
Schooling her son, Volumnia claims “Action is eloquence, and the eyes of th’ ignorant / More learned then the eares.” Coburn Freer would teach a very different lesson about Jacobean dramatic verse because it “bears a unique relation to the other elements of dramatic meaning” and “finally takes on the force of metaphor itself” (p. xii). Identifying that “metaphoric” capacity would be much easier, if also more mechanical, if one could construct “a prosody relating verse patterns to the dramatic contexts in which they occur,” but Freer rejects that project because “interpretation of the dramatic context of any given line would depend upon one’s reading of the whole play, just as interpretation of the rhythm of a single line would depend upon hearing the rhythms present in similar lines, some of which will have the misfortune to occur in very different dramatic contexts” (p. xvi). Freer thus dismisses one version of the hermeneutic circle—the mutual interplay and inter-correction of part and whole in the progressive construal of a text (or dramatic performance)—but other versions will return.

Chapter one, “Poetry in the Mode of Action,” reviews previous studies (few and unsatisfactory), defines “poetry in the drama” (p. 7: “the ten-syllable five-stress line in all its variations”), and discusses how dramatic verse differs from narrative or lyric verse (p. 24: “a dramatic speech . . . lives among many speeches”). Several important features of Freer’s argument appear: his interest in dramatic character and the way narrative demands threaten coherence (p. 17); poetry as a universal glue (p. 19: “There do seem to be many Jacobean plays that hang together chiefly in their verse”); poetry as the universal solvent (p. 26: “plot, the pattern of repetition of event as reflected in the current of the verse,” for example, or “poetry as a function of physical movement”).

Freer next takes up some central questions: can dramatic poetry validly be separated from other elements in a performance? Was it so separated in the Renaissance? What is the relation between the reader’s experience of a printed text and the spectator’s experience of a performed one? Misjudging the humor of Joseph Hall’s attack on bad meter, an attack that deliberately mismatches its own meters, Freer maintains what he confesses “might seem to the modern reader a highly implausible fiction”—“that an audience could distinguish
among different metrical feet, while hearing lines from the stage for the very first time" (p. 36). This incredible claim sinks toward probability when we learn that a theatre audience could distinguish verse from prose (p. 41, a capacity happily still extant), and, later, when the "attentive playgoer" is granted the ability to hear "the verse as rhythmic, metered speech, not simply as a subspecies of formal rhetoric, or as a vehicle for theme and plot, or as a local diversion" (p. 48). On these large issues, Freer adduces three categories of evidence: dramatic discussion of dramatic speech; prefaces and puffs for printed texts; contemporary, ear-witness testimony. Hamlet's advice to the Players—"Speak the speech trippingly on the tongue" rather than mouthing it like the town-crier—leads to this generalization: "concern for the accurate transmission of the meter makes sense only if dramatic poetry is assumed to have an existence apart from performance" (p. 50). And when Hamlet tells Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (not the Players, as Freer states), "the lady shall speak her mind freely, or the blank verse shall halt for't," Freer believes "we know that the audience Hamlet imagines would be able to hear the lady's meter and tell when it was lame. If she is to "speak her mind," presumably her language will convey some agitation or disturbance; and that agitation must be very different from the agitation of halting and lame meters" (p. 34). Perhaps, but this "lady" is not Gertrude, only one of a stock collection of dramatic characters (king, adventurous knight, lover, humorous man, clown), and Dr. Johnson's note seems just: "The lady shall have no obstruction, unless from the lameness of the verse." Hamlet is here more literary critic than a student of actors and audiences.

Many authorial prefaces and friendly blurb writers testify that "dramatic poetry" has "an existence apart from performance." The very circumstances make it inevitable that an author or his friends will defend, even exaggerate, the joys awaiting the buyer. One can, therefore, invert Freer's argument and find it fairly remarkable that authors ever mention the performed play (as Chapman and Webster among others did) while trying to send the reader not to the theatre but to the study or St. Paul's, lighter by six pence or so. All this changed after the Restoration, according to Freer, when dramatists subordinated language to other qualities in a play and the reading of plays became more common. When John Dennis writes in 1702, "Tis not the Lines, 'tis the Plot makes the Play. / The Soul of every Poem's the design, / And words but serve to make that move and shine" (p. 52), he seems to reverse the equation Freer believes John Ford makes in a prefatory poem of 1632, "The Body of the Plot is drawn so faire, / That the Soules language quickens, with fresh ayre, / This well-limb'd Poëm." (p. 39). Earlier evidence upsets the claim for an historical change. Marston's preface to The Malcontent (Q3, 1604) praises playing over reading and, like Dennis, makes action the soul: he entreats that "the vnhandsome shape which this trifle in reading presents, may be pardoned, for the pleasure it once afforded you, when it was presented with the soule of lively action." We may detect some privy marks of irony, but the tenor is undeniable. From the 1647 Beaumont and Fletcher folio, Freer quotes James Shirley's remarkable lines on how readers find themselves "at last grown insensibly the very same person you read" (pp. 59-60), but Freer does not quote Shirley's preceding paragraph. There we find—obliquely and politcally made—the standard concession: "And now
Reader in this Tragicall Age where the Theater hath been so much out-acted, congratulate thy owne happinesse, that in this silence of the Stage, thou hast a liberty to reade these inimitable Playes.” For himself, for other dramatists, and for us, Shirley wishes the silenced stage were at liberty to perform plays, rather than the reader free to read them.

