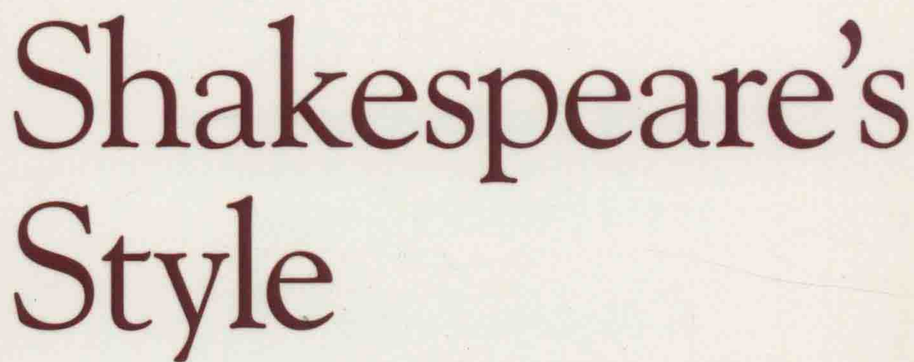

# Shakespeare's Style

Maurice Charney

*Literary Studies • Shakespeare*

*Shakespeare's Style* presents a detailed consideration of aspects of Shakespeare's writing style in his plays. Each chapter offers a detailed discussion about a single feature of style in a chosen Shakespeare play. Topics examined include a discussion of a key image or images, both verbal and nonverbal; consideration of the way a character is put together; reflection on the changing audience response to a character; and audience response to an account of the speech rhythms of a single play. This book will be of interest to audiences who see Shakespeare's plays, readers of the printed page, and students, aiding them in concentrating on the significant ways that Shakespeare expresses himself.

**Maurice Charney** is retired from Rutgers University as a distinguished professor and was president of both the Shakespeare Association of America and the Academy of Literary Studies.

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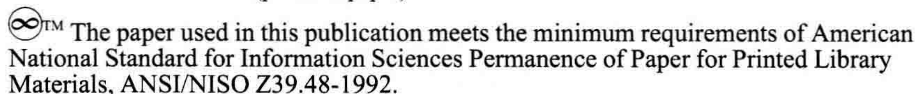

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# Shakespeare's Style

For

Bobbie

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# Acknowledgments

Shakespeare's plays are quoted from *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), with the exception of *King Lear*, which is quoted from the Arden edition, 3rd series, ed. R. A. Foakes (London: Thomson Learning, 1997). I follow the chronological order of the plays as listed in the Signet edition. I have profited greatly from the notes in the Signet and Arden editions, from my wide reading in the critical literature about Shakespeare, and from stimulating conversations with my students, academic colleagues, and the members of the Shakespeare Seminar at Columbia University.

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# Introduction

*Shakespeare's Style* offers a close reading of all of Shakespeare's plays, with each short chapter devoted to a single aspect of Shakespeare's art. I use the word "style" in a wide sense that includes how characters are fashioned, what key words and images are used to express a play's distinctive meanings, as well as the important nonverbal, presentational aspect of the plays as seen or imagined in performance. Although not strictly a scholarly book (it has no footnotes or bibliography), *Shakespeare's Style* is nevertheless aimed at committed readers and spectators of Shakespeare's plays and the growing number of Shakespeare's plays that may be seen in movies or on television. The book grows out of the same effort to understand the complexity of the vast critical inquiry about Shakespeare's art as the scholarly books I have written.

These include *Shakespeare's Roman Plays: The Function of Imagery in the Drama* (1961), dealing with verbal and nonverbal aspects of *Julius Caesar*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, and *Coriolanus*; *Style in "Hamlet"* (1969); *Hamlet's Fictions* (1988, reissued 2014); *Titus Andronicus* (1990); *Shakespeare on Love and Lust* (2000); *Wrinkled Deep in Time: Aging in Shakespeare* (2009); and *Shakespeare's Villains* (2012). But with serious students of Shakespeare also in mind, I have written a different kind of book in *How to Read Shakespeare* (1971, revised 1992) and *All of Shakespeare* (1993). The latter deals comprehensively with all of Shakespeare's works. *Shakespeare's Style* is a kind of sequel to *All of Shakespeare*, except that it is directed to Shakespeare's plays alone, and it concerns itself with only a single aspect of style in each play.

