Renaissance Drama in Action

an introduction to aspects of theatre practice and performance

Martin White

ROUTLEDGE

RENAISSANCE DRAMA IN ACTION

How did Elizabethan and Jacobean actors stage their plays?

Renaissance Drama in Action is a fascinating exploration of Renaissance theatre practice and staging. Covering questions of contemporary playhouse design, verse and language, staging and rehearsal practices, and acting styles, Martin White relates the characteristics of Renaissance theatre to the issues involved in staging the plays today.

This accessible volume examines the problems posed for modern readers and performers by contemporary verse and language. Looking at both familiar plays such as *The Duchess of Malfi*, *The Changeling* and *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*, as well as less well-known texts, the author offers a fresh look at key issues of staging and interpretation. White examines the evidence for contemporary theatre practice but also draws on the work and experience of modern theatre practitioners such as Stephen Jeffreys, Harriet Walter, Adrian Noble, and Matthew Warchus.

Renaissance Drama in Action offers undergraduates and A-level students an invaluable guide to the main characteristics of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, and its relationship to contemporary theatre and staging.

Martin White is Professor of Theatre at the University of Bristol, and has taught and directed for 25 years. He is editor of *Arden of Faversham* and author of *Middleton and Tourneur*.

This book is dedicated to Alison, Hannah and Nathaniel

– as is the author

In my own writings I do not always find again the sense of my first thought; I do not know what I meant to say, and often I get burned by correcting and putting in a new meaning, because I have lost the first one, which was better.

Michel de Montaigne

Theory is concerned with reason and the operation of the intellect, Practice with the operations and movement of the senses . . . So that the one is the summit and the other the foundation of the whole fabric of human discourse.

Cesare Ripa, *Iconologia*, 1625

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ABBREVIATIONS

ES E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, 4 vols, Oxford 1923; reprinted 1961.

JCS G.E. Bentley, *The Jacobean and Caroline Stage*, 7 vols, Oxford 1941–68.

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I am but a gatherer and disposer of other men's stuff, at my best value.
Sir Henry Wotton

This book is aimed at students who are interested in approaching plays from the Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline periods as performance texts – in the playhouses of those times and in our own. I have tried, therefore, within the texts of the chapters and through the use of a number of case studies, to mix the historical study with examples of later practice. I have also tried, in the course of the book, to address some of the questions that have arisen in discussing and, more especially, working practically on these plays with my students over the past twenty-five years. I am, therefore, deeply indebted to all those students whose enthusiasm, talent and questions have stimulated my own pleasure in these plays. I have relied on their participation in practical projects and full productions to enable me to learn more about Renaissance drama than I could ever have done otherwise. Many of them, I hope, have found pleasure in presenting to an audience plays that many critics have neglected or sold short and in refuting those views by demonstrating their stage-worthiness. There are many other people to whom I owe thanks. Glynne Wickham (who pioneered the study of drama in universities in general and created at Bristol an environment where scholarship and practice go hand in hand) and Peter Thomson read drafts of this book and pointed out many errors in both my facts and wishful fictions. John Marshall and Ted Braun were particularly helpful in clarifying aspects of medieval and twentieth-century practice respectively. The mistakes that remain are, of course, all mine.

While writing this book I became involved at the very edges of the project to construct a replica of the Globe on the South Bank in London. The debates surrounding the various decisions, invariably enlivened by Andrew Gurr's knowledge and imaginative interpretation of information have (like his published work to which I am also indebted) been both a source of new discoveries and, combined with the work of the theatre practitioners at the reconstructed Globe playhouse in London, required me to rethink my own views on the performance of these plays in their own time. Many other scholars have opened up unforeseen routes of enquiry, and I should particularly like to thank Marion O'Connor who has been a constructive source of ideas and advice.

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productions I have learned a great deal were unconscious collaborators, their work silently observed, noted and then used to provide my examples. Others were more aware of the demands I made on them. At different times over the past fifteen years or so, Peter Copley, Ron Daniels, Peter Gill, Mike Gwilym, Stephen Jeffreys, Helen Mirren, Adrian Noble, Trevor Nunn and Janet Suzman – all of whose ideas I have drawn on, if not directly quoted, in the pages that follow – were not only willing to be interviewed, but were even kind enough to make me feel that they were happy to give up their time and their ideas. Harriet Walter's and Matthew Warchus's major contributions in particular are evident from the Case Studies of their work. And, although it is hard to be precise about their help, mainly because it has been long-standing and pervasive, I also want to express my thanks to my friends Mick Ford, Robert Hickson and Gary Yershon. At Routledge, first Janice Price (who, with Nick Hern originally encouraged this book), then Helena Reckitt and finally Talia Rodgers, Sophie Powell and Miranda Chaytor have all demonstrated more patience and understanding than I could reasonably have expected. I am grateful for a term's research leave that allowed me time to make progress with this book and for financial assistance from the University of Bristol Arts Faculty Research and Conference Funds.

