

Prosody and the Personal Pronoun Explored in William Shakespeare's Verse

by Pete Sweeney

Read from the page, without scansion or attention to meter, Shakespeare's verse can be read like prose, or more accurately, like speech. Since his verse was intended for actors to speak, this makes sense. However, since iambic pentameter is a relatively restrictive form, how successfully the verse reads aloud is a testimony to Shakespeare's genius. Shakespeare created this effect not by dispensing with the restrictions of pentameter, but rather by manipulating and stretching them; by paying attention to seemingly minute details like where the stress should fall within each line, and on what word the stress should fall upon.

The position of a pronoun in a line is not apparently relevant to the literal meaning of the phrase unless read aloud. The massive difference in sound and tone is more obvious when heard spoken in a theater. Shakespeare tended to leave his pronouns in unstressed positions for good reason. In fact, if one examines our unmetered everyday speech, we would find that people rarely stress personal pronouns, because the meat of the meaning contained in any verb phrase is the verb itself. Latin has no real subject pronouns; all the information is contained inside the verb. Italian and Spanish use subject pronouns, but do not depend on them. Despite the Latinate roots of English, however, subject pronouns are important to the English verb phrase—they cannot be ignored, yet frequently they only serve to identify the person and number left out of inane English verbs like “can”: I can, you can, he can, they can; without the pronoun, the reader would have no idea who could. In

ordinary speech, the subject pronoun is emphasized mainly when used in forms of address (Hey, *you!*) in the interrogative (Are *you* alright?), in the imperative (*You* go with *him!*), or to emphasize distinction between persons. (*I* didn't. *She* did.) Likewise objective, dative, and possessive pronouns rarely require much force.

Shakespeare may not have consciously deliberated the position of each pronoun in each line; he may well have placed most of his pronouns in their unaccented positions not from conscious choice but from his superb, innate, unconscious sense of the natural rhythms of the English language. Yet in other cases Shakespeare did consciously adjust the position of the pronoun for deliberate effect, and these cases illustrate both his command of the form and his sensitivity to the actors in his company (and all the other companies) who had to read the lines without abandoning either meter or the necessity for natural flow.

Iambic pentameter, in its strictest form, always sets stressed syllables next to unstressed ones and vice versa. The practical result of this format affects the simple verb phrase, which contains only one subject word and one verb word (*I drank*), and forces the author to stress either the subject or the verb. On the other hand, a verb phrase containing auxiliary verbs (*I was drinking*) allows the author to stress both subject and main verb and leave the auxiliary unstressed.

When one finds an accented pronoun standing all alone in a Shakespearean verse, there is a good chance it simply falls into one of the general categories mentioned earlier (interrogative, imperative etc.), or is simply the natural result of a complex verb phrase. Where Shakespeare deliberately stressed pronouns, he frequently placed them in

series or in patterns, to accentuate debate or an argument between people. In many ways the patterns that these stressed pronouns appear to imitate resemble classical rhetorical devices. Shakespearean characters tend to use verse rhetorically, to persuade and argue. Normal conversation is often left in prose. Likewise common characters (like Falstaff) tend to avoid verse. So when a character speaks in verse, he or she is often making a speech of some sort. From this perspective, the connection between stress patterns and rhetorical devices becomes even clearer.

This paper will begin with “The Comedy of Errors”. Because the play is a good example of one of Shakespeare’s earliest; the play is tightly metered and the characters speak in verse almost exclusively. The lines frequently rhyme. Shakespeare also uses less feminine endings and broken lines in “The Comedy of Errors” than can be found in later plays like “The Tempest.”

Reading “The Comedy of Errors”, we first encounter a pair of stressed pronouns in line twelve of the first scene. The Duke is addressing Egeon;

For since the mortal and intestine
jars
Twixt *thy* seditious countrymen
and *us* (1.1.11)

Although the first pronoun is possessive and the last one personal, they are stressed as to accentuate the distance between Egeon’s heritage and the Ephesian people. Since the Ephesian’s are effectively planning to execute an innocent man for the politico-economic offenses of his home city, the Duke uses this rhetorical structure to assign responsibility for these political crimes to an individual person (Egeon) and posit the personal Ephesian *us* as the victims. Thus the political aspect

of the trial is minimized and the personal conflict emphasized. Egeon is the personal enemy of the people of Ephesus because he personally owns his seditious countrymen.

