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Community and Conflict: A Practitioner's Perspective on Verse Drama*

RICHARD O'BRIEN

For my doctoral thesis at the University of Birmingham, I undertook a historical investigation into the impact of Shakespeare on the development of the form of verse drama in England. Crudely summarised, the cultural history sketched in the course of this project suggested that the overbearing presence of Shakespeare in the English-language tradition has made it increasingly impossible for playwrights using verse not to reflect upon and attempt to justify their own formal choices. In the final stages of my research, I became acutely aware of how necessary such reflection felt, having myself written three verse plays in an attempt to explore through practice the unique possibilities offered by verse as a dramaturgical resource to poets and playwrights working today, by testing those possibilities in my own writing.

This article therefore takes up a prompt offered by Rob Conkie and Scott Maisano, the editors of a special issue of *Critical Survey* dedicated to the emerging trend of critical-creative inquiry within Shakespeare studies: "What if knowing *why* Shakespeare made use of [a wide range of familiar dramaturgic features] as he did depended on learning *how* (or at least trying) to do it ourselves?" (4-5). As a practitioner engaging with the self-imposed fetters of iambic pentameter verse drama in the model now most commonly associated with Shakespeare, I am not only developing my own creative practice, but learning as a scholar to identify "what kinds of critical insights are

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debate/contemporary-perspectives-on-verse-drama>>.

made possible only or especially via creative strategies" (Conkie and Maisano 3).

Since at least the early twentieth century, many of the verse dramatists whose work I have considered felt the need to offer reasoned defences of their own practice in response to presumed critical suspicion: a tradition in which my work here will follow. Some of the most persuasive commentary in defence of the form has been offered by Christopher Fry. In the two decades before his death in 2005, Fry—the author of *The Lady's Not For Burning*, who in 1951 had three plays running simultaneously on the West End, and had recently featured on the cover of *Time* magazine—gave a number of reflective interviews in which he attempted to account both for the particular advantages of his chosen form of theatre, and for its undeniable fall from grace. In 1992, he lamented to the *Times* that the contemporary verse dramatist feels unable to pursue his or her own practice in a climate of critical hostility: "Why does there have to be only one ruling taste? [...] Why can't we have theatre which contains the poetic, as well as other approaches to life?" (Lewis).

Why the absence of a poetic approach in contemporary drama matters—and the case I wish to make for its continued value—can be understood in part through Fry's own justification for the existence of verse drama as a theatrical form. His comments on the productive constraints of the medium, written for the mass culture audience of *Vogue* magazine, are worth engaging with in a serious way:

[i]n prose, we convey the eccentricity of things; in poetry, their concentricity, the sense of relationship between them; a belief that all things express the same identity, are all contained in one discipline of revelation. (Fry 137)

Fry's spiritually-inclined statement of intent positions verse drama as a form which is holistic, unifying, and democratic. This view of the medium is perhaps surprising: with regard to the best-known verse dramatist, Shakespeare, Kiernan Ryan notes that "most battles for the Bard have been won by forces intent on fabricating from his art a powerful apology for leaving the world as it is" (2). Anthony Easthope described iambic pentameter itself as the voice of "solid

institutional continuity" (476), in which "the tradition itself, the abstract pattern, is beyond question" (488). As such, verse drama availing itself of this metre might operate as a "hegemonic form" implicitly confirming cultural norms (Easthope 486). And in philosopher Sara Ahmed's terms, a contemporary verse play by a white, male, middle-class subject risks being solely "citational relational" to other such plays and subjects, even as it manifests its own forms of internal tension. For a practitioner working today, these challenges clearly beg the question: in what ways can a systematized way of writing "A Practitioner's Perspective on Verse Drama"—structured, metred verse—engage with, and allow for and facilitate challenges to, entrenched systems of power without merely endorsing or replicating them?

Fry's egalitarian view of verse drama as "concentric," however, finds support from a variety of perspectives—as George T. Wright puts it in *Shakespeare's Metrical Art*, with reference to pentameter lines split between multiple speakers, "the shared line only realizes more intently that condition of being bound together in a common action that the play as a whole affirms" (138). Irene Morra, in *Verse Drama in England, 1900-2015*, has demonstrated that the form was closely associated in the early twentieth century with "a strong sense of community and egalitarian social politics" (73).