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Martin White
Bristol, August 1997

1

'COMEDIES ARE WRIT TO BE SPOKEN, NOT READ'[1]

Approaching the play

> . . . a Play *read*, hath not half the pleasure of a play *Acted*: for though it have the pleasure of *ingenious Speeches*, yet it wants the pleasure of *Gracefull action*.
>
> Richard Baker, *Theatrum Redivivum*, 1662

Anyone who has read an Elizabethan, Jacobean or Caroline play knows how difficult a task it can be. For anyone preparing the play for performance the challenge is even more taxing since lines over which the eye can move swiftly and easily can present significant and time-consuming difficulties in rehearsal. When lines have to be the spoken expression of an individual character and filled out with action and interaction, each *moment* of the dialogue and the associated action has to be fully explored and understood: approximations and generalisations are, as Stanislavsky said, 'the enemy of art'.[2]

It is precisely this exhaustive analysis that explains why working on a play-text practically (in rehearsal, onstage, or in a class/workshop) invariably teaches one very different things from reading alone, and why the conclusions of critics that are based on textual study alone can often seem wide of the mark, even downright mistaken, to those who have performed the same play. Michael Billington recounts an exchange between the critic John Wain and the actor Alan Howard:

> John Wain remarked that the wooing scene in *Henry V* was simply a joky footnote to the play. Alan Howard, who by then had played the king countless times, picked him up on that and plotted the four or five shifts of movement within the scene. The actor, through practice, has simply spotted things the critic missed.[3]

In this chapter I shall try to outline what I see as some of the problems a student – or performer – might encounter (or possibly overlook) when working on an Elizabethan or Jacobean play, and guided by the experience of theatre

artists, my observation of performances and my own practical experience, try to suggest ways in which these hurdles might be approached.

Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists wrote in what is in many ways to us a foreign language and any attempt to minimise or avoid the difficulties that result from this is misleading. All the actors and directors to whom I spoke or whose views I read during the course of writing this book acknowledged the challenges posed by the language. The director Sam Mendes, for example, describes the first read-through for his production of *The Alchemist* as 'like trying to read a text in Swahili', and David Troughton (preparing to play Fitzdottrel in *The Devil Is an Ass*) likened speaking Jonson's words to 'chewing beef stock cubes'.[4] Jonson may present particular problems, but they are not unique ones, and in my own experience as a director and teacher I know that many students find understanding the words and forms of language a real stumbling-block to their enjoyment of the plays. In fact, the language is often *more* problematic than it might at first sight appear; the bonus is that careful study – rather than being some inward-looking 'academic exercise' with little bearing on performance – can lead to the pleasure of discovering exciting and frequently unforeseen possibilities of interpretation and staging.

Even the audiences at the original playhouses undoubtedly found much of what they heard unusual or complex as the playwrights used old words in new and surprising contexts, invented their own words, recovered some from their classical studies and borrowed others from contemporary languages. The demand for new words was considerable. In his *Art of Reason* (1573) Ralph Lever claimed that 'there are more things than there are words to express things by', and throughout the Elizabethan and early Stuart periods the English language faced the challenge of expressing and describing the flood of technological, geographical and scientific discoveries. The development of a vernacular language became a matter of national pride, and writers strove to demonstrate the superiority of English; as Samuel Daniel wrote in his poem *Musophilus* (1599):

> Or should we careless come behind the rest
> In power of words, that go before in worth,
> Whenas our accents, equal to the best,
> Is able greater wonders to bring forth.
> (II. 951–4)

The playwright Thomas Heywood, in his *Apology for Actors* (1612), made confident claims for the role played by the theatre in refining the language:

> our English tongue, which hath been the most harsh, uneven, and broken language of the world, part Dutch, part Irish, Saxon, Scotch, Welsh, and indeed a gallimaufry of many, but perfect in none, is now

> by this secondary means of playing continually refined, every writer striving in himself to add a new flourish unto it; so that in process, from the rude and unpolished tongue it is grown to a most perfect and composed language, and many excellent works and elaborate poems writ in the same, that many nations grow inamoured of our tongue, before despised.
>
> (1841: 52)

Certainly the language of Heywood and his contemporaries was visibly and audibly less rooted in the inflections and conventions of Middle English than that of their grandparents, even of their parents. Indeed, Elizabethan and Jacobean language soon became as different from the English spoken in the early 1500s as it is from the English we speak today.

It may seem unnecessary to make the point, but it is important that any study of the language of these plays is aware of it as *spoken* language. As Hamlet says to Polonius, the court will 'hear a play tomorrow' (2.2.530), and G.K. Hunter's vivid image of the playhouse as a 'rhetorical gymnasium',[5] where language flexed its muscles, is an apt one. Although levels of literacy improved markedly during the period, the transition from an oral culture to one dominated by the written word was still far from complete: despite the fact that London had a substantially higher literacy rate than the rest of the country, only about a third of the capital's adult males – and presumably even fewer of its female population – could read or write. Consequently, although plays were published, some (especially following the issue of Ben Jonson's *Works* in 1616) being prepared and adapted specifically for a reader, plays were generally viewed by their creators as scripts for theatrical production, to be heard and seen rather than read. The author of the *Character* of 'An Excellent Actor' (probably John Webster) underlined the importance of the spoken word:

> Sit in a full Theatre, and you will think you see so many lines drawn from the circumference of so many *ears*, whiles the Actor is the centre [emphasis added].[6]

This strikes me as a perfect image of the Elizabethan and Jacobean playhouse: the actor – the focal point of any performance in any period – at the centre of a circle of listeners. Consequently, playwrights and audiences alike were alert to the skill actors displayed (or did not) in delivering their lines to the best advantage. In the Preface to his tragi-comedy *The Devil's Law Case* (published 1623), Webster wrote of his debt to the actors:

> A great part of the grace of this (I confess) lay in action; yet can no action ever be gracious, where the decency of language, and ingenious structure of the scene, arrive not to make up a perfect harmony.
>
> (14–17)

