

analysing texts

# Shakespeare

## The Tragedies

Nicholas Marsh



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NICHOLAS MARSH



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# General Editor's Preface

This series is dedicated to one clear belief: that we can all enjoy, understand and analyse literature for ourselves, provided we know how to do it. How can we build on close understanding of a short passage, and develop our insight into the whole work? What features do we expect to find in a text? Why do we study style in so much detail? In demystifying the study of literature, these are only some of the questions the *Analysing Texts* series addresses and answers.

The books in this series will not do all the work for you, but will provide you with the tools, and show you how to use them. Here, you will find samples of close, detailed analysis, with an explanation of the analytical techniques utilised. At the end of each chapter there are useful suggestions for further work you can do to practise, develop and hone the skills demonstrated and build confidence in your own analytical ability.

An author's individuality shows in the way they write: every work they produce bears the hallmark of that writer's personal 'style'. In the main part of each book we concentrate therefore on analysing the particular flavour and concerns of one author's work, and explain the features of their writing in connection with major themes. In Part 2 there are chapters about the author's life and work, assessing their contribution to developments in literature; and a sample of critics' views are summarised and discussed in comparison with each other. Some suggestions for further reading provide a bridge towards further critical research.

*Analysing Texts* is designed to stimulate and encourage your critical and analytic faculty, to develop your personal insight into the author's work and individual style, and to provide you with the skills and techniques to enjoy at first hand the excitement of discovering the richness of the text.

NICHOLAS MARSH

# A Note on Editions

References to act, scene and line numbers in the four tragedies we study in this volume are to *The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare*, published by Routledge. In the Arden series, *Hamlet* is edited by Harold Jenkins (1982), *Othello* is edited by M. R. Ridley (1958), and *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are both edited by Kenneth Muir (1972 and 1951 respectively). Act, scene and line numbers from other works by Shakespeare are taken from *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, edited by Peter Alexander (Collins, London and Glasgow, 1951).

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**PART 1**

ANALYSING  
SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGEDIES



# Introduction: Analysing Shakespeare's Poetry

I have avoided technical terms as much as possible in this book; but some metrical analysis, and one or two other terms, are useful. So we should have some knowledge of the form of Shakespeare's poetry before we start.

## Blank Verse

In these plays, most of the text is written in **blank verse**. Blank verse has no rhyme, and ten-syllable lines. Experts disagree about whether blank verse has a meter – a regular pattern of stresses – or not. Those who say that it is metrical regard many of Shakespeare's lines as 'irregular'. Others say that it has no set meter, but some of the lines have a 'regular iambic meter'. Yet another group says that the natural stress pattern in the English language is 'iambic'; so there is an 'iambic' background, even where there is no set meter.

We will not take sides in this argument. It is useful to notice when the stresses in Shakespeare's poetry do not form any pattern, and we will often call these rhythms 'irregular'. It is equally useful to notice when there is a strong 'iambic' pattern. The next section explains the few technicalities involved.

## Iambic Pentameter, Caesurae, Couplets

An 'iamb' or 'iambic foot' is a unit consisting of two syllables with the stress on the second syllable. So the word 'report' is an iamb because we never put the stress on the first syllable and say 'report'; we always stress the second syllable and say 'report'.

Five 'iambes' in succession make a line of poetry called **iambic pentameter**. For example:

An honest mind and plain, he must speak truth.  
(*King Lear*, 2, ii, 96)

If you say this aloud, you naturally stress 'hon-', 'mind', 'plain', 'must' and 'truth'. If you forget the words and listen to the rhythm, it sounds like 'de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum'. That is the sound that a regular line of iambic pentameter makes. When we point out meter in our analyses, we will print the stresses in italics, so our example would look like this: 'an *honest mind* and *plain*, he *must speak truth*'.