Many authors in this period, however, up to and including Fry and Eliot, chose not to harness a quality I find essential to the democratic possibilities of poetic dramaturgy as exemplified by Shakespeare: a consistent, and thus unifying, shared metre. One of the crucial features of verse drama using a shared rhythmic baseline is the fact that everybody speaks the same language. While registers of diction may vary, on the level of dialect or idiolect, if all characters have access to the same governing rhythm, then all can be equally articulate, and all can access a higher, poetic linguistic range: Shylock's speeches can rival the rulers of Venice. As the rowdy, working-class satyrs in one modern verse play, Tony Harrison's *The Trackers of Oxyrynchus* (1988) put it in defiantly Shakespearean terms, they too have a right to access

and produce high art: "It confounds their categories of high and low / when your Caliban outplays your Prospero" (137).

This model—shared ownership of a common rhythm between characters of differing status—need not, however, mean that verse plays are devoid of conflict: instead, I argue here, with reference to my own practice, that it can give them license to manifest conflict within on-stage communities at the deepest formal level. My practice draws heavily on Caroline Levine's theory of form, wherein forms have "affordances." Levine's term, drawn from design theory, describes the range of "potential uses or actions latent in materials" (6): that is, "the range of uses each could be put to, even if no one has yet taken advantage of those possibilities—and also [...] their limits, the restrictions intrinsic to particular materials and organizing principles" (10-11).

So what affordances within verse drama mean that it can challenge its own reputation as an unshakeably hegemonic and conservative medium? What is the use of dramatic verse, restricted to a certain range of metrical norms and variations and distributed among a range of characters, uniquely able to highlight and explore? George Steiner held verse to be "the prime divider between the world of high tragedy and that of ordinary existence," and asserted that "[t]here is nothing democratic in the vision of tragedy," wherein "[c]ommon men are prosaic and [...] Kings answer in verse" (241-42); on the political left, critics such as Easthope have also implied that the form's "abstract pattern" is inherently undemocratic (488). Why then should I, today, impose upon myself the fetters of a form conventionally, if erroneously, associated by such a broad range of critics with a restrictive and hierarchical world-order?

My answer, as a practitioner, aligns itself with Annie Finch, whose introduction to her anthology *A Formal Feeling Comes: Poems in Form by Contemporary Women* asserts that "the poems collected here contradict the popular assumption that formal poetics correspond to reactionary politics and elitist aesthetics" (1). It begins by positing six basic hypotheses about the affordances of verse drama:

- 1) In creating an onstage community where all characters speak the same “metrical language,” verse creates a stylised “natural order.”
- 2) In this context, stretches of smooth, uninterrupted verse-speaking can consolidate (or establish) authority in this community.
- 3) By contrast, interruptions of a speaker’s line, by another speaker or by a high degree of internal variation, can contribute to a sense of instability, fragmentation or conflict over the possession or bases of that authority within the community.
- 4) The opposition of norm and variation (and of verse and prose, where prose is a factor in the play’s dramaturgy) can create meaningful character conflict, marking out individual characters as distinctive, engaging, or notably divergent from the other members of the community with whom they share the stage at any given moment.
- 5) The inherent artifice of verse can allow for explorations of theme and subject that go beyond the realistic and the everyday; in Tony Harrison’s phrase, it can “rescue the actor and text from the suffocation of naturalism” (Introduction, *Square Rounds* 170).
- 6) If widely distributed, the linguistic resource of verse allows all characters in a community or network equal access to articulacy, eloquence, and gravitas.