John Orrell has argued that 'the Globe was an acoustical auditorium, intended to serve the word and the ear more fully than the image and the eye' (Orrell 1983: 140). Although this deliberately and provocatively understates the impact of the playhouse's decoration and the importance of visual stage languages (such as an individual actor's posture and gesture, stage groupings, costume, various elements of the permanent stage structure, portable scenic elements), Professor Orrell is right to stress the centrality of spoken language, and the recreation of the Globe at the International Shakespeare Centre on the South Bank of the Thames (despite flight paths and river traffic), a project in which Orrell has played a significant role, allows us to get at least some sense of the original playhouse's acoustics.[7] The work done so far has produced predominantly favourable responses to this aspect of the reconstruction (though on rainy days, Globe 3's Artistic Director Mark Rylance has observed, the actors need to project with much greater force). But what performances there cannot demonstrate (except, perhaps, at occasional 'authentic' presentations) is the difference in the actual *sound* made by the voices of Elizabethan actors and their modern counterparts. Peter Hall, for example, who describes Elizabethan pronunciation as 'like Belfast crossed with Devon', notes that:

> the resonance and assonance of Shakespeare's text were richer and more complex than the clipped grey sounds of modern English. When I am preparing a Shakespeare play, I still mutter the text to myself in Elizabethan. It reveals the shapes and colours. It *always* makes the words wittier.
>
> (1993: 76)

Barrie Rutter's Northern Broadsides company currently perform Shakespeare's plays in often broad, generally northern, accents, and so strictly speaking do not reproduce 'Elizabethan' English. Nevertheless, they have challenged the notion that there is a particular 'voice' for classic plays (still often characterised, unfairly and quite wrongly, as an 'RSC' voice) and restored much of the original linguistic and vocal energy to performances of the plays, especially as their vocal approach is matched by elements of theatre practice that are in tune with the original expectations and resources of Elizabethan and Jacobean production teams (Holland 1994 and 1995). Writing of Northern Broadsides' production of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, directed by Tim Supple, and staged in a disused viaduct beneath an old Halifax mill, Robert Butler commented:

> Northern Broadsides have a vigorous aesthetic, a way of doing Shakespeare that is revelatory. Direction and design are kept to a minimum. There are very few lighting cues. The audience sit on two sides facing one another. The actors wear modern dress, but not the sort of stereotypical clothes that prejudge character. Quick and

> unsentimental, they never slow up the verse with naturalistic acting, which would duplicate emotions that are self-evident. They trust the text, carry us along with the rhythm of the verse, and, by making the arguments really matter, they transport us effortlessly from the gloom of the viaduct to the heat of Verona . . . this production restores the thrill of narrative: the rapid, jostling succession of events that throws up its own surprises. Shakespeare's promised 'two hours' traffic' here comes in at a miraculous 2 hours 10 minutes.
>
> (*Independent on Sunday*, 13 October 1996, p. 12).

When we speak (and sometimes when we read) a text, a number of obstacles stand in our way. We may initially be floored by syntactical complexity:

> Pray you,
> Since doubting things go ill often hurts more
> Than to be sure they do – for certainties
> Either are past remedies, or, timely knowing,
> The remedy then born – discover to me
> What both you spur and stop.
>
> (*Cymbeline*, 1.6.95–9)

Changes in pronunciation often make puns (such as 'Do you smell a fault', which would to its original audience have been indistinguishable from 'Do you smell a fart' – and so made more sense of the line (*King Lear*, 1.1.13)) and rhymes (such as in 'Blow, blow, thou winter wind / Thou art not so unkind . . .' (*As You Like It*, 2.7.174–5)) seem laboured (or even, as in the *King Lear* example, disappear). Despite the gradual acceptance in the period of standard grammatical practices, different conventions of word order produce for us easily misunderstood sentences, such as in the following speech from Ford's *The Broken Heart* (1633):

> Orgilus,
> Take heed thou hast not, under our integrity,
> Shrouded unlawful plots; our mortal eyes
> Pierce not the secrets of your heart, the gods
> Are only privy to them.
>
> (3.1.8–12)

Speaking these lines aloud reveals the particular difficulty of making the word *only* apply to *the gods* rather than sounding as if it is defining *privy*. To many in Ford's audience, the Latinate sentence structure would no doubt have been familiar (and appropriate to the play's classical setting), but the modern actor will not find it so straightforward.

For performers and audiences, however, who unlike readers do not have

access to footnotes, the most obvious – and most regularly encountered – problems concern vocabulary. It has been estimated that over 10,000 new words were introduced between 1550 and 1650, of which Shakespeare's share has been reckoned to be anything from 600 to 2,000 (including many words in common use today, such as *gloomy, radiant, leapfrog, frugal, accommodation, admirable, educate, generous* and *tranquil*). John Marston's *Antonio and Mellida*, first performed at Paul's playhouse in 1599, which contains on average a new word every fourteen lines, may be an extreme case of word-coining (and one much pilloried by Jonson) but it derives from a generally shared impulse among contemporary writers. There was no English dictionary until 1604 (Robert Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabeticall*) and so it is not always easy to assess to what extent an audience member actually registered that a word was new, as opposed simply to being unknown to him or her individually. Many of Marston's words – such as *belkt, firking, gerne, houts, loofe, neakes, pantable, peregal, sliftred, spangs, surquedries, tyer, wimble* – must surely have struck the audience as unusual, but just in case they didn't, Marston has a character in the play, Balurdo, draw attention to these inventions:

> my leg is not altogether unpropitiously shaped. There's a word: 'unpropitiously'! I think I shall speak as 'unpropitiously' as any courtier in Italy.
>
> (2.1.106–9)

A cluster of such overtly strange words can be particularly difficult for an actor to deal with, and I suspect that any performer would find the following obscure and obsolete mixture daunting: 'No, no, but careening of an old morphewed lady, to make her disembogue again – there's rough cast phrase to your plastic' (Bosola, *The Duchess of Malfi*, 2.1.31–3). Even if the actor, using footnotes and a dictionary, works out a translation (mine is itself prosaic and none too clear – 'No, no, but scraping clean an old mildewy lady – like cleaning the barnacles from the hull of a ship – so that she can sail forth on new adventures like a boat leaving the river for the open sea: there's coarse plaster to your delicate moulding'), he actually has to *say* Webster's lines and hope to communicate something to an audience. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the line is generally cut.