Later in his speech the Duke refers to Syracusans without stressing the pronoun;

Again, if any Syracusan born
Come to the bay of Ephesus, he
dies. (1.1.19)

Since this generic Syracusan is not present, the action, not the person, is stressed. When the Duke pronounces the sentence on Egeon, he again leaves the pronoun weak: “*Therefore by law thou art condemned to die*.”(1.1.25) An easy way to appreciate the effect of the stresses is to read only the stressed syllables; (There)fore. . . law. . . art (con)demned... die. The force of the phrase is obvious here, a death sentence. The pronouncement is unconcerned with individuals; here the Duke stresses law and leaves the person weak, emphasizing the impersonality of the legal process. After hearing Egeon’s story, the Duke grows more sympathetic and again slips into personal mode; after telling Egeon he cannot reverse the sentence, he adds “Yet *I will favour thee in what I can*” (1.1.149). Later when the Duke repeats the sentence he stresses the personal:

Beg *thou*, or borrow, to make up
the sum,
And live; if no, then *thou art doom'd*
to *die*. (1.1.154)

Again it is useful to read the stressed syllables alone to get the sense. After hearing Egeon’s story, the Duke can see him and address him as a person, more than a representative of “thy seditious countrymen.”

In this scene and in many others, the

pronoun's stress can be used to increase impersonal distance or to decrease it. Politicians are perhaps the most useful characters to study here; of Shakespearean characters, they tend to be the most deliberate and skilled in their rhetoric, and the most sensitive to its effect. Kings rarely stress the royal *We*, as it connotes not the individual person of the king, but rather the eternal, symbolic Kingdom he represents. When one finds a king stressing his *we*'s, it is usually because the ruler is getting in an argument. When one finds a king mixing his *we*'s up, it is often because the king himself confuses his identity with that of the symbolic throne, deliberately or not. King Henry the Fourth is a perfect example. Henry IV is never completely secure on the throne, and it shows in his verse. In the opening of *The First Part of King Henry IV*, he begins by mixing his personal pronoun and the royal *We*. He stresses the royal *We* to enforce his superior position; this does not impress the rebels:

Worcester, get thee gone, for *I* do see
 Danger and disobedience in thine eye. . .
 You have good leave to leave us. When
 we need
 Your *use* and *counsel*, *we* shall *send* for *you*.
 (1.3.15–21)

Henry constantly fights to retain his distant regal manner with phrases like *You have good leave to leave us*. But he already indulged in the personal earlier, which sabotages the effect of the *We* later on. Henry constantly uses the royal *We* and constantly stresses it, to force its rhetorical validity on the rebels, who have no problem with the abstract kingship, but with Henry the person, whose obnoxious arrogance is only emphasized by his rhetoric:

Send me your prisoners with the
 speediest means,

Or you shall hear in such a kind
 from me
 As will displease you. My Lord
 Northumberland,
 We licence your departure with
 your son.
 Send us your prisoners, or you will
 hear of it. (1.3.120–124)

Henry is mixing his pronouns while trying to force his royalty. In these lines appears a pattern found in many other verses; in line 120 and 121 notice that the second syllable in each line is stressed. This parallelism is the most common structure in which stressed pronouns are found. It is connected to another rhetorical device called *Anaphora*, in which a word is repeated symmetrically in two adjacent lines— here the stress and function of the words are symmetrical, if not the always the words themselves. Another example, from the same scene:

Shall we but treason? and indent with
 fears,
 When they have lost and forfeited
 themselves?? (1.3.88)

Richard the Third and Lady Anne have an exchange along these lines;

Richard

Let him thank me, that
 help to send him thither;
 For he was fitter for that
 place than earth.

Lady Anne

And thou unfit for any
 place but hell. (1.2.111)

In many cases the words are parallel as well, as when Hal looks down on Falstaff's supposed corpse;

We should have a heavy miss of
 thee

If we were much in love with
vanity. (3.4.106)

In line 105 we see another
common pattern Shakespeare
employed, related to yet another
rhetorical device called
Epanalepsis, where the word(s)
beginning of the line and the
ending the line are symmetrical .
Shakespeare frequently related his
stressed pronouns to each other
structurally, clustering them or
making them symmetrical for
emphasis. Note that in the lines
above and in many others, one
frequently finds both Anaphoric
and Epanaleptic stress patterns
mixed together. The Governor of
Harfleur concedes to Hal in
“Henry V”:

Enter our gates; dispose of *us* and
ours;
For *we* no longer *are* defensible.
(3.3.50)

Clustering stressed pronouns often creates
a punctuated, impatient effect, as when
Henry IV offers Worcester and Vernon
pardons in part one of Henry IV

Both *he* and *they* and *you*, every
man
Shall be my friend again and *I'll* be
his. (5.1.108)

Yet just a few lines later he slips back into
a more threatening posture, with a typical
Henryesque couplet.