Freer gleans a thin crop of contemporary, non-professional comment on dramatic poetry. Certainly audiences took away memorable scraps and repeated them, and satirists claimed that would-be wits, poetasters, and feeble playwrights actually took their tables to the theatre. Yet Manningham at Twelfth Night or Forman at The Winter’s Tale found plot and spectacle memorable, not the poetry. Indeed, E. A. J. Honigmann has recently suggested that Ben Jonson’s contemptuous attitude toward Shakespeare changed markedly when he had the chance to read (about 1623, as he prepared his Folio tributes), rather than merely to see and hear, many of Shakespeare’s plays (see Shakespeare’s Impact on his Contemporaries [1982], pp. 36-37). Honigmann’s speculation supports some of Freer’s argument (dramatic poetry is separable from performance), but it works against other parts (the contention that an audience—here Jonson—grasped powerful, refined, complex poetry at first hearing). This second chapter, then, is better at uncovering difficulties with the argument than solving them (and I have omitted Freer’s thoughtful consideration of several other points: the auditory base of Elizabethan education, for example, and the nature of actors’ elocation).

The bulk of the book studies, chapter by chapter, The Revenger’s Tragedy, Cymbeline, Webster’s two tragedies, and The Broken Heart, and Freer considers much more than the verse alone. These five plays have been chosen because of the varying ways their verse displays “congruence with dramatic situation and characterization” (p. 201): very close in The Revenger’s Tragedy and The Broken Heart; very distant in Cymbeline; intermittent in Webster’s plays, depending on whether he was copying his notebooks or writing for himself. Careful as many readings are, they often fall into a curious circularity. For example: “These two levels of style, the metaphors and the verse, are both aspects of the chief organizing agent, Vindice’s mind” (p. 79) could logically be reversed: “Vindice’s mind is chiefly organized and represented as mind through two levels of style, the metaphors and the verse.” Elsewhere in the treatment of Vindice (e.g., pp. 70-71), one might object that the formal, prosodic elements are simply what they are and that the critic derives his interpretation of Vindice from other sources and then regards the verse’s formal properties as supporting or conveying that meaning. Bosola and Flamineo are Freer’s chief subjects when he turns to Webster: “Each is endowed with a different kind of reality, and this is emphasized by the different kinds of verse they are given” (p. 137), but “emphasized” saps the primacy verse had for the interpretation of Vindice. Observing of Posthumus that he “seems continually to break off, qualify, or chop at what he has just said,” Freer acknowledges, “someone who is distraught does not automatically speak blank verse with a great many pauses; the verse might just as well tumble out in long gushes” (p. 116), as indeed do the speeches of distraught characters in Shakespeare’s earlier plays. If distress can take two such prosodically different forms, then the verse itself does not clearly distinguish among emotions.
The hermeneutic circle has come round again: one’s interpretation of a character or a play does not usually (or perhaps ever) originate with the verse’s formal properties; rather, those formal properties—if they are rigorously defined—may be seen to support and to create in an audience the predisposition to accept an interpretation arrived at by other means. Yet Freer does claim an originating power for the verse; for example, Fletcher’s “control of an entire act originates in the choice of individual words” (p. 59). Although “control” is a murky word, the lines from Herrick’s prefatory poem entered as evidence will not do: “Here’s words with lines, and lines with Scenes consent, / To raise an Act to full astonishment.” “Consent” sounds like the “perfect Harmony” Webster claimed among “Action,” “decency [i.e., docorum?] of Language,” and “Ingenious structure of the Scaene” (The Devil’s Law-Case), and while “raise” may be a building image, metaphorically suiting Freer’s claim, it also has “astonishment” as its object. More argument is needed before we may consent that “in verse drama as in other forms of life, ontogeny repeats phylogeny” (p. 59).