In such cases, readers and actors at least know they need to look the words up. A more insidious problem is posed by words that still exist in modern usage, and whose modern meaning appears to fit the context, but whose original meaning has become lost or obscure: *honest* (often used to mean 'chaste'), *nice* (coy), *shrewd* (shrewish) and *presently* (immediately) are common examples of such words. *Mere* is another: to the Elizabethans and Jacobeans, although it could carry our modern understanding of 'slight' or 'trivial', it was frequently employed as an enforcing word with the sense of 'total' or 'downright'. The result can be confusing for us when Alice Arden, for instance, claims that her lover, Mosby, seduced her by 'mere sorcery' (*Arden of Faversham*, scene 1, l.200),

or when Hamlet, describing the state of Denmark, complains that 'things rank and gross in nature / Possess it merely' (1.2.136–7).

As Harriet Walter points out (see p. 91), although actors often agonise in rehearsal over things which turn out apparently to be of little concern to an audience seeing the finished production, it is precisely because rehearsals *do* explore the text in such detail that actors learn where to place weight, or discover where emphasis may be less important and so are able to give the play its shape and pace. The investigation of possible word meanings – what Ian McKellen calls the exploration of 'every little corner of the text' – is a key part of this rehearsal process, and of direct practical use in preparing to perform these plays beyond the obvious necessity for actors to create meanings from the lines they speak.

In the opening scene of *The Changeling*, for example, Beatrice-Joanna is desperate to avoid her imminent marriage to Alonzo de Piracquo, her father's choice of suitor, now that she has fallen in love with a newcomer, Alsemero. She tries to stall for time:

VERMANDERO: Thou must be a bride within this sevennight.
ALSEMERO: [*Aside*] Ha!
BEATRICE: Nay good sir, be not so violent; with speed
I cannot render satisfaction
Unto the dear companion of my soul –
Virginity – whom I thus long have lived with,
And part with it so rude and suddenly;
Can such friends divide, never to meet again
Without a solemn farewell?
VERMANDERO: Tush, tush! There's a toy.
(1.1.190–7)

Two words here will probably be of particular interest to the actor: *speed* and *toy*. To contemporaries, *speed* carried the sense both of 'haste' and 'success'. The first meaning is current with us and fits the context, and although the richness of the word's Jacobean double-meaning will probably be lost to a modern audience there will be no significant loss of understanding. The second word – *toy* – is not glossed at all by the editors of the New Mermaids (1964) or Penguin (1965) editions. The obvious meaning appears to be that Vermandero is referring patronisingly to his daughter's virginity as a 'toy' in the sense we commonly use the word today – a plaything, something childish to be put aside on reaching adulthood. The Jacobeans frequently used it in this sense too; for example, Giovanni in *'Tis Pity She's A Whore* teases his sister after they have made love for the first time:

I marvel why the chaster of your sex
Should think this pretty toy called maidenhead

> So strange a loss, when, being lost, 'tis nothing,
> And you are still the same.
>
> (2.1.9–12)

Alternatively, or in addition, we might perhaps take *toy* to refer to Beatrice-Joanna's professed fears which are, in her father's opinion, trifling, and this meaning, again shared by the Jacobeans and us, is also satisfying in the context of the scene. But there are a number of further meanings which, though now obscure or obsolete, would have been readily understood by the original audience. In the early seventeenth century *toy* could also mean 'an amorous sport' (an obsolete usage now as a noun, but one we retain as a verb in the expression to 'toy with someone's affections'); a 'frivolous or mocking speech' (the gloss given by the more recent Penguin editors); a 'foolish or idle fancy' or 'whim' (the sense in which Middleton uses the word in the opening line of 2.2 of *The Witch* – 'What a mad toy took me to sup with witches?' – and the gloss chosen by the editor of the 1990 New Mermaids edition); a 'foolish or unreasoning dislike or aversion'; and a 'trick'. A number of these meanings fit the context, and although now lost and therefore probably impossible to communicate to an audience directly, they may nevertheless be of practical help in rehearsal. They shed light on the character Vermandero in particular by clarifying and developing both his view that his daughter's duty is to marry when and whom he chooses, and his opinion of the weight of her objections. Moreover, if an audience understands 'trick' as one of the word's meanings, it may suggest to them that Vermandero suspects his daughter's speech is not a valid expression of fear, and reveal his readiness to believe her capable of such a deception. This may in turn help the actress playing Beatrice-Joanna to develop the character and its imaginative past, especially if the line is taken that (as De Flores claims) the qualities that emerge in her as the play progresses are all present at the start and are drawn out by the events that follow. Of course, Vermandero's domineering and insensitive attitude to his daughter and Beatrice-Joanna's wilfulness and deviousness are fully demonstrated in their words and actions throughout the play: for example, following Beatrice's discovery of Alsemero's 'physician's closet' with its potion that will reveal 'whether a woman be with child or no', her immediate response when Diaphanta enters is to exclaim 'Seeing that wench now, / A trick comes in my mind' (4.1.53–4). 'Toy' in this context is therefore what Peter Brook terms a 'vibrating' word – one that cannot and should not be restricted to a single, certain meaning (Berry 1977: 121) – and editorial practice is misleading in generally reducing in the glossary the range of meanings a word might have had for the original audience. For the modern actors playing this scene, though they obviously won't be able to convey that range, just the *knowledge* of the variety of meanings the word may have had for the playwrights might influence vocal tones and physical behaviour and help them establish their attitudes to other characters and events.

