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The Politics of Shakespeare’s Prose
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During the late 1580s English playwrights developed a conventional system for picturing the world in the commercial playhouses.¹ Employing an unprecedented density of representational material, such dramatists as Christopher Marlowe, George Peele, and Robert Greene offered the world as a sequence of secular actions undertaken by eloquent characters. For their plays’ eloquence these university-educated writers drew upon a rich variety of media, including diverse forms and subgenres of verse and prose alike. As important as their astounding fluency of expression in dramatic dialogue was the use of this representational variety in the service of a system that charted social distinctions among, and psychological distinctions within, linguistically self-aware characters. Ironically, the very success of these dramatists’ system would lend it a kind of cultural invisibility. Indeed, so natural does this system strike us still that, despite a renewed interest in the material basis of culture and of cultural representations, we too seldom attend to its profoundly heterogeneous outlines and effects. To shed light on a crucial element of Shakespeare’s career, I examine his adoption of this world-picturing system and how he changed it – in particular, his increasingly sophisticated, functional alternation of verse and prose in dramatic dialogue. Notwithstanding the findings of foundational studies of Shakespeare’s prose by Jonas Barish and Brian Vickers, we tend to overlook the centrality of this distinction to Shakespeare’s development as a playwright, and to the larger significance of his dramatic works.² For if, as Robert Weimann has noted, Shakespeare’s theatre ‘bestows upon us an unsurpassed paradigm in artful communication,’³ this paradigm – at once linguistic and social – was profoundly affected by Shakespeare’s early decision to mimic the verse/prose representational system developed by his dramatic contemporaries.

More than the simple fact of his writing scripts for an acting company at the outset of his career, Shakespeare’s adoption of the world-picturing system that alternated verse and prose in conventional ways may have prompted Greene’s well-known but still elusive indictment of this ‘upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers.’⁴ Whatever the prompt of this famous
phrase, looking closely at the functional alternation of prose and verse in Shakespeare’s work helps to contextualize his plays in meaningful relation to those of his contemporaries. It also reveals a paradox of form and sequence: What remain arguably the greatest works of our best dramatic writer owe their poetic achievement to Shakespeare’s reliance on and mastery of prose, a medium he took up and then abandoned before returning to it as the vitalizing basis of his most productive years in the theater.

To describe the representational system that Shakespeare inherited and worked within, my analysis begins with an examination of prose’s role in theatrical world-picturing as it came into being prior to his career as a playwright. An important if little-known text in the development of this system was the anonymously authored drama *The Rare Triumphs of Love and Fortune* (1582), which helped solidify in a systematic way the decorous correspondence of speaking style and social station. The next section of the essay explores the range of contemporary opinion on the relative merits of prose and verse, as well as the reasons behind some of these evaluations. Shakespeare’s own tendencies with verse and prose (especially the grounds of their distinction) preface a concluding section that takes up several passages of verse and prose from *The Taming of the Shrew* (1590–91) and *Hamlet* (1600–01). Here I seek to foreground a significant development in Shakespeare’s deployment of the two media. This development, which involved the redefinition of prose as a significant element of aristocratic speech, constitutes one of his most meaningful contributions to the system of representation he adopted for the basis of his dramatic fictions.

**Prose in English drama before Shakespeare**

Philip Sidney’s often-cited regret over the ‘mingl[ing]’ of ‘Kings and Clowns’ in English drama of his time anticipated a number of patterns of productive difference that would characterize plays of the commercial repertory during Shakespeare’s lifetime. Among the more familiar of such differences are the dynamic relation of plots and subplots, the functional interplay of various domains of action and existence, and, notably, the contextual alternation of verse and prose in spoken dialogue. So familiar do the workings of this world-picturing system seem that it is sometimes hard for us to imagine English theaters featuring another mode of representation, much less a linguistic arrangement based on anything other than the use of blank verse and prose.

Prior to the 1580s, however, such was not only possible but the norm. For all our uncertainty connected with the rise of the theatrical industry in England during the second half of the sixteenth century (the number of plays extent is frustratingly small), enough evidence survives to show that the world-picturing system of representation we associate with Shakespeare came into existence through four stages. During the sixteenth century,