I do not use the idea of Shakespeare's style in its narrower, rhetorical sense, referring only to effects of language. The Roman writer Quintilian of the first century CE established elaborate rhetorical categories for Latin that

were taken over by English theorists such as George Puttenham in his *Art of English Poesy* (1589). One frequently used rhetorical device in Shakespeare is "zeugma," which the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines as "A figure by which a single word is made to refer to two or more words in the sentence." Another frequent rhetorical figure in Shakespeare is "hendiadys," which the OED defines as "A figure of speech in which a single complex idea is expressed by two words connected by a conjunction." A variety of "hendiadys" is in the compacted phrase "sleepy bed," meaning bed in which I am asleep. One can pursue this subject in detail in the excellent study by Sister Miriam Joseph, *Shakespeare's Use of the Arts of Language* (1947).

I am also interested in how characters are conceived and fashioned. I do not mean to practice old-fashioned character analysis, but it is significant how characters are created stylistically. "Old-fashioned" Shakespeare criticism usually refers to romantic and often sentimental writers on Shakespeare of the nineteenth century. I am thinking, particularly, of Sir Sidney Lee's biography, *A Life of William Shakespeare* (1898), in which Prospero in *The Tempest* is seen as an autobiographical portrait of Shakespeare himself bidding farewell to the stage and retiring as a dramatist. This cannot be factually true, and Lee's thinking violates the fictionality of Shakespeare's characters. There is no consistent line of development in these characters. His representations of women, for example, vary widely from the vivacious and intelligent females of the comedies, like Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Beatrice in *Much Ado About Nothing*, to the relatively passive and long-suffering women of the tragedies, like Ophelia in *Hamlet* and Desdemona in *Othello*.

Shakespeare's plays are not directly autobiographical. One of the most curious examples of the way that Shakespeare's "mythical sorrows" enter into Shakespeare criticism is in H. Somerville's *Madness in Shakespearian Tragedy* (1929), which claims that Shakespeare himself was suffering from the brain damage brought about by syphilis when he created the character of Timon in *Timon of Athens.*

We need to insist on the fictionality of Shakespeare's characters. This is where stylistic considerations play an important part. Hamlet is one of the most well-rounded and fully developed characters in all of Shakespeare, but there are seeming contradictions in his presentation on stage. If he is a character who thinks too much (and that is the root of his tragedy, as in the movie with Laurence Olivier), he is also quite homicidal in his pursuit of revenge. In act 3, scene 3, he doesn't consider it a good revenge to kill the king while he is praying, and, in the next scene, he runs Polonius through without ascertaining whether or not his victim is indeed the king. If Hamlet's tragedy is really caused by the fact that he thinks too much, how does one explain his soliloquy at the end of act 3, scene 2, where he says: "Now could I drink hot blood / And do such bitter business as the day / Would quake to look on" (3.2.398–400). He is steeling himself not to murder his mother. Shakespeare

seems to be arranging various aspects of Hamlet's character for their maximum theatrical effect.

I am particularly concerned with the plays as they are performed, which would include nonverbal, presentational imagery, although I understand that most people are acquainted with Shakespeare primarily through reading. We must allow for effects in Shakespeare's plays that are nonverbal, that are presented in the dramatic action without the need for an accompanying verbal description. I am thinking of the climactic scene in *Coriolanus* (5.3), when the protagonist is most intent on taking his revenge on the Rome that has exiled him. After many fruitless appeals from his dear friends and family to relent, he answers the fervent oration of his mother with a wordless stage direction: "*Holds her by the hand, silent*" (5.3.182 s.d.). Nothing else need be said, but Coriolanus knows that his gracious pardon will prove "most mortal to him" (5.3.189).

