

Historical background

Boy Players

Alexander Cooke the boy player Nicholas works with here was a real person. He died young in 1613 after working for Shakespeare's company for some years. Prior to his time at the theatre it appears he was apprenticed to a grocer. Although it is not certain, it is thought he played a number of female roles in plays by Shakespeare and other writers.

The boy players were aged from about 14 to 18 and possibly older. It is thought that many boys matured later than is the average today. This meant unbroken voices would have been commonplace for the young men playing the ladies' roles. Though scholars disagree on the upper age limit of the 'boy' players, there is some evidence to suggest some men played the ladies' roles into their 20's (perhaps even if they matured and their voices deepened). There is no tradition of eunuchs acting on the stage as there is in European opera. Once a boy's voice broke he often went on to play the male roles. There is no particularly good reason why young men were used for the female roles rather than women. It was a tradition which grew out of earlier theatrical traditions and it was thought improper for a woman to act in the public theatre. As far as we know it was not used for comic effect – like the pantomime dame in today's panto, but was an accepted convention that was little questioned. The boy players were often adored by the female theatre-goers as their slender build and whimsical look was close to the ideal of male beauty of the day.

The Use of Verse

Shakespeare, like his contemporaries, wrote mostly though not exclusively in verse. Shakespeare's favoured verse rhythm was Iambic Pentameter which is a rhythm close to that of 'normal' speech.

Iambic Pentameter is a simple rhythm of 10 syllables per line alternately stressed weak/strong as shown here with the stressed syllables highlighted in red bold text.

In **sooth** I **know** not **why** I **am** so **sad**.

This is in fact the first line of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*. It is a very regular line in that all the stressed syllables hit the important words. It is rare for Shakespeare to write long passages which fit the pattern this neatly. Many pupils find it hard to recognise what is verse and what is not, but in fact it is very easy to tell without even understanding a single word on the page. Take these examples made from the place-holder text *Lorem ipsum*



Alexander Cooke

Example 1

Character 1

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur
Adipiscing elit. Integer sagittis commodo nisl,
Eget imperdiet nunc egestas sed. Donec facilisis
Dapibus turpis vel pretium. Quisque lobortis at
Turpis ut fringilla. Donec ac orci ac ligula convallis
Tempus at malesuada erat. Aliquam erat volutpat.

This is verse. It is justified to the left, with an upper case letter beginning each line whatever punctuation ends the line above.

Example 2

Character 1

Sed tincidunt lectus ut lectus blandit egestas.

Character 2

Duis tempus

Character 1

Adipiscing feugiat. Sed lectus ipsum, elementum
Ut mi vel, elementum interdum dolor. Fusce malesuada
laculis tortor, id ornare ligula varius id. Cras id risus elit.

This is also verse. Justified left, with upper case letters starting each new verse line. The line 'Duis tempus' is a short line. It does not have the same length as the other lines. Pupils can be invited to imagine what fills the 'blank space' left at the end of the line, often it is a sound or a pause for thought. If Shakespeare does not want a pause or action he can continue the verse lines to create speedy speech.

Example 3

Character 1

Vivamus viverra quam

Character 2

a interdum adipiscing. Ut faucibus.

Character 1

Ultrices neque nec blandit. Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet,
Consectetur adipiscing elit. Aliquam ut metus sit amet
Neque fringilla facilisis. Aliquam ornare lorem a mollis temp.



Alexander Cooke

This is verse too. But here the first verse line is shared between character 1 and 2. This suggests that character 2 speaks promptly after character 1 so that the verse rhythm is uninterrupted. You can spot shared lines because the second half is printed as indented underneath the first half of the line. Verse lines may be shared by two or more characters.

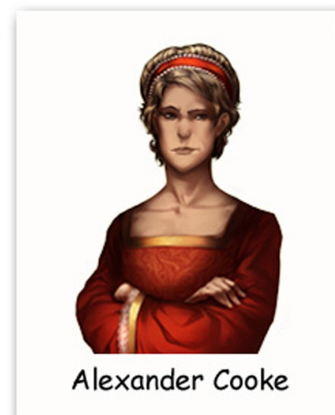
Example 4

Suspendisse ultrices placerat convallis. Etiam sed mauris eu ipsum tincidunt condimentum ut ac nisi. Vestibulum vulputate posuere sem. Aenean pretium odio vitae neque lobortis varius. Curabitur bibendum dignissim risus, sed dignissim mi gravida et. Morbi nisi ipsum, pulvinar eget sollicitudin sed, lobortis nec leo. Mauris et luctus velit. Curabitur vel sagittis mi.

This is prose. It is justified across the full page. And lines only begin with upper case letters where standard grammar requires it.

Although a standard line of Iambic Pentameter is 10 syllables long. Shakespeare sometimes varies this with short lines – as above. Or long lines with 11 or more syllables. Long lines are often used when characters are speaking fast, are anxious or their thoughts are running away with them.

Although you can spot many different types of verse in Shakespeare's plays there is almost always a discernible logic to it. It is thought that his original audience had a much better ear for verse rhythm than we do today and a subliminal awareness of the rhythms of the speech may have functioned for the audience a bit like mood music. For instance the witches in *Macbeth* speak in a **Trochaic** rhythm which is the reverse of the more natural sounding Iambic this gives their speech an inhuman creepy sound to it.



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