, for example, as in *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest*, be from complexity to simplicity; as in *Othello* and *Macbeth*, never emerge from the rhetorical prison except in contrasting moments ("the pity of it," "nobody; I myself," "He has no children"). Ophelia's madness no more relieves the riddle of *Hamlet* than Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking alleviates *Macbeth*. Horatio's simple "So Guildenstern and Rosencrantz go to't" (5.02.56) presents in a flash the whole problem of Hamlet's eternal future, a problem not solved by "Good night sweet prince, And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!" (359-60) or by Hamlet's own "Absent thee from felicity a while" (5.02.347). With all that has gone before, Hamlet can hardly mean the felicity of existlessness, nor is Hamlet any more likely than Faust to be snatched up to the highest heaven. Yet there is a touch of musical endorsement about these two lines. *Coriolanus* proceeds, like *King Lear*, to a penultimate simplicity, but its ending, unlike that of *King Lear*, provides a further twist. *Measure for Measure* is written as if to crown us when Isabella kneels for Angelo's life, and her lines on the Atone-ment (2.02.73-79) with their musical endorsement seem to

promise us that; but instead we are given something rationally perfunctory. *Romeo and Juliet*, with the musical sweep of the balcony scene and the aubade exchange of the first eleven lines of 3.05, has to decline upon the super-Senecan rhetoric of Romeo's final speech. In *Julius Caesar*, political satire as it is, we have to content ourselves with a mere few remarks between Brutus and Lucius which do not reach lyrical height. In *Henry IV, Part 1*, and *Henry IV, Part 2*, the Prince (not yet Prince Hamlet) moves up from his shared amusement with Falstaff to the resolution but not simplicity of kingship; while at the same time Falstaff, in spite of his insight in Part 1 into the falsity of honour, declines to greater and greater corruption and less and less awareness of his impending fate in *Henry IV, Part 2*. The sequencing of *Richard II* demonstrates how much more complex and sensitive a play it is than *Edward II*. Shakespeare has not chosen to resolve for us whether *Richard II* moves out of posturing into simplicity – the monologue of 5.05.1-66 does not make up for everything that has gone before: sixty lines of two posturings lead to two contradictory reactions to the music he hears; and his final lines are as much a posture as Caesar's last.

What is required of the highest dramatic solution is "a condition of utter simplicity, costing not less than everything" – everything, that is except itself. If we are to look for the cause of this type of dramatic construction where individual posturing, self-assertion, and self-betrayal are solved or not solved in a shared simplicity, we need to look to the societies with which even the greatest were produced and at odds, and in which hardly anything other than ironical comment was possible (the introduction of another world to come, could, once again, make possible nothing but irony). Other societies have produced different types of literature. In Homer, the gods may behave like apotheosized feudal lords, and the relation of Odysseus with Athene is hardly that of Christ with his Father; but

beyond all that is a sense of order and justice that Homer succeeds in making real and not fictive or fantastic. Vergil, with a deep sense of a peaceable agrarian society, had to reconcile singing for that with celebrating a gross and harsh imperium. Dante, placing his friends and enemies at appropriate points in the hereafter, could not but give Francesca an affectation of speech reminiscent of the discarded Provençal style – he would have found it impossible to use Abelard and Heloise. Goethe, constricted in Weimar but with some hopes of an open America, could finish his ironical *Faust*, but not his *Wilhelm Meister*. Cervantes, ranging the styles almost as variously as Shakespeare himself, produces the final scene of his great book at Don Quixote's deathbed; and Shakespeare himself conforms to the deeper Christianity at the base of his two corrupt contemporary churches by simply making Prospero's epilogue a prayer.

The sequencing of *personae* in the comedies up to *Twelfth Night* requires a separate paper, in which humour and courting would play the largest part, and the stress would lie on the complement derived from Arcadianism instead of on the Senecan strain. In those changed terms, the contrast of affectation with the genuine would remain the same.

### Notes

1. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 13 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1933, 1961, repr.), 2:281, entry 17.

2. Theophrastus (372-ca. 287 B.C.), Greek philosopher who wrote *Charakteres*, thirty brief character sketches outlining moral types, for ethical purposes.

3. "The Characters of the Persons" is a brief character summary of the primary "dramatis personae" in Ben Jonson's play *Every Man Out of His Humor*.

4. Theophrastus, *Characteres*, 8 vols. (Lyon: Le Preux, 1592); for other works by him see Mark Pattison, *Isaac Casaubon 1559-1614* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1892); cf. also Joseph Hall, *Meditations and Vows . . . with Characters of Virtues and Vices* (London: Fetherstone, 1621); also his *Virgidemise* ca. 1597, satires and character sketches in

A. Davenport, ed., *The Collected Poems of Joseph Hall* (Liverpool: University Press, 1949), 18-87.

5. Jean de La Bruyère (1645-1696), *Les Caractères* (1699); it accompanied his translation of Theophrastus' *Charakteres* and was written in the Theophrastian style which defined qualities (e.g., jealousy) and depicted them in sketches of actual people. La Bruyère commented on the "characteristics" of the age, attempting to reform behavior and morals.

6. *The Tatler* was a periodical printed in London from 1709-11 and written by essayists Richard Steele and Joseph Addison. It satirized manners, society, and ideals. It was succeeded by *The Spectator* (1711-12), another satirical periodical written by the same authors.

7. "Humour," as a dominant trait, derives from the early definition of "humour" as one of four bodily fluids (OED "humour" entry 1.1.2,2b) that determine "mental disposition, . . . constitutional tendency, . . . mood" (OED "Humour" entry 2.4,5). Shakespeare's knowledge of these usages is found in *Taming of the Shrew* 4.01.209, and *Richard III* 1.02.227-28.

8. Cf. T. S. Eliot, "Christopher Marlowe" and "Shakespeare and the Stoicism of Seneca," *Elizabethan Essays* (New York: Hasbell, 1964), 21-31, 33-54.

9. Cf. Ben Jonson, *Discoveries*, Maurice Castelain, ed. (Paris: Hachette, 1906), 104. This is the "oratio imago animi," the "language picture of the soul," or "language as a picture of the soul." The sentiment is from Apuleius, *Florida* 2, *The Works of Apuleius* (London: Bell, 1893), 374.