Perhaps inevitably, Freer devotes his fullest attention to the problems knotted around the word character. When we read that “something goes out of Vindice as a poet after he has killed the Duke” (p. 62, italics original), we may recall, for example, Peter Ure’s objections to the interpretation of Richard II as a poet (Arden edition [rpt. 1966], pp. lxix and lxxi). Like Shakespeare, Tournier uses whatever media he commands, including “poetry,” to achieve the ends he requires; creating Vindice and his mind’s imagined variety are among those ends, but creating a Vindice characterized as a poet is not. Elsewhere, Freer wonders “how can Webster fragment a character’s consciousness enough to justify feeding into his speeches all manner of tidbits from the author’s voracious reading, yet still make the character seem real enough to be a plausible factor in the play’s action?” (p. 136). But why should the “tidbits” ipso facto disrupt a character’s coherence unless (perhaps not even then) we postulate an audience as well acquainted with Webster’s reading as R. W. Dent? One answer is that Freer very much prefers “verse” that grows “out of an immediate situation instead of the author’s library” (p. 164; cf. p. 160). A further reason might be that formal properties of “imported” text, whether verse or prose, cannot so easily be attributed to this character in this situation, although any reader-spectator who believes some human experience to be universal would not be dismayed to find that The Arcadia or Florio’s Montaigne could help define life and death in an imaginary Amalfi as well as in London or southern France.

Webster’s characters are irregularly “deep,” depending upon their engagement and their creator’s resort to his library; Ford’s are almost all subject to a “controlled thinness of characterization” (p. 188). While most of the cast of The Broken Heart are thin characters allowed only to “become more intense without having changed fundamentally” (p. 173), Bassanes and Penthea are different, and their relation “generates” the play’s “most interesting poetry” (p. 184). Freer’s treatment of Bassanes’ verse is an admirable tour de force and almost always convincing, although his very first speech, called “an extraordinary poetry” (p. 185), surely derives from Jonson’s Corvino, a figure far
more conventional than Freer elsewhere shows Bassanes to be. Coherence, sincerity, plausibility, "depth" of character, and speech that arises from situation are the criteria Freer usually employs to match prosodic features with character and action, but he includes Cymbeline to show "how far it was possible to go in exploiting the gap between a character's poetry and that character's self-awareness, or between this gap and our own sense of the relations between the characters" (p. 209). Iachimo introduces a different model of character, and Freer's bravura reading of Iachimo's long concluding speeches finds him "the play's chief poetic ventriloquist" (p. 135), a character, as Richard Lanham would argue, without a "central self." Posthumus and Imogen develop, Iachimo does not, and his character as well as a certain amount of "archaism" and "an older rhetoric viewed through a refracting prism" (p. 126) frame and distance the play's action.

My review has not considered any examples of what the author might well claim as his major contribution, the patient and usually sensitive record of how the verse sounds and how it might affect us in each of these plays. Critics, teachers, and students of these plays will learn much from these analyses, but the careful study they deserve and reward cannot be undertaken in a review. Nor have Freer's many fine interpretations been fully noticed: the view that "Vindice is obsessed by his own experience of the court" (p. 64), for instance, or that Posthumus's "own consciousness of his failings and his distinct sense of being Imogen's inferior are attitudes he must shake, and by suspecting her of being unfaithful, that whole great weight can be canceled, that sense of perpetual obligation removed" (p. 113), or that "In the beginning Flamineo seems more a character of prose comedy than a verse-speaking tragic principal. Up to the trial scene he is close to being merely a stand-up comedian" (p. 138). Instead, I have sought to trace the argument's contours, and I find it to be a prosody of dramatic character, with all the difficulties that argument entails.

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Modern Scholarship on Sir Thomas Browne has tended to follow one of two traditions. The first seeks to establish Browne's credibility as a thinker, to remove any suspicion that he was not a serious and purposeful scientist. Its contributions include the great edition of Browne's works published by Sir Geoffrey Keynes (6 vols., London, 1928-31), which made available a critical text of his writings and correspondence; the essays of E. S. Merton, which evaluated Browne's experiments in plant reproduction, embryology, and digestion; the monographs of R. R. Cawley and George Yost (Studies in Sir Thomas Browne [Eugene, Oregon, 1965]), which underscored Browne's wide range of learning and his debt to Aristotle; and more recently, the edition of Pseudodoxia Epidemica or "Vulgar Errors" published by Robin Robbins (2 vols., Oxford,