With these aspects in mind, in putting into motion a community of characters who share underlying patterns of speech while each attempting to achieve different individual ends, verse drama reveals itself as a powerful formal tool for exploring the dialectic between the individual and society, and between self and other. In the three verse plays I have written over the last three years, iambic pentameter is the building block for a social world; my characters are bound by a shared metrical underpattern, and the regularity of shared metre creates a web of expectation which each divergence subverts. Metrical departure might connote revolutionary energy (a break from a repres-

sive system) or the darker freedom born of certain kinds of self-determination (a rupture in the social fabric).¹

Whatever meaning is ascribed to metrical variation—revolution or rupture—the relative fixity of the shared pentameter has made it, for me, a paradoxically flexible and neutral vehicle. By writing characters who follow or subvert metre—who are in or out of line—or who steal lines from others, I can stage conflicts over authority, control, freedom, and restraint at the microcosmic level of the line. As I. A. Richards writes, “the notion that there is any virtue in regularity or variety, or in any other formal features, apart from its effects upon us, must be discarded before any metrical problem can be understood” (107), and not every trochee, spondee or extra syllable, of course, carries a weight of meaning on its own terms, beyond localised narrative impact or phonetic variety. But metre, in this account, is a political vehicle precisely because of its neutrality, or its malleability.

First Experiments: Freedom and Control

My first verse play, *Free for All*, looked at the increasing role of the free market in the British education system. Its setting was a new-built free school, a kind of educational establishment pioneered under the 2010-2015 Coalition Government which was intended to allow for the devolution of substantial decision-making powers away from local authorities and into the hands of parents and community groups. This type of school appealed to me as the basis of a verse play in as much as the thematic concerns associated with it seemed to lend themselves to formal parallels: I could pursue, through my management of verse and prose, concepts of status, hierarchy, freedom, and constraint.

The idea of a completely level, collectivist playing field which might neglect the range of individual needs (“An education—free for all, / And all the same in every town / From Millom to the Surrey Downs”—*Free for All* 2) could be contrasted to a system that favoured the development of individuality and tailored, child-centred learning:

a philosophy which in its extreme form might lead to a viciously individualistic competition for resources. My script's narrative ended in a violent video game simulation, taking place in a distorted version of the school where these dynamics of competition had been escalated to their fullest extent: the second meaning of the title's "free for all."²

The hypotheses stated above gave me an opportunity to explore the theories around freedom, control, authority, and verse which ran through the project dramaturgically. One formal choice I made in this script was informed by hypothesis (2), that stretches of fluent verse could consolidate character authority: by making some characters more "at home" in verse than others, I hoped to imply that being able to move fluently and flexibly through verse lines might signify other forms of social self-possession. Thus, the school's headmaster, Torben Krill, responds to a challenge from his main antagonist, Kerry—a veteran trade unionist—in lines which are light, supple and confident, with some of the self-interruptions of natural speech:

TORBEN. See, what I mean is freedom—after years
of desks in lines and one man at the board
and targets, tests, the tedium of chalk,
we're taking matters into our own hands,
nourishing individuality.
Open the windows, let in light and air;
eat lunch for breakfast, Kerry—we don't care!
Why shouldn't we? Because the man says no?
Because some suit looked at his boring chart
and said "Top button" and "Keep off the grass"?
We don't have ties. We don't even have grass!
And why? Because we took a step ourselves,
broke out of LEA control—

KERRY can't listen to any more and leaps up.

KERRY. Control!

Control, control, control, control, control!

That's all you people talk about—control!

TORBEN. Oh really? I remember saying "freedom" [...] (18)

Freedom and control were thematically counterpointed throughout, but even at this early stage my treatment of Torben and Kerry revealed a potential challenge to hypothesis (4)—the use of norm and

variation to mark characters as divergent and thus create character conflict. It felt necessary for Kerry's character to speak an equally fluent verse, even when Torben patronisingly attempted to speak prose to connect "on her level." I thereby gave Kerry—a self-taught, working-class woman—a kind of parallel authority to Torben's speech style:

We must seize this chaos here,
grip it in our raised fists and cast it out.
It all starts here, the job of taking back
the future that was going to be ours,
before they shunted it off to one side
and took a piece for him, a piece for her,
carved up our birthright like a wedding cake
then pulverised it like an Eton mess... (27)

An alternative might have been to frame Kerry as Torben's formal opposite, even a kind of linguistic obstacle: in giving her extremely broken lines with multiple internal breaks, I might have positioned her as a metrical roadblock to his grandstanding rhetoric, though this could clearly have limited the latitude available to her to express herself as an independent character. I could also have written her entire dialogue in uncompromising prose: an option I did in fact use for one parent, Keith, whose construction company had part-funded the new school but who was clearly at odds with the middle-class paradigms encouraged by this institution. In a world to which his self-made wealth had bought him access, Keith's prose stood out as a form of resistance to its norms, a recalcitrant otherness which went hand-in-hand with his tendency to make off-colour and prejudiced remarks in public.