Rebuke and dread correction wait on *us*
And *they* shall do their office. So, be gone.
(5.1.112)

Shakespeare’s metrical style grew more
flexible and fluid over time. Indeed the
blank verse of “The Tempest” is much
more difficult to scan than the simple,

rhyiming couplets of “A Comedy of
Errors”. Prospero also uses familiar
symmetrical structures with his pronouns,
but also does some things few other
characters do. For example, he repeats
stressed pronouns often, as in his speech
to Miranda:

I have done nothing but in care of
thee,
Of *thee*, my dear one, *thee*, my
daughter, *who*
Art ignorant of what thou art,
nought knowing
Of whence I am, nor that I am
more better. (1.2.17)

Shortly after, he returns to this device:

No, not so much perdition as an
hair
Betid to any creature in the vessel
Which *thou* heard'st cry, which *thou*
saw'st sink. Sit down;
For *thou* must *now* know farther.
(1.2.33)

Miranda too employs interesting parallel
structures.

Dash'd all to pieces. O, the cry did
knock
Against my very heart. Poor souls,
they perish'd.
Had *I* been *any god of power*, *I*
would
Have sunk the sea within the earth
or ere
It should the good ship so have
swallow'd and
The fraughting souls within her.
(1.2.5–10)

It is made clear here that despite
Prospero’s will to control his daughter,
she has a mind and will of her own, in the
repeated assertion of the forced I.

Hal, the expert rhetorician, uses the stressed pronouns to shake people into action, but retreats into unstressed royal We when he wishes to distance himself from responsibility. For example, when he warns the Archbishop of Canterbury against inciting him to invade France (which he has already made up his mind to do) Hal uses the unstressed royal We almost exclusively, while stressing the Archbishop's "you".

Of what your reverence shall
incite us to.
Therefore take heed how you impawn
our person,
How you awake our sleeping sword
of war:
We charge you, in the name of
God, take heed: (1.2.21)

The speech contains five total unstressed royal We's referring to Hal, making him seem the passive object of Canterbury's actions; Canterbury's "you" is stressed four times before Hal finally relents a bit and tells Canterbury:

For we will hear, note and believe
in heart
That what you speak is in your
conscience wash'd
As pure as sin with baptism..
(1.2.31)

Note that the relaxation in meaning is reflected in the reversal of stresses in the pronouns. Yet after Canterbury's interminable drone, Hal finally snaps: "May I with right and conscience make this claim?" (1.2.96) Thus spake the true Harry, man of action.

Hamlet, on the other hand, stresses his pronouns in slightly different situations from Hal:

Why, what an ass am I! This is

most brave,
That I, the son of a dear father
murder'd,
Prompted to my revenge by
heaven and hell,
Must, like a whore, unpack my
heart with words, (2.2.584)

Since Hamlet is always addressing the audience, and since he is frequently his own subject, he tends to stress his personal "I" more than other characters:

There's letters seal'd: and my two
schoolfellows,
Whom I will trust as I will adders
fang'd,
They bear the mandate; they must
sweep my way,
And marshal me to knavery. Let it
work (3.4.212)

In summary, William Shakespeare controlled the pronoun well in verse, using it to amplify rhetorical effect and to direct attention to connected words in a phrase. As his versification evolved, so did his control of stress in the line. One can find endless varieties of stress patterns throughout Shakespeare's work, but since they mostly occur within the context of iambic pentameter, there are also ultimate similarities between them. For example, forceful personalities stress their personal pronouns, while subservient ones avoid it. Hotspur stresses pronouns right and left, because he is so frequently in a personal argument, asserting his ego. Curiously enough, his stress patterns frequently resemble Henry IV's, since he too is constantly insulting people.

Other characters employ equally characteristic stress patterns. The emphasis placed on pronouns is a subtle detail, difficult to notice if one is not looking or listening for it, but extremely important to the tone and effect of the

verse on stage, because Shakespeare not only gave his characters character, he also gave them real voices with individual accents, pronunciations, and the strengths and weaknesses of rhetoric that reflect an individual personality behind the sound of the words, the grammar of the sentence, and the words themselves.

Thus the pronoun's stress, and by extension the stress placed on every word, is a detail of importance to the director of a Shakespearean play. When one reads Shakespeare, one must read him aloud, or one may miss a whole critical dimension of nuance, and of sound that adds so much to the enjoyment of his work.

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