Emblems and staging

Obscurity is not confined to individual words but may extend to images involving a spoken allusion to a specific visual emblem or imply the physical creation of such an emblem as part of the stage action. Emblem books – collections of illustrations with explanatory verses and mottoes – were extremely popular in England, and the analysis of explicit and implicit emblematic images in the texts and implied performances of plays has become a significant strand of Renaissance drama studies in recent years. The most immediately available examples of emblems in action can be found in contemporary paintings, especially those of Elizabeth I which employ iconography to enforce and establish aspects of the Queen's image and power in what are essentially political portraits. The imagery they employ ranges from the accessible – such as the 'Ditchley' portrait in which the Queen is shown standing on a globe, on a map of England, her toe near to Ditchley House in Oxfordshire whose owner probably commissioned the picture – to the more esoteric. Roy Strong is quick to remind us, however, of the pitfalls that lie in the way of attempts to 'read' the paintings, even when they seem comparatively straightforward:

> It was . . . riddling emblematics that became all the rage in late Elizabethan England and to read these portrait icons correctly requires a mind well versed in late renaissance allegory . . . But we are left wholly baffled by most pictures.[8]

In an exhibition at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1969, an 'Obelisk' designed by Pauline Whitehouse was erected depicting thirteen of the emblems most commonly associated with Elizabeth I. One of these was a sieve, which figures in a number of portraits of the Queen painted between 1579 and 1583. Any bewilderment experienced by the viewer of one of these paintings of the Queen holding what appears to be a kitchen or gardening utensil is dispelled when one learns that the Sieve had been used in Petrarch's *Triumph of Chastity* in which Tuccia, a Roman Vestal Virgin, accused of impurity, seized a sieve and, filling it with water from the River Tiber, ran without spilling a drop to the Temple of Vesta. Once one has the key to the painting's imagery, it can be read as a statement of Elizabeth's renowned role as Virgin Queen, rather than a celebration of her domestic virtues. The Sieve has a further meaning, embodied in the motto inscribed around its rim: *A terra il ben mal dimora insella* (literally: 'The good falls to the ground while the bad remains in the saddle'). This refers to its sieving action in discerning good from bad, the sense in which the emblem is interpreted in Geoffrey Whitney's *Choice of Emblems*, published in 1586, and probably the most popular of all the English emblem books. In other words, the painting's imagery asserts that Elizabeth is not only chaste but wise.

Emblems in books such as Whitney's are composed of three elements: a

visual image commented on and explained in a motto (usually in Latin) and a verse epigram (in English). In *The White Devil*, Monticelso and Camillo describe, translate and interpret such an emblem:

MONTICELSO: Here is an emblem, nephew – pray peruse it.
'Twas thrown in at your window, –
CAMILLO: At my window?
Here is a stag, my lord, hath shed his horns,
And for the loss of them the poor beast weeps –
The word '*Inopem me copia fecit*'.
MONTICELSO: That is,
Plenty of horns hath made him poor of horns.
CAMILLO: What should this mean?
MONTICELSO: I'll tell you. 'Tis given out
You are a cuckold.
(2.1.323–31)

The form and function here is essentially no different from that of a literary emblem; it remains verbally expressed. But playtexts frequently imply that a stage image comprising a single figure or a group has been created in the form of a verbal and pictorial tableau that embodies particular relationships or makes abstract themes concrete: in effect a three-dimensional emblem (see Case Studies, pp. 100–8 and pp. 133–43). Some 'emblematic' stage images rely on conventional symbolism and are not dependent on a specific and pre-existing code, nor are they quoted directly from emblem books. For example, when Charlemont describes the water he drinks at his trial as 'thou clear emblem of cool temperance' (*The Atheist's Tragedy*, 5.2.210) the meaning is transparent to us, too, but many links between stage action and images or emblems, like their counterparts in paintings, remain mysterious to a modern audience, or even go unnoticed. As with word meanings, however, awareness of specific emblematic representation may be of direct use in production. Act 2, scene 3 of Middleton's *The Witch* is the shortest scene in the play (55 lines), and is, on the surface, quite straightforward. Francesca, sixteen years old, has given birth to an illegitimate child. The baby's father is Aberzanes, a worthless friend of Francesca's violent brother, Antonio. Fearful of what Antonio might do if he should discover their secret, Aberzanes has taken Francesca to a secret location to give birth. As the scene opens, we see Aberzanes dispose of the baby to an old woman. Once she has gone, Aberzanes explains to the audience that he has paid the woman to leave the child outside the house of Aberzanes's tailor. Aberzanes hopes to get the tailor into trouble with his wife, since she will think it the product of her husband's liaison with their serving-girl, a joke Aberzanes clearly believes the audience will share.[9] Francesca enters, evidently holding a mirror, and studies her face in it:

Alas, sir,
I never marked till now – I hate myself! –
How monstrous thin I look.
. . .
Fie, fie, how pale I am!
(31–35)