Each iambic unit of two syllables is called a 'foot', so there are five 'feet' in a pentameter line. We will sometimes comment when one of the feet is 'reversed'. This means that the first syllable in one of the feet is stressed, instead of the second. For example, three lines after the one quoted above, Cornwall says '*Harbour* more *craft* and *more corrupter ends*'. This sounds like 'dum-de de-dum de-dum de-dum de-dum' because we say '*harbour*' not 'harbour'.

Even our example of a regular line is not perfect, however. Notice that 'speak' is not stressed in the iambic pattern; but when we say the line aloud, the final three syllables are almost equally stressed. There is a heavier, more frequent beat at the end of the line. That is why it sounds dogmatic and powerful.

Pauses are extremely important when analysing rhythm: we will often look at the punctuation, and discuss the phrasing of a passage. Pauses often come near the middle of a line. If a pause occurs between the fourth and seventh syllables of the line, it can be called a **caesura** (plural **caesurae**). I use this term because the alternative is a clumsy phrase: 'pause in the middle of the line'. So, there is a caesura after 'plain' in our example from *King Lear*. I have also chosen to avoid the clumsy phrases 'line with a punctuation mark at the end of it' and 'line with no punctuation mark at the end of it'. We will use the short, self-evident terms 'end-stopped line' and 'run-on line' to describe these two phenomena.

In Shakespeare's tragedies most of the text is in blank verse.

However, we will come across two other kinds of writing as well. Some scenes or parts of scenes are written in **prose**. It is often worth noting when Shakespeare shifts from poetry to prose or back again, because it can indicate a change of tone in the drama. For example, the prose sections usually, but not always, involve characters from the lower ranks of society. On the other hand, as you pursue your Shakespeare studies you will find that some passages are printed as poetry in one edition, and as prose in another. This happens when different editors cannot agree, so we will be careful not to draw too many conclusions from such changes.

The other kind of writing we will meet occurs when two adjacent lines rhyme. When this happens, the pair of rhyming lines is called a **couplet**. Shakespeare sometimes writes a couplet for the final lines of a scene, an act or an important speech. His couplets are usually also in regular iambic meter. Couplets often produce an effect of balance between the two lines, and they lend themselves to neat statements or to irony in the final line or half-line. Shakespeare uses them to express a concluding statement: a condensed summing-up of what has been happening. For example, at the end of Act 1 of *Hamlet*, Hamlet summarises his feelings about meeting the Ghost and his duty to revenge his father, in this couplet:

The time is out of joint. O cursed spite,  
That ever I was born to set it right.

(*Hamlet*, 1, v, 196–7)

Some of Shakespeare's early plays were written almost entirely in couplets, and even in the mature tragedies he occasionally uses couplets for a whole speech. Another variation on this form happens when four lines rhyme alternately (i.e. the first with the third, the second with the fourth).

## Imagery

We pay close attention to imagery in all of the extracts we analyse, and Chapter 7 concentrates on imagery. So it is important, at the

start, to clarify what 'imagery' is. We do not call it 'imagery' when the words make a picture in your head. We only call a word or a group of words an 'image' if they express a comparison between something in the play and something imaginary which is there for the sake of the comparison. For example, when Hamlet says that the sky is:

... this majestic roof fretted with golden fire ...  
(*Hamlet*, 2, ii, 301)

we know that the sky is not really a roof, and the stars are not really gold paint or flames. The sky and stars are compared to a gilded roof.

There are two kinds of image which have different names. If an image is stated in explicit language (such as 'man . . . how *like* an angel' in line 306 of the same scene, where 'like' expresses the comparison), it is called a **simile**. If we understand the comparison but none of the words explain that a comparison is happening (as in our example of 'this . . . roof', when we know that Hamlet is talking about the sky but the words do not explain this), the image is called a **metaphor**.

# 1

## Openings

We will take an extract from each of the four tragedies we are studying, in each chapter of Part I. We will begin by looking closely at these samples from the texts, finding out as much as we can by analysing how they are written. Remember that these works are 'wholes' in the sense that everything about them contributes to the meaning they convey: it is just as much there in the style – the way they are written – as in the subject-matter. So we can take a sample and analyse the style in detail, confident that beginning in this way will bring us insights into the meaning and artistic purpose of the whole text. We are particularly interested in any features we find that are common to all four plays.

