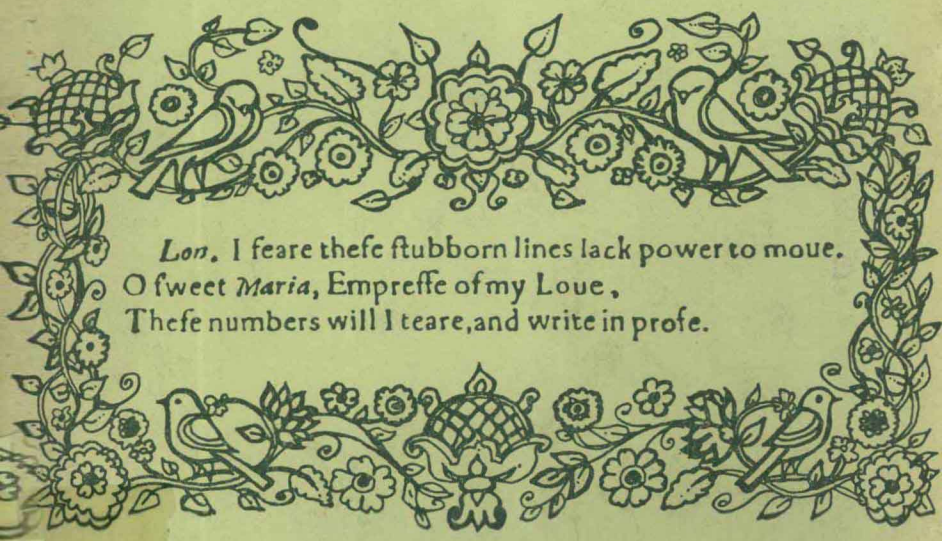
Brian Vickers

The Artistry of Shakespeare's Prose



The Artistry of Shakespeare's Prose

BRIAN VICKERS

METHUEN
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 1968

This edition reprinted 1979
by Methuen & Co. Ltd
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE
Published in the USA by
Methuen & Co.
in association with Methuen, Inc.
733 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Printed in Great Britain by
Whitstable Litho Ltd, Whitstable, Kent

ISBN 0 416 72570 8

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Vickers, Brian, *b.1937*
The artistry of Shakespeare's prose.
— (Methuen library reprints).
1. Shakespeare, William– Prose
I. Title
822.3'3 PR3087 79-40752
ISBN 0-416-72570-8

Preface

An earlier version of this book was the Cambridge University Harness Prize Essay, 1965, and I am grateful to the examiners, Dr John Northam and Dr Anne Righter for setting a topic which came so near to my own interests. In revising it I have greatly benefited from criticism by Richard David, Harold Brooks, and Tom Henn, all of whom have made useful suggestions and removed a number of blemishes: those still remaining are entirely my fault. Above all I must thank my wife for typing, re-typing, criticizing, editing, prompting me to do better, and keeping me at it. I hope that the results are worthy of her.

Note

All quotations from Shakespeare are from the text of C. J. Sisson (London, 1953), but with line-references to the Globe edition.

Preface to the Revised Edition

In reprinting this book I have corrected typographical errors (most of them pointed out by that nonpareil of proof-readers, Dr Stanley Wells, late of the Shakespeare Institute), but not otherwise made alterations. Looking at the book again I feel the usual slight embarrassment at being confronted with an earlier self. The vigour and excitement with which I worked on it are not qualities that I want to disown, but I could wish that the sentences were not so long and, at times, breathless. On the whole I feel that the book did justice to its topic, but over the years I have come to notice many more Shakespearian subtleties and fine points of detail, especially at the crossing-points between prose and verse. Perhaps one day I shall get around to writing the companion volume on Shakespeare's poetry.

The only feature that I would wish to have changed, but cannot for typographical-economical reasons, is the title of Chapter 5 : but in my defence I must say that in 1965 the phrase 'Gay Comedy' did not have the sense it has almost overwhelmingly come to have, especially in this country, but 'was an excellent good word before it was ill sorted'.