We need to understand that Shakespeare's magnificent language is only one part of the entire dramatic context—and, in any case, the words are spoken by actors on the stage, and different actors will, undoubtedly, speak the words differently. Let us look at one other example (although there are many hundreds to choose from): *Antony and Cleopatra* begins with a speech by Philo, one of Antony's soldiers (who has no other function in the play). He condemns his general's "dotage" (1.1.1), or foolishness, especially connected with elderly lovers, for being so enamored of Cleopatra. "His captain's heart" (1.1.6) "is become the bellows and the fan / To cool a gypsy's lust" (1.1.9–10). "Gypsy" was an Elizabethan word for Egyptian. Philo's speech is interrupted by an elaborate stage direction: "*Flourish. Enter Antony, Cleopatra, her Ladies, the Train, with Eunuchs fanning her*" (1.1.9 s.d.). The stage direction enacts what Philo is saying, and when he continues his speech, he comments on what the audience has clearly seen for itself:

> Look where they come:
> Take but good note, and you shall see in him
> The triple pillar of the world transformed
> Into a strumpet's fool. Behold and see. (1.1.10–13)

The idea of presentational imagery is that it vividly shows the audience what is also spoken about in the language of the play. When Antony is decisively defeated by Caesar at the battle of Actium, all his grief seems to be embodied in the stage direction: "*Sits down*" (3.11.24 s.d.). What more need be said?

I recognize the importance of ideas and backgrounds in Shakespeare, but these are not my primary concern. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, for example, we cannot escape the continuous concern for the conflict between Rome and Egypt, for Antony's conflicted roles as Roman soldier and Egyptian lover. These are ideas drawn from Sir Thomas North's translation of Plutarch's

*Lives*, which Shakespeare made significant and often literal use of. But I use the conflict of Rome and Egypt not historically but stylistically: in other words, how Antony's overarching historical moment is expressed in the imagery of the play. I don't intend to ignore the big ideas that the plays are about, but my focus is on how they are expressed. *Macbeth* is a play deeply steeped in Scottish history as Shakespeare read about it in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1577) and other historical sources, but my primary concern is not with how Shakespeare interpreted Scottish history but with his imaginative creation of tragic characters who enact this history. Influenced by his reading of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Shakespeare devoted at least ten plays to English history: the Minor Tetralogy (*Richard III* and the three parts of *Henry VI*), the Major Tetralogy (*Richard II*, the two parts of *Henry IV*, and *Henry V*), *King John*, and *Henry VIII*, but, while the history behind the plays is fascinating in its own right, my concern is with the expression of dramatic values rather than with the plays' status as histories.

But such matters are not my chief concern, which is with a close reading of the text itself. I am particularly interested in discovering the preoccupations of the dramatist, both verbal and nonverbal. In *Hamlet*, for example, there are a significant number of skin images, especially related to disease. When Hamlet meets Fortinbras's Captain in act 4, scene 4, he complains about the folly of his military expedition:

> Two thousand souls and twenty thousand ducats
> Will not debate the question of this straw.
> This is th' imposthume of much wealth and peace,
> That inward breaks, and shows no cause without
> Why the man dies. (4.4.25–29)

An "imposthume" is a boil or abscess, and it calls our attention to the poisoned secrecy of the play and its many murderous plots. Shakespeare's imagery has been much studied since Caroline Spurgeon's important book, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us* (1936), followed by Wolfgang Clemen's *The Development of Shakespeare's Imagery* (1951, first published in 1936 in German). Most of Shakespeare's plays have a distinctive set of key images, both in the language and in the staging. The repeated use of these images in any particular play offers useful clues for the interpretation of that play.

Close reading may also be pursued in key words that are not necessarily images. I am thinking of the use of "ha" in *Othello*. This is an insignificant word, usually called a meaningless interjection, but it has special significance in the context of this play. It is characteristically Iago's word, which, as Cassio is leaving Desdemona, he uses to initiate Othello's jealousy. With some annoyance, Iago exclaims: "Ha! I like not that" (3.3.35). This provokes

Othello into a series of questions about his wife's conduct. More importantly, it is interesting to see how Othello takes up Iago's word later in the scene (3.3.330) and how it signifies Iago's successful seduction of Othello.

Following is a preview of the thirty-four short chapters of this book.

We begin with *The Comedy of Errors* and Antipholus of Syracuse as an ideal comic hero. He is searching for his lost twin brother in Ephesus, but, when he is mistaken for that brother, he does nothing significant to assert his own identity. In true comic style, he entertains "the offered fallacy" even though he knows it to be wrong. He decides to accept the many gifts and favors that are showered upon him.