This 'group of works' was written for the theatre, and our approach should take this into account consciously: it is both important and extremely helpful to imagine a performance of the play in a theatre, with audience, actors and actresses. Plays exist in performance, with sight and sound and in space and time, as well as on the page. They spring into existence during the first minute of the first act. The dramatist has been given a set space and time, and the magical power to create a world within those limits. The vital question for us as we study his intentions is: what sort of a world has he chosen to create, and why? We will find out a lot about the answer to this question by looking at the first vital minutes of the performance. Imagine that we are sitting in the audience. The lights in the auditorium dim, and the people around us become quiet. The curtain rises (or, in many modern theatres and

in Shakespeare's time, the stage is lit and the actors enter). What happens?

\* \* \*

Here is the opening of *Hamlet*:

### SCENE I.

*Elsinore. A platform before the castle.*

FRANCISCO *at his post. Enter to him* BARNARDO.

*Bar.* Who's there?

*Fran.* Nay, answer me; stand, and unfold yourself.

*Bar.* Long live the King!

*Fran.* Barnardo?

*Bar.* He. 5

*Fran.* You come most carefully upon your hour.

*Bar.* 'Tis now struck twelve; get thee to bed, Francisco.

*Fran.* For this relief much thanks; 'tis bitter cold,  
And I am sick at heart.

*Bar.* Have you had quiet guard? 10

*Fran.* Not a mouse stirring.

*Bar.* Well, good night.

If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,  
The rivals of my watch, bid them make haste.

*Fran.* I think I hear them.

*Enter* HORATIO *and* MARCELLUS

Stand, ho! Who is there? 15

*Hor.* Friends to this ground.

*Mar.* And liegemen to the Dane.

*Fran.* Give you good night.

*Mar.* O, farewell, honest soldier, who hath reliev'd you?

*Fran.* Barnardo hath my place. Give you good night. *[Exit.*

*Mar.* Holla! Barnardo! 20

*Bar.* Say, what, is Horatio there?

*Hor.* A piece of him.

*Bar.* Welcome, Horatio; welcome, good Marcellus.

*Mar.* What, has this thing appear'd again to-night?



- Bar.* I have seen nothing. 25
- Mar.* Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,  
And will not let belief take hold of him  
Touching this dreaded sight, twice seen of us;  
Therefore I have entreated him along  
With us to watch the minutes of this night, 30  
That if again this apparition come,  
He may approve our eyes and speak to it.
- Hor.* Tush, tush, 'twill not appear.
- Bar.* Sit down awhile,  
And let us once again assail your ears,  
That are so fortified against our story, 35  
What we two nights have seen.
- Hor.* Well, sit we down,  
And let us hear Barnardo speak of this.
- Bar.* Last night of all,  
When yond same star that's westward from the pole,  
Had made his course t'illuminate that part of heaven 40  
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,  
The bell then beating one—  
*Enter GHOST.*
- Mar.* Peace, break thee off. Look where it comes again.  
(*Hamlet*, 1, i, 1–43)

What are the outstanding features of this opening sequence? The characters are mounting guard on the battlements of Elsinore castle, at night, and the opening line is a guard's challenge: 'Who's there?' An atmosphere of military tension is immediately established. With military tension goes danger, emphasised by their cautious responses to each other ('Nay, answer me; stand, and unfold yourself' and 'Stand, ho! Who is there?') and their expressions of gratitude and relief when they recognise each other: 'Welcome . . . welcome'. Being alone on the battlements is frightening – at the end of his watch Francisco says 'For this relief much thanks' because he is 'sick at heart', and Barnardo does not want to be alone for long ('bid them make haste').

Darkness isolates people from each other. More than a quarter of