This moment may plausibly be read, and played, as the character's misery at losing her baby and her realisation that her lover is a wastrel, mixed with concern that her looks will give the game away as soon as she returns to her brother's house. Later in the play Francesca seeks to destroy the reputation and marriage of her sister-in-law, Isabella, who discovers her secret, but at this stage audience sympathy will probably be wholeheartedly with Francesca, especially given their exposure to the reprehensible Aberzanes. Not Middleton's, however. At least, not entirely. Even if (as seems unlikely) anyone in the original Blackfriars audience was oblivious to his portrayal in Francesca of the notorious Frances Carr (the pun on the names is only one of the clues intended to signal the character's origin to the audience), they would very likely have recognised, in the image of a finely dressed woman holding a mirror, a reference to a contemporary emblem. Marion O'Connor suggests this emblem is that of Vanity and Lust, which certainly fits the context. It seems to me, however, that Middleton may be making a more bleakly ironic allusion to the equally popular emblem of Prudence, who, like Vanity and Lust, was represented as a woman with a mirror. In addition to her mirror, Prudence was also commonly portrayed accompanied by a snake which, in that context, symbolised wisdom.[10] A viewer of the stage image, seeking to complete the image of Prudence, may have found the snake represented (equally ironically) by the remaining presence onstage – Aberzanes, who (fulfilling another symbolic serpentine role) has tempted Francesca into her decidedly imprudent actions. Indeed, perhaps Middleton intended both images – Lust *and* Prudence – to be read simultaneously, so producing a marked tension of response in those in the audience who recognised the emblematic representations and matching the fusion of comic and tragic tones which characterises the play as a whole. Although any of these emblematic associations will undoubtedly be lost to a modern audience, knowledge of them can help keep a modern actress and director clear-sightedly aware of the danger of seeing Francesca wholly as she sees herself, and remind them to keep the balance of understanding and criticism in their presentation of a character who, though young, desperate and vulnerable can nevertheless cold-bloodedly seek to destroy innocent men and women who threaten her own security.

Students often query whether or not 'ordinary' members of the original audience would have been able to interpret these emblematic references in stage action and language, but the sheer profusion of such images, not only in

the visual and literary arts but on domestic items surrounding people every day, demonstrates their popularity. In *The Fair Maid of the Exchange* (1607), for example, a play performed at a public playhouse, and which includes considerable detail about embroidery techniques, the character Phyllis describes the images her mistress, Mall, has chosen for the handkerchief she intends to give to her lover:

> In one corner of the same place wanton Love,
> Drawing his bow shooting an amorous dart,
> Opposite him an arrow in a heart,
> In a third corner picture forth disdain
> A cruel fate unto a loving vain.
> In the fourth draw a springtime laurel tree
> Circled about with a ring of poesie: and thus it is:
> 'Love wounds the heart, and conquers fell disdain.'
> (Scene 7, ll.869–76)

Something of the effect Moll seeks can be seen in *The Shepherd Buss*, a bedcover (in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London) of white linen embroidered in black silk, which, in addition to images of flowers, fruits and animals, the forlorn lover and a melancholic inscription, reproduces emblems referred to in the speech as well as one taken directly from Whitney: the snake in the grass (Ashelford 1988: 93). However remote we might find certain emblems, therefore, we should not underestimate the ability of the contemporary audience to decode what they saw and heard nor, more importantly, their eagerness to do so: Malvolio's desperate attempt to decipher what he believes to be the code in which Olivia's letter is couched depends largely for its comedy on the audience's (self)recognition of that fact (*Twelfth Night*, 2.5). Ben Jonson, in the Epistle that prefaces *Volpone*, complained that contemporary audiences were obsessed with seeking out hidden meanings even where the writer had intended none:

> nothing can be so innocently writ or carried, but may be made obnoxious to construction . . . Application is now grown a trade with many, and there are that profess to have a key for the deciphering of everything.

Rhetoric

> Use all the *Tropes*
> And *Schemes* that Prince Quintilian can afford you:
> And much good do your Rhetoric's heart.
> *The Devil Is an Ass*, 1.4. 100–2

The term 'rhetoric' has gained a somewhat pejorative connotation today, as if the ability to use language well in some way diminishes the truth of feeling that lies behind – too far behind – the actual expression. In *Hamlet*, Polonius's rhetorical posturing leads Gertrude to demand 'more matter with less art' (2.2.95) but Shakespeare's contemporaries generally saw rhetoric (and its cousin, oratory) as arts of persuasion, and instruction in rhetorical skills as the means to learn how spoken and written language might be used to their best and most powerful advantage, employing the basic rhetorical skills of *inventio* (how to conceive the original idea – 'the brightest heaven of *invention*' as the Chorus in *Henry V* calls it), *dispositio* (how to arrange and plan material), *elocutio* (how to employ the various 'ornaments of style', divided between *tropes* such as metaphor, hyperbole, puns, irony and *schemes*, which organised thought rather than individual words and phrases, such as antithesis), *memoria* (how to memorise the material) and *pronunciato* (how best to use gestures, vocal inflections and facial expressions to deliver the material – the sense in which Hamlet uses the word when he tells the Players to 'speak the speech . . . as I pronounced it to you', 3.2.1) (Hussey 1992).

The study of rhetoric was a major part of grammar school education in England. By 1575 there were about 360 such schools, each training its pupils to be fluent in written and spoken Latin, to write and dispute, and to develop the arts of memory. The vast majority of rhetoric manuals used in English schools and universities were in Latin, the standard language of education. Although never produced in the same quantity as those in Latin, there were a number of books in English, such as those by George Puttenham (1589), Henry Peacham (1577, 1593) and, most popular of all, Thomas Wilson's *Art of Rhetoric* (1553), all of which no doubt appealed not only to preachers, lawyers and statesmen eager to brush up their skills (but whose Latin may not have been quite up to the mark), but also to playwrights (Vickers 1994).