February 1979

Contents

CHAPTER I

Shakespeare's Use of Prose

Shakespeare's supremacy as a dramatist has always been recognized as stemming from a mastery of language. At one extreme he is the dramatic poet above all, so much so that 'Shakespearian' has become a tag to describe any poetry of richness and complexity, while at the other his proverbs have passed into the common speech. Of course much of his particular greatness is not to be limited to purely linguistic effects, and we have to neglect the detail of his language to consider such things as the whole meaningful development of an action, the adaptation of sources to make structures in every way superior to the original, the creation of characters, the representation and analysis of human motives and feelings, and the confrontation of varying emotional states: all these elements of a play go beyond its language. But nevertheless (and it is the constant paradox of a literary work) these larger elements are only created and apprehended through the language, and it seems reasonable to say that if we approach the words with a keen imaginative sympathy we should best be able to appreciate what lies behind them. The study of its language is indisputably a valid way of entry into any literary work – some would say the most valuable – but I think it should be used in harness with our response to the work as a whole, and in conjunction with all other profitable critical methods. Yet this is an approach which has been little applied to Shakespeare.

One of the critical revolutions of the last age was a reaction away from the excessive interest in Shakespeare's characters back to 'the words on the page'. Given this general interest in such things as imagery, poetic textures, ambiguity, irony, it may seem that by now the study of Shakespeare's language would be exhausted. But in fact there has been less detailed and intelligent study of Shakespeare's style since this movement than there was

before it, and the lasting work that has been done has occurred outside the movement.[1] For these critics (and I refer to the work of Wilson Knight, L. C. Knights, D. A. Traversi, J. F. Danby and a host of followers) approached plays as if they were lyric poems, abstracting 'themes' and 'symbols' from the whole complex development of drama. Furthermore, if they were interested in imagery, it was not essentially because of the poetic value of the image but rather for the idea behind it: they looked for image-patterns, as revealing thematic meaning. In addition to the principal dangers[2] inherent in extracting a theme (which often turns out to be a moral commonplace) from the living tissue of a play, and implicitly suggesting that Shakespeare was offering a discussion of Appearance and Reality, or the effects of Time and Mutability, this approach does not recognize two characteristic features of Shakespeare as a dramatist. One is his remarkable self-awareness, his propensity to comment on what he is doing: if a play involves within its action the mounting of another play (as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, say, or *Hamlet*) there will be discussions of the art and styles of acting, the role of imagination, the nature of illusion – these discussions hardly constitute a 'theme' in the accepted meaning of the word.

Similarly if the plot involves a disguise, or a failure in trust, then there will inevitably be a comment on the discrepancy between appearance and reality (but how inadequate it is to describe *Much Ado About Nothing* as 'a play about Appearance and Reality').

Secondly we should consider how his characters react to their situation with comparable awareness: if the plot involves total confusion about identity, as does *The Comedy of Errors* (though not about 'identity' in a modern psychological sense) then it is perfectly natural for characters to say that they are bewitched, and thus some recent discussions of this play in terms of its 'witch-craft' or 'loss of identity' themes are not only heavy-handed but misleading, in that they mistake accident for essence. Again such a remark as that in *2 Henry IV* that 'We are time's subjects, and time bids be gone' (I, iii) ends a scene with the message 'we must really get a move on' (which is not altogether inappropriate for men of business such as rebels are). But it is not to be taken as evidence of 'the Mutability-theme': similar stock remarks are found in many

plays (e.g. *Coriolanus*) where they are as functionally relevant but as thematically irrelevant as they are here. In both these latter examples there may be more to it than this, but critics must be more careful than they have been so far about how they extract their 'themes'.

I am not suggesting that Shakespeare's comments are not sometimes so frequent or so important that they amount to a thematic status, nor that one cannot still gather valuable insights from *The Wheel of Fire* or *Some Shakespearean Themes*, but I think that this is a critical approach which is almost fully worked out, and which – more to the point – is not very helpful to the understanding of Shakespeare's style in the context of drama. Shakespeare's plays are not 'dramatic poems' but 'poetic dramas', and although that seems a small readjustment much is involved in it. Our starting-point must be the simple principle, stated with clarity by A. S. Downer, that