Early modern playwrights had used prose in similar ways: the more socially-integrated Simon Eyre in Dekker's *Shoemaker's Holiday* continues to speak primarily in ribald prose even when he has been elevated to Lord Mayor of London. That Eyre does so while his predecessor in the role, Sir Roger Oatley, speaks verse, might indicate something of his pride in his origins. By contrast, Leantio in Middle-

ton's *Women Beware Women* begins the play as an economically precarious "factor" but speaks comfortably in verse as he moves into the world of the court. In this extract, Keith's refusal to speak verse (after he has just made a gauche reference to paedophilia) could represent a stubborn certainty in his own identity, even as his wife, Angela, speaks an uncomfortably metronomic pentameter which our production framed as a learnt, aspirational behaviour:

ANGELA. It's wonderful to see you, Dr Krill.

What an occasion. Such a special day.

TORBEN. And you, Mrs McEntee, though I must insist, I don't yet have a doctorate...

ANGELA. A travesty. Well, neither does my Keith, as you can tell from that ill-timed remark—I must apologise reservedly: a shameful comment. From a governor!

KEITH. If Turbo's gonna talk about kids roaming freely in the woods, Ang, it's got to be expected. Nonces behind every bush. I built the bloody school, I don't want my name on that. That's not the kind of thing we want in the paper.

ANGELA. My husband sometimes struggles with deportment—

KEITH. I'm always talking about deportment. It's all they bloody deserve.

But as director Rebecca Martin (who herself played Angela) and I discussed how to bring across the thinking behind these formal choices in the rehearsal room, I began to be haunted by the idea that the portioning out of the resources of verse and prose simply repeated inherited inequities: that to stage a builder speaking only prose would reinforce the kinds of assumptions about class and intelligence identified by Tony Harrison in "Them & [uz]": "You're one of those / That Shakespeare gives the comic bits to: prose." I justified the choice in part by reasoning that unequal access to the tools of social and cultural capital remains a persistent social problem, and that in the context of this particular play-world my use of linguistic stratification onstage could expose, rather than entrench, such real-world dynamics. Nonetheless, even before seeking audience responses on this question, hearing the prose/verse dynamic in practice I began to reconsider

how possible it was, in a contemporary context, to explore conflicts of character through the alternation of verse and prose without becoming complicit in a process of elitist othering.

An audience survey we conducted after performances in January 2016, which I will describe in greater detail in the next section, revealed similar issues with my use of variant verse forms in this script. In a Q & A session following one performance, actor Octavia Finch commented positively on the heightened form in which her lines had been written. I intended for the constraints of her tight, rhymed trochaic tetrameter, to show the internal and external pressure her character, Starfish, an overworked schoolgirl, was under:

Ten-on-one debating winner,
always back in time for dinner,
Teenage Vegan Essay Contest,
Cuckoo drowning in a swan's nest. (7)

Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, in *Shakespeare in Parts*, describe how “prosody furnishes the actor with his character's grounds of being [...]. For the actor, prosody and ontology become one” (391). And, indeed, Octavia described the stylised form of her lines as “incredibly freeing”—rather than putting in detailed character work, she noted, “it just sort of came to me that this is who Starfish was.”

While these distinct styles achieved a certain dramaturgical effect in terms of character definition, they also risked muddying the dramaturgical waters: one character, the Ghost of Anthony Crosland—a grotesquely exaggerated version of the 1960s Labour education minister responsible in part for the British comprehensive system—stood both for a lost continuity (a social order which used to, up to a point, make sense) and for a willed disruption of the current state of things:

A comprehensive right to learn,
no matter what your parents earn.
It's in my “Crosland Circular”!
But death is a great leveller,
and now I'm six feet underground
it's funny how it's all come round.
I mean, take this school—*take* it, please! (2)

His rhyming, near-pantomimic verse style might have gestured to a different, older authority, and was certainly disruptive in its strangeness, but the very regularity its untimeliness required made it difficult for his interventions to seem truly chaotic and unpredictable, rather than the work of, say, a capricious but controlling magician. The character's overdetermination was only emphasised by the lack of clarity in what I was using his metre to mean. In general, therefore, the variety of verse idioms in this script made it more difficult for me to present verse as a social-structural world which is truly shared, and thus where individual departures from metrical norms might have a significant relationship to the social fabric.