Rhetoric, it must be stressed, was a practical pursuit that aimed at equipping a man with the ability to impress others with his command of language and sway them with his persuasiveness. At the age of eleven, a student might study the popular handbook, *Epitome Troporum ac Schematum* (*Examples of Tropes and Schemes*) by Susenbrotus. This comprised a collection of 'tropes', 'schemes' and rhetorical figures that the schoolboy (there was no formal education for girls) would be required to learn by heart, with the result that by the time they left school the vast majority of educated boys would have known a good number of the 132 examples listed in the book. Moreover, they would know how to apply them. In William Kempe's *The Education of Children* (1588), one of the earliest theoretical studies of education, the author suggested that once the pupil had learned the basic tropes and figures he should undertake a series of exercises to put them into practice. One such exercise, intended to develop the ability to 'amplify' language is set out in another widely used textbook, Erasmus's *De Copia* (*Of Copiousness*). Erasmus set students the task of casting a simple sentence in as many different ways as possible. For an example, Erasmus gives the sentence 'Your letter pleased me mightily', which he then proceeds

to render in more than 150 different ways, ranging from the mundane – 'I was singularly delighted by your epistle' – to the ornate – 'As I aspire to the love of the Muses, nothing more gladsome than your letter has ever ere this befallen me' (Erasmus 1978: 349, 352).

Much early Elizabethan drama reflects the popularity of this ornate, abundant style, often termed 'copious' after Erasmus or 'euphuistic' after John Lyly's linguistically exuberant prose works, and the comedies he wrote for the Children of Paul's in the 1580s (see Chapter 3). As Jocelyn Powell points out, Lyly's 'artificial' comedies, with their 'fanciful and curious settings', were specifically intended as 'games for the sense, and games for the mind', their effect being 'in the best sense *dilettante*; they exercise the faculties to no other end but their delight'.[11] In later plays this ornate language was superseded as playwrights, in response to the 'form and pressure' of their time, and in particular to the growing interest in human psychology and the spirit of enquiry promoted by Francis Bacon, developed styles in which 'matter' predominated over 'manner'. Indeed, Bacon perceived a contrast between his own writing and the 'delight in their manner of style and phrase' displayed by earlier authors in whom 'the whole inclination and bent . . . was towards *copia* rather than weight'.[12] The closing years of the sixteenth century and early years of the seventeenth saw publication of a number of studies of human psychology, and playwrights sought increasingly to create dramatic language that seemed to be the product of immediate thought, with an inevitable impact on the art of acting (see Chapter 3). There was, of course, no crude evolution by which one fashion replaced its forerunner completely, and later dramatists found themselves with a wide range of styles from which to choose in order to enforce characterisation or theme. Consequently, in later plays, not only do the vocabulary and structure of speeches require analysis, but the possible associations an audience might make with the *kind* of language used have also to be explored: the elaborate, 'copious' style of the early part of the period – the 'amplification' that the Erasmus exercises produced – might be used by dramatists to suggest surface rather than depth (as with Osric in *Hamlet*), or to dramatise expansiveness and scale in a character (as Jonson does with Epicure Mammon in *Volpone*). In similar fashion, the employment of obvious rhetorical devices might be used to hint at possible deviousness or shallowness in a character (the Lawyer and Cardinal in *The White Devil*, Ulysses in *Troilus and Cressida*); formal rhetoric might be used to distinguish public utterances from more 'natural', private speech (*Henry V*) or to distinguish 'real life' from performance (as in *The Roman Actor*: see Case Study, p. 100). The genuineness of a character's attempts at persuasion, where one might expect oratory, might be underlined by the *absence* of rhetoric, such as in *The Devil Is an Ass*, 1.3. (see Chapter 3); deliberate recourse to rhetoric might underline a character's failure to engage with the reality around him, as in *Richard II*; tyrants (like Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi*) might 'double' with their words, and be contrasted with plainer, more direct language (such as Webster writes for Antonio). In other words, *how*

things were said could be as meaningful as *what* was said. Actors, necessarily, had to be capable of handing this range of rhetorical strategies, and I discuss this aspect of the actor's art in Chapter 3.

Verse and prose

Elizabethan and Jacobean plays are written in different forms of verse combined in various ways with prose.[13] The verse is predominantly blank (unrhymed) verse, which was first introduced to England by Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, in his translation of Book IV of Virgil's *Aeneid*, published in 1554.[14] The title-page referred to it as being written in a 'straunge meter', an attempt to reproduce in English poetry the 'quantative verse' (i.e., dependent on a specific number of syllables in a line) of the Latin original. The first play to employ the meter was *Gorboduc*, written in 1562 by two lawyers, Thomas Sackville (who wrote the first two acts) and Thomas Norton (who composed the other three). This play, like Surrey's translation of Virgil, seems to have been prompted by a Renaissance humanist desire to imitate a classical model – in this case the work of the Roman playwright Seneca. For Sir Philip Sidney the attempt succeeded, and he praised the play for climbing 'to the height of Seneca his style'.[15]

Prior to this time English poetry and plays had commonly been written in end-rhymed lines, often known as 'fourteeners' because of the number of syllables they contained. An example of this form is Thomas Preston's *Cambises* (*c.* 1570). These are the opening lines:

> My counsel grave and sapient with lords of legal train,
> Attentive ears towards me bend and mark what shall be sain.
> So you likewise my valiant knight whose manly acts doth fly
> By bruit of Fame that sounding trump doth pierce the azure sky.