> The drama is a unique form of expression in that it employs living actors to tell its story; its other aspects – setting, characters, dialogue, action and theme – it shares with others forms of communication. But the fact that the dramatist is not dealing with characters merely, but with three-dimensional persons is paralleled by the fact that he is not dealing with a setting verbally described but three-dimensionally realized, with action that actually occurs in time and space, with dialogue which is spoken by human voices for the human ear.[3]

It follows that the critic must consider the physical representation of the drama – such things as visual imagery, significant groupings or stage-movement – and that the student of Shakespeare's style must try to relate these and such other factors as 'setting, characters, dialogue, action and theme', to the language of the plays. Shakespeare's language is an increasingly subtle medium for reflecting the differences and interactions between characters, situations and moods, thus we must approach the words not as abstractable entities but as the expression of the particular attitudes of quite distinct characters in equally distinct dramatic situations. The nature of Shakespeare's language is organically related to the development of each play.

Within the plays as a whole Shakespeare makes considerable use of prose, and before studying this aspect of his art it is as well to

remind ourselves of the extent of his usage. In terms of quantity, we can observe a steady growth[4] in the amount of prose through the early comedies and histories, reaching a peak in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which is largely a prose comedy, but having the dominant part in *Much Ado*, *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night*, being almost equal in bulk (and in excellence possibly superior) to the verse of *Henry IV* parts 1 and 2, *Henry V*, and *All's Well*, while playing a very significant part in three other comedies, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Troilus and Cressida* and *Measure for Measure*. From those elementary statistics we can deduce two points: that prose is largely the vehicle of comedy and the comic parts of the histories, and (although this would involve extensive argument) that Shakespeare's prose came to maturity before his poetry. But at once we must make an important qualification, for the prose does not go into a decline in quality as it does in quantity in the period of the great tragedies; it is now applied with increasing skill to the whole design of the play, and in many ways the prose of the tragedies is Shakespeare's greatest achievement. On first thought we might connect tragic prose with a few isolated clown scenes, but in fact prose occupies roughly a quarter of the whole in *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Timon of Athens* and *Coriolanus*, while its importance for Mercutio or Iago bulks far larger than the statistics would suggest. To mention these two essentially prose characters (although of course both are also given verse) is to think of others whose very existence depends on prose: Bottom, Shylock, Falstaff, Shallow, Mistress Quickly, Beatrice and Benedick, Dogberry and Verges, Rosalind and Touchstone, Sir Toby Belch, Thersites, Parolles, Autolycus and the clown in *The Winter's Tale*. And to think of the variety of character-creation shown here, and the importance that each has in the play as a whole, may help to justify this study of Shakespeare's prose by itself (though I will approach each play as a structure, and in practice will have to consider some of the verse too). Obviously the detailed study of the prose will result in a limited vision of some plays – *The Comedy of Errors*, say, or *Romeo and Juliet*, or *The Tempest*, for the dominant life of the play is elsewhere. But nevertheless prose provides a viewpoint which Shakespeare created and shared for some parts of the play, and although these parts may be limited in them-

selves they are not to be ignored, in the way that so many modern accounts of *Measure for Measure* or *The Winter's Tale* just do not mention the lower worlds of Pompey and Mistress Overdone, or Autolycus and the clowns. And if sometimes of restricted value, in other plays the study of the prose will reveal a central aspect of the action (as in the middle-period comedies and histories), or a vital phase in the development of characters and *motifs* shown elsewhere mainly in verse (Iago, Hamlet, Edgar). I think that on balance the advantages of this detailed study of one medium outweigh its obvious limitations – and I hope that it could be used as a basis for the much harder but more rewarding analysis of the poetry.