*Love's Labor's Lost*, modeled on John Lyly, does a good deal to satirize learning, especially with such extreme characters as Holofernes the schoolmaster, Nathaniel the curate, and Don Armado the "fantastical Spaniard." They are all at ease in their preoccupation with words, especially words derived from Latin. It is as if the rapidly developing English language has been set back a hundred years.

The physical deformities of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, later King Richard III, figure importantly in the action of the third part of *Henry VI* and *Richard III*. Richard seems uniquely satisfied with his ugliness, which allows him scope for his self-confessed villainy. He is astonished at his own success, even in the wooing of Anne for his queen.

Aaron in *Titus Andronicus* sets the pattern for many of Shakespeare's villains that follow, like Iago in *Othello*. He begins the play in Marlovian splendor, even though he is a captive to Titus. He is a sardonic, laughing villain, who reminds us of the medieval Vice. Tamora, the Queen of the Goths—also a captive—is his devoted mistress. Unlike other villains like Iago, Aaron has one redeeming trait: his absolute love for his black baby, conceived with Tamora.

*The Taming of the Shrew* is a paradoxical play because it is ultimately difficult to tell who tames whom. Petruchio seems to have the upper hand in socializing Kate, as one would train a hawk, but, eventually, Kate becomes aware of how the marriage game is played and seems to triumph at the end. At the conclusion, Petruchio and Kate win a large bet and look like a happily married couple.

The conventions of romantic love are formally displayed in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. Valentine's contempt for love at the beginning of the play is strongly rejected in act 2, when he falls desperately in love with Silvia. Soon Proteus is falling in love with Silvia, too, and he decisively rejects his former love for Julia. The swiftness of all of these moves looks forward to the chemically induced loves of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It is significant that the women in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* seem much more convincing lovers than the men.

*Romeo and Juliet* begins as a comedy, but the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues turns deadly with the death of Mercutio. Tybalt, the swordsman, seems to be at the heart of the tragedy, which unfolds with great emphasis on portents and inauspicious stars. There is a sense of doom that hangs over the play.

In *Richard II*, it is remarkable how our attitudes to Richard change during the course of the play. In the earlier scenes, the frivolous Richard insults the dying Gaunt and seizes his estate, which properly belongs to Gaunt's son, Henry. Richard alienates the audience when he unjustly "farms" the realm to pay for his Irish wars. But when he returns from Ireland, he hardly fights Bolingbroke at all, all the while asserting the divine right of kings. At the time of his murder in Pomfret Castle, he has become a Christ-like martyr in his sufferings.

It is important to remember that the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are not mortals but spirits, who are amoral and not in any way Christian. Titania, Queen of the Fairies, is uninhibited in her love for Bottom, the weaver, even though Oberon, King of the Fairies, has turned him into an ass. Puck, Oberon's factotum, is Robin Goodfellow, a mischievous spirit who enacts Oberon's orders to induce love chemically with the juice of a magical pansy.

Shylock seems hardly a comic character in *The Merchant of Venice*. His monomaniacal hatred of Antonio and his insistence on the pound of flesh when Antonio doesn't pay his bond all seem like the dire events of tragedy. Shylock rationalizes his desire for revenge by the hateful way that Jews have been treated in Venice. The flight of his daughter, Jessica, who marries a Christian and steals from her father, further enrages him, and he asks unequivocally: "Hates any man the thing he would not kill?"

In *King John*, "commodity" is a key word, much used by Philip Faulconbridge, the bastard son of Richard, *Coeur de lion*. The Bastard seems to take over the play from King John. His reaction to the deal between the English and French kings—to leave off warring because of the proposed marriage between Lewis, the Dauphin of France, and Blanch of Spain, niece to King John—invokes the base idea of commodity, which has a range of meanings: self-interest, gain, expediency, commercial advantage, and profit. This is the way of the world, which the Bastard vigorously rejects.

Falstaff in the two parts of *Henry IV* is a creative and imaginative speaker and an excellent actor. He is particularly skilled in hyperbole, or what we would ordinarily call exaggeration, or just plain lying. His speeches are self-conscious thrustings beyond the ordinary and commonplace. The fact that he is a fat man gives a literal meaning to his hyperbole. He is a gormandizer with an unquenchable appetite for food and drink.

Falstaff's banishment at the end of *2 Henry IV* is a significant event. Prince Hal, now King Henry V, does what he has always hinted he would do,

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