Compare those with the opening lines of *Gorboduc*:

> The silent night that brings the quiet pause,
> From painful travails of the weary day,
> Prolongs my careful thoughts, and makes me blame
> The slow Aurore that for love or shame
> Doth long delay to show her blushing face,
> And now the day renews my grief-ful plaint.

If you read both the above speeches aloud you will need little convincing of the reasons 'fourteeners' did not survive: they easily result in monotonous delivery and gabbling.[16] But blank verse asserted itself as the norm of dramatic verse writing for positive reasons, not because of the limitations of 'fourteeners'. These reasons are not difficult to establish: blank verse closely

approximates the breath and stress patterns of normal speech and was sufficiently flexible to meet the demands made upon it by different dramatists throughout the period. The turning point that set the seal on blank verse as the dominant dramatic medium was its almost simultaneous use by Thomas Kyd and Christopher Marlowe in the late 1580s. In the opening lines of the Prologue to *Tamburlaine*, Marlowe announced both his intention to be different and the superiority of his chosen medium over its predecessors:

> From jigging veins of rhyming mother wits,
> And such conceits as clownage keeps in pay,
> We'll lead you to the stately tent of war,
> Where you shall hear the Scythian Tamburlaine
> Threat'ning the world with high astounding terms.

Marlowe dramatised the power of Tamburlaine partly by the power of the language he spoke: 'terms Italianate, Big-sounding sentences, and words of state', as Joseph Hall described similar writing in *Virgidemiarum* (1597). Marlowe also explored the dramatic versatility of the verse, a flexibility that in its most developed form characterises the work of the later Jacobeans. Indeed, it was this adaptability of blank verse to the changing demands made upon it that sustained its use and pre-eminence.

This book does not aim to be a manual for performance: there are a number of studies available that suggest ways actors might develop their skills with verse and heightened language, most notably John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare* (1984), and the more technique-oriented books by Cicely Berry (1993) and Patsy Rodenburg (1993) listed in the bibliography. However, for students of drama who approach these plays 'practically' (i.e., are alert to their nature as theatrical rather than literary texts), some awareness of ways in which playwrights controlled the basic verse form for dramatic purposes, and of how language structures can consequently be as much a guide to our understanding as thematic analysis, is a key part of exploring how these plays work.

Iambic pentameters are lines of ten syllables grouped into five iambic feet in which the first syllable is unstressed (˘) and the second is stressed (/). Regular blank (i.e. unrhymed) verse lines go like this:

> ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
> In sooth I know not why I am so sad.
> ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /
> It wearies me; you say it wearies you.
> (*The Merchant of Venice*, 1.1.1–2)

A quick glance at virtually any play, however, even more so a play written later in the period, will show how frequently the metre varies from this basic form, and indeed, it is precisely this flexibility that is blank verse's great strength as a dramatic medium. Apart from the freedom (for writer or actor)

to stress four rather than five beats, variation can be achieved in a number of ways: by letting the stress and sense coincide (as in the *Merchant of Venice* lines) or setting them at variance; by the addition of extra syllables (called 'hypermetrical' lines and very common in later plays); by reversing the stresses in the first foot or dropping a syllable and beginning on a stressed beat ('headless' lines); by end-stopping lines or running them on (enjambement) to find completion in the midst of a following line; by giving lines stressed or unstressed endings (sometimes termed 'masculine' and 'feminine' respectively); or by having a short line for emphasis or, perhaps, to leave space for implicit stage movement. There is usually a pause in each line – called the *caesura* – which is normally placed after the second or third stressed syllable. This pause may provide a breathing space, indicate a break or change of direction in thought, or mark a 'beat' – a moment in which an idea expressed in the earlier part of the line can be held and focused on before the speaker moves on to the remainder of the line. Further variation can be provided by splitting a complete line between two or more speakers, which may produce added tension and pace, or give a sense of conversation or disputation (see Case Study, p. 161ff.).

Nor is all dramatic verse blank. Rhyme is often used not only to round off a scene (useful in a theatre with no front curtain or blackout), to sum up points in an argument, or to place particular stress and focus on a piece of essential information. It may also be placed in productive contrast with the prose and un-rhymed verse that generally forms the dominant language of the play. For example, in the closing moments of Thomas Middleton's city comedy, *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (*c.* 1604–6), first the Courtesan, and then Witgood, kneel, admit the error of their ways, and pledge themselves to reform their lives. Both speeches are in rhyming couplets and have a formal patterning in their structure. On the face of it, these speeches present a conventional closure, but the use of the rhyme may be employed by Middleton to alert us to the pragmatic artificiality of these speeches and, through this, to the impossibility of rounding off in so neat a fashion the complex issues and social conflicts raised in the play. Such a reading is hinted at, perhaps in Witgood's aside to the audience ('I must confess my follies; I'll down too', 5.2.176) before he begins his rhyming speech, with the physical gesture possibly referring to the action of a performer kneeling to deliver an epilogue to the audience.

A number of plays from the period (such as Shakespeare's *King John* and *Richard II*, Ford's *The Broken Heart* and several of Philip Massinger's) are composed entirely in verse, but – though it is the predominant form in plays such as Middleton's city comedies – no play is written completely in prose. Some verse, however (certainly later in the period), has a form so flexible that it may be difficult for anyone hearing it to distinguish it from prose, while prose frequently has a balance in rhythm and pattern that makes it difficult to distinguish from verse. The commonly expressed view that verse is the