Indeed this relative ease in studying Shakespeare's prose compared to his verse (but it is only relative) has produced a number of useful studies[5] (especially those by Richard David and Elizabeth Tschopp), which are also probably more searching than anything yet done on the poetry in its dramatic context, with the exception of Wolfgang Clemen's admirable book on the imagery. Happily I can say at the outset that whatever virtues or faults that they have, these studies all limit themselves to general considerations of how Shakespeare used prose in the plays, and not to the specific nature of that prose. However, a number of valuable guiding principles have been exposed which must be the basis of any more detailed analysis. Some of the principles on which Shakespeare used prose have been so long recognized as to be common property, such as, for example, the general conventions in Elizabethan drama which determined the suitable occasions for prose. These can be grouped under two main heads: first, letters and proclamations, which enter into the play from the outside world, have their separateness marked off by being in prose: in Shakespeare such are the letters of Armado, Falstaff, Hamlet and others (Verdi in his setting of *Macbeth* duplicates the effect of Lady Macbeth reading her husband's prose letter by making her do it in a dry recitative on one held note), and such formal pronouncements as the peace-contract between Henry VI and the French King (*2 H VI*, I, i), Edgar's Challenge, or the accusation of Hermione. Secondly, a much larger group which is also based on the sense of the 'otherness' of prose, conveying information

about particular characters who are below the dignity and norm of verse, for a variety of reasons: in Elizabethan drama generally prose is the vehicle of an inferior class, such as servants and clowns – this is so in Shakespeare for most of the time, though many of his noblemen speak prose too (the categories are not exclusive). Similarly prose is used for those below dignity and seriousness generally, such as the clowns, who have a peculiar brand of clowns' prose, 'exuberant and original' as Richard David describes it (p. 81). Some clowns (the bumbling type) also come into the next category, that of those below the normal level of human reason, such as drunks (the porter in *Macbeth*, characters in the drinking-scenes in *Henry IV*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Othello*), and lastly madmen, the use of prose showing both the feigned madness of Hamlet and the real madness of Ophelia, a contrast which is repeated with still greater intensity between Edgar and Lear.

This last category raises a very important point about the alternation between prose and verse. Given that the norm of the plays, with some few exceptions, is blank verse, then prose must always have been felt as a deviation from it, and one made for a particular reason, such as for these elementary categories which we have been considering. This sense of the otherness of prose is exceptionally strong in the case of madness, and everyone sees the significance of the degeneration of Othello into a frenzy or Lady Macbeth into her sleepwalking being matched by a parallel decline from blank verse into prose, thus echoing on the stylistic level the falling-off from reason so evident in the action. But it does not seem to be commonly appreciated that the historical significance of this extreme contrast is the same as that of the more general alternation between verse and prose, namely that the Elizabethan audience must have been aware of the difference between the media in a way that no modern audience is. Miss Tschopp has finely analysed the scene in *As You Like It* (IV, i) where Jaques and Rosalind have been sparring in witty prose when Orlando, entering, is given one decasyllabic line:

> Good day and happiness, dear Rosalind.

Jaques' response is sardonic and instantaneous:

> Nay then God b'wi'you, an you talk in blank verse. [*Exit.*]

Miss Tschopp's conclusion is that 'the audience must obviously be sensitive to the change from verse to prose and must react to it quickly' (p. 4), for indeed the whole point of that exchange is lost if we do not at once spot the difference. I think that the same principle applies for the distinction between prose and verse (if seldom so urgently) in all Elizabethan drama. The importance of this principle is largely stylistic, but it has a significant by-product for our knowledge of Elizabethan acting, which must in any case have used a fairly formalized style given the enormous pressure of their repertory system,[6] and would thus seem to have employed a more stylized delivery for verse and a more relaxed one for prose.[7] A confirming detail for this deduction comes from Marston's *Malcontent*, where Milton Crane notes that 'At one point in the opening scene of the play, Malevole, left alone with a trusted friend, drops his disguise and speaks verse in his own character of Altofronto; when a third person enters, he returns to prose. The change is strikingly emphasized by the stage direction: *Malevole shifteth his speech*' (p. 156).

The stylistic implication of this difference in the tone or speed of enunciation is that we must accept the alternations between prose and verse as being not accidental but deliberate on the part of the author, and with a definite aesthetic intent which would have been perceived by the audience. An analogy prompts itself from another art, for we could compare the switch from verse to prose with that from a major to a minor key in classical music: the analogy is not exact, of course, but it does suggest that in both cases we are dealing with an alternation of media according to certain definite artistic conventions (and in both arts the changes have emotional connotations). The distinction must have been noticeable, then, otherwise those departures from the norm of our first simple categories for prose would not have been appreciated. So Falstaff the prose-speaking clown *par excellence* is occasionally given verse – but only to mock it (Crane, p. 5). In the drinking-scene in *Othello*, amid the general prose, 'Iago's verse asides reveal him still completely self-possessed' (David, p. 88). Lear mad is brought down to prose but is returned to verse during his madness when given royal dignity, or perhaps the superior authority of moral perception.[8] Again in *Merry Wives*, the first time that