Audience and Actor Perspectives

Despite my concerns as a practitioner regarding the formal choices I made in this first experiment, audience members did nonetheless report a clear awareness of the play being in verse as they listened to it in a survey we conducted after five performances across the course of the production. It seemed, therefore, that many listeners registered some of the stylised order implied in hypothesis (1). A brief account of this process might be helpful. In the tour of the production we mounted in early 2016, we gave audiences in Stratford-upon-Avon, Nottingham, Leicester, and Birmingham feedback sheets to fill out after the performance; responses were also collected at a Stratford preview in advance of the play's Edinburgh run. In total across the performances we were able to assemble 71 responses to a number of questions, including the following:

- 1) When watching *Free for All*, to what extent did you feel aware of the play being in verse?
- 2) Were there any moments in the play when rhythm or poetic language seemed particularly prominent?
- 3) Did the use of verse make the play feel different to other plays in any way? Did it have an effect on its meaning to you?

- 4) Verse drama—especially modern verse drama— isn't produced very often. Other than Shakespeare, have you seen a production of any other play in verse?

This last question was particularly helpful in developing a sense of audience awareness: how likely would spectators have been to have any pre-existing suppositions about stage verse which were not directly linked to Shakespeare? The majority of responses were negative, splitting 42 to 29. Among the "Yes"es, many respondents had seen works by contemporaries of Shakespeare and plays in translation from the Classical repertoire, ranging from Greek tragedies to Martin Crimp's adaptation of *The Misanthrope*. Only fifteen respondents offered contemporary examples, of which seven mentioned Mike Bartlett's *King Charles III*, a play which was promoted in explicit dialogue with the Shakespearean history cycles. The only other named examples of verse dramatists from the last twenty-five years who audiences had encountered in performance were Tony Harrison, Ted Hughes, and Helen Edmundson. It was clear, therefore, the main comparison points for my work in the audience's minds were unlikely to be contemporary writers.

Responses to the question about awareness of verse were coloured by the fact that the use of verse was explicitly announced in pre-show publicity materials; one performance was also preceded rather than followed, due to scheduling problems, by a question-and-answer session. Seeing the question put so bluntly, audience members might have felt compelled to "produce" an awareness of verse being used, a response which risked enhancing the idea of verse as an elitist hoop to jump through: as one wrote, "I feel stupid but I only noticed it when the ghost was talking." With these important caveats, 88% of respondents asserted they had noticed the presence of verse either "sometimes," "often," or "throughout" the performance. No respondent agreed with the proposition "I was only very rarely aware of verse being used." An online survey I conducted after the BBC screening of a filmed version of Bartlett's *King Charles III*, with a differently

phrased question, produced remarkably similar results: 89% found the use of rhythm noticeable either “throughout,” or “somewhat” (“Some unscientific thoughts”).

Both results resonate with George T. Wright’s suggestion of an in-built somatic awareness in our “nervous systems” for the use of verse (92) but also have direct implications for practice. If I wished to heighten this awareness (converting the “sometimes” respondents—37%—to “often”—here 34%—or “throughout,” currently 17%), which might in turn allow for a stronger awareness of the significance of regularity and deviation, I would have to work with actors and directors to foreground the role of verse speaking. At the Stratford post-show talkback, actor Blake Barbiche addressed some of the difficulties raised by the closeness of some of my verse to contemporary everyday speech:

I think that’s what actually makes it really difficult ... because it is so, the words are constructed in a way that we would speak and not as heightened as Shakespeare, I think that’s where I’ve found difficulty in making sure that it is clear that it’s verse, I’ve had a really difficult time sort of driving through that and keeping the energy of that, personally.