Ford reaches a mood of dignity after his jealous madness, he is given verse (IV, iv, 6). One might also suggest, if it does not make Shakespeare too consistent, that the fact that Leontes in his apparent madness is not given prose is yet another sign that his is a serious or a tragi-comic but not a tragic situation (in none of the tragedies are we as unsympathetic to the hero as we are to Leontes and his insane jealousy, and in none is a tragic hero so humiliated by other characters as he is by the nobility of Hermione and the scolding of Paulina) – certainly Shakespeare preserves him from the final collapse. At all events we must look at the points of change from prose to verse with some care, and both Mr David and Miss Tschopp have made some valuable suggestions.

But before going on to discuss the consequences for Shakespeare's prose of it being in an inferior position to verse, it may be as well to show these conventions of prose-verse allocation at work, so I will briefly consider the early plays up to *Love's Labour's Lost*[9] (I will describe the alternation of media without much quotation here, for many of these scenes will be discussed later). The relegation of the clown-servant to prose, on part-social part-intellectual grounds, is seen in them all, as is the normal convention for Shakespeare that when a person from a superior class talks with the clown then he too descends to prose, as if to show the pervasive effect of clownish wit. So the use of the clown in *Titus Andronicus*, though only faintly prefiguring that in later tragedies, is characteristic, for in the brief scenes in which he appears (IV, iii, 80–120, IV, iv, 4–50), the Roman nobility are made to speak prose in some but not all of their speeches to him (this inconsistency within a scene is typical of the early work). A similar confusion of the appropriate form is seen in *The Comedy of Errors*, where the entry of Dromio of Ephesus reduces both Adriana and Luciana to prose as one would expect (II, i, 44–54), only for all three to revert to verse at once. Another inconsistency comes in the following scene between master and servant (both of Syracuse, this time) which begins in verse and continues thus for nearly forty lines before suddenly descending to prose. At this point in the scene, with the entry of Adriana and a romantic topic, the medium rightly ascends to verse, and – by giving way to the law of dominant mood – now the Dromio also

speaks verse, so as to preserve the dignified tone. A similar transition from serious verse to comic prose and back to verse which involves both Antipholus and Dromio is seen later (III, ii, 71–151), and for the third time the entry of the clown reduces the medium to prose in a scene in which the courtezan arrives (IV, iii, 12 ff.). Here, however, we see a more consistent piece of decorum: the courtezan speaks verse throughout, while both Antipholus and Dromio speak prose when they taunt her but move up to verse for more serious or objective matters (similarly IV, iv, 22 ff.). There is again some confusion in the final scenes, the Dromios speaking prose and verse without distinction, although the fact that they are given verse for the last words of the play may be significant, in that very few plays end on the low level of prose (excepting the witty epilogues of *As You Like It* and *2 Henry IV*) – dignity and ceremony must be restored.

Despite some confusions we can at least detect Shakespeare's method, by which the normal allegiance of a character to one medium can in some circumstances be broken according to the dramatic mood being stressed. So we have to take two factors into account, the nature of the individual characters, and the tone of the particular context. This duality of reference is illustrated again in *Richard III* in the brief prose scene for the murder of Clarence: the two murderers speak prose, and at first bring Brakenbury down from verse to their level, only for him to recover the dignity of his office as he surrenders the keys (I, iv, 86–98). They then continue in prose together, with their uneasy quibbles, until Clarence awakes (99–171), at which point they ascend to verse. Clearly, if they spoke prose it would lower the intensity and pathos of Clarence's last appeal, so they must be raised to his level (at the possible cost of some dramatic credibility). Significantly, once the more brutal First Murderer breaks the spell and kills Clarence, his more sensitive partner continues in verse (278–80), which is the further accentuated by the murderer returning in callous prose. It would have been possible for Shakespeare to give Clarence verse and the murderers prose, but this sort of separation, although it can devalue the prose-speaker, inevitably produces a discordant tone. This we see from the mob scenes in *2 Henry VI*, where a variety of effects is produced. Jack Cade and his mob are

naturally presented in semi-realistic prose, so that when Cade, awaiting Sir Humphrey Stafford and having just knighted himself ('To equal him I will make myself a knight presently. [*Kneels*]. Rise up Sir John Mortimer. [*Rises*]. Now have at him!') ascends to verse to try and boast a royal descent the dissimulation inevitably rings false:

> It is to you, good people, that I speak,
> Over whom, in time to come, I hope to reign;
> For I am rightful heir unto the crown.
> (IV, ii, 136–9, 149–54, 163, 192–7.)

In the later scenes Cade remains in character with a coarse colloquial prose, and Shakespeare consistently devalues him by contrasting his prose with some nobler character who continues to speak verse and thus dominates the stage: first with Lord Say, whom the mob cruelly murders (IV, vii, 59 ff.), then with Buckingham and Clifford, whose patriotic verse succeeds in winning away the fickle mob from Cade (IV, viii – so prefiguring the triumph of verse over prose in the twin orations of *Julius Caesar*); and lastly with the sturdy Man of Kent, Alexander Iden, who is only of good bourgeois stock but is shown to be superior to Cade by his verse before he kills him with his sword (IV, x). By being restricted to prose Cade is shown to be limited, and by contrast with the verse-speakers, contemptible.

Earlier in the play Shakespeare used prose for a very different effect, in constructing the little mirror-scene in which the good Duke Humphrey exposes the false miracle of Simpcox's restoration to sight. This scene begins in verse (II, i, 75 ff.) but is gradually reduced to prose (as if stripping off pretence) by the Duke's penetrating questions, culminating in the final accusation, for which Gloucester puts aside his dignity and the fake's pretence in order to push home the charge in prose. In the circumstances of Gloucester's final downfall prose is used for a new effect, in the scene where his wife employs black magic to discover the secrets of the future (I, iv): the preliminary discussion between the conjurer Bolingbroke and his attendant witches is in prose, but as the Duchess appears and the ceremonies begin, the emotional level rises with the ominous verse:

Patience, good lady, wizards know their times.
Deep night, dark night, the silence of the night,
The time of night when Troy was set on fire,
The time when screech owls cry, and bandogs howl. . . .

(it is worth noting that none of Shakespeare's many omens is delivered in prose). In this example prose is a kind of springboard, from which verse attains greater power and resonance, a sensitive use of style typical of the intelligent application of prose in this play. In the two other early comedies not yet considered, the transitions from verse to prose are also imaginative, if on a smaller scale. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* the arrival of the clown again reduces the master to prose, who, when left alone, either bobs up to verse (Proteus and Speed, I, i, 70 ff.); or, like Antipholus or any romantic hero, despite the presence of the clown, reverts to verse at the entry of his beloved (Speed, Valentine, and Silvia, II, i). The other clown Launce (the bumbling type), unlike the more versatile Speed, is given prose throughout (II, iii; II, v; III, i; IV, iv). But in this play for the first time characters from the upper stratum come down to prose when clowns are not present, in the flyting between Valentine and Thurio for the love of Silvia (II, iv), and in that between Proteus and Thurio for Julia (V, ii). Here prose is needed because of the lower tone of these scenes, and already it is associated by Shakespeare with sardonic wit. Another prophetic use of prose here which is less derogatory is that associated with disguise: when Julia disguises as a boy to overhear the infidelities of Proteus (IV, iv) she steps down into prose too, only returning to character and verse for the final direct admission (after some defensively indirect quibbling with the Host) of her pain and foreboding:

HOST. Trust me, I think 'tis almost day.
JULIA. Not so; but it hath been the longest night
That e'er I watched, and the most heaviest.

In *The Taming of the Shrew* we find such expected movements as that by which a master is reduced to prose by the arrival of a servant only to regain the norm after his exit (Baptista and Biondello, III, ii; Lucentio and Biondello, IV, iv), and the contrary state where the needed mood prevails and the servant, having naturally spoken prose, moves up to verse (Grumio for Petruchio