And as director Rebecca Martin pointed out, my use of colloquial language in a rigid form might pose problems for maintaining metre, when considered in the light of the naturalistic traditions of contemporary actor training:

One thing I found interesting listening and watching it is the tendency of modern actors, myself very much included, to put in your “um”s and your “ah”s when you’re talking in modern day speech, and particularly on screen, if you get trained in screen, then the line is kind of a vague approximation of what you’re going to say. I’m sure at every point I gave someone a note about “you can’t say that ‘ah,’” or “you can’t do a cough in the middle of a line,” or something as minute as that ... you can’t do it, because it’ll automatically disrupt the metre, and that was a very nice lightbulb moment for me as an actor and as a director, the specificity.

Audience responses to the question of where, if anywhere, rhythm or poetic language seemed particularly prominent in the performance, suggested that hypothesis (2)—whereby longer, uninterrupted verse

speeches could consolidate authority—merited more investigation. 18 respondents mentioned moments where long speeches were delivered, or characters who did so, as making them particularly aware of verse use. As regards hypothesis (3)—that the audience might, in contrast to such fluency, perceive any split, broken or interrupted line as a struggle for power, alive with a new charge and energy—the responses we received did not reflect this. One audience comment offered a particular challenge to this idea:

The times I had the most trouble keeping track of the rhythm were [...] some of the shared lines in dialogue which sometimes moved too quickly.

Given that split lines did not seem to be registering as significant, the results also led me to favour what Martin describes as a linguistically “specific,” non-naturalistic style of acting and directing, further bringing out the effects of end-stopping which Abigail Rokison’s historical research suggests were practised in the early modern theatre (179-81). To test more fully what might happen if split lines were overtly emphasised, I would therefore need to pursue in future productions a mode of directorial practice which particularly heightened broken or split lines, perhaps at the expense of even more elements of naturalism.

Rhyme registered as a stumbling block of a different kind. With regard to the question about where rhythm felt prominent, my survey yielded 84 separate references either to rhyming or to Starfish and the Ghost, two characters whose dialogue was almost exclusively rhyming. Rhyme was seen as reinforcing rhythm and/or poetic language, by making it “a lot easier to notice” and because “the rhymes drew more attention to the meter.” But rhyme also elicited by far the most negative responses to the effect of verse: one audience member felt it “made meaning more difficult to follow waiting for clunky rhymes at the end.”

More positively, views consonant with hypotheses (5) and (6)—that the artificiality of verse could allow it to transcend realist conventions, and that verse added a sense of eloquence and gravitas to a range of

speakers—were also expressed unbidden in a number of survey responses to the question relating to the effect of verse on meaning. Poetic language, for instance, was considered by one respondent to “establish a level of suspension of disbelief upfront, such that the supernatural aspects were more reasonable in the established sort of non-reality,” and by another to create “a slightly heightened, fairy-tale-ish quality.” Verse was variously described as an element which made “certain words and sentences feel more significant,” added “weight to certain moments,” and “helped ‘focus’ meaning and attention”; the form “drew attention to particular characters’ lines and in a way heightened their import and impact.” William Stafford’s review partly endorsed these ideas by arguing that a playing style “broader than naturalism” was an appropriate choice “to fit the comic styling as well as the sometimes-heightened language.”

Though he did not, to the best of my knowledge, conduct any comparable surveys, T. S. Eliot commented in the 1950s, the low cultural esteem in which audiences by that point held verse drama meant that “to introduce prose dialogue would only be to distract their attention from the play itself to the medium of its expression” (134). In the *Free for All* experiment, survey responses showed that transitions between forms were often either not noticed or took the audience’s attention away from the guiding principles of a shared-metre stage world. Having a number of scenes outside of the main blank verse metre, including in prose, risked diluting the sense of a baseline or norm against which variations were meaningful. In my future practice, I therefore resolved to avoid this distorting effect by using both rhyme and prose more sparingly.

Building a Shared World

With the successes and flaws of *Free for All* in mind, I wanted my next project to foreground my hypothesis that the shared-ness of a metrical stage-world allowed for domestic and political ruptures to take on a

greater resonance, expressed in formal terms, and to pursue the idea that verse licensed a certain rhetorical articulacy. I was coming to an understanding that verse and its uses could both set people apart, and bring people together. I therefore started looking for a story which, even more so than the school setting of *Free for All*, could foreground and link verse usage to the conflicts within a clearly defined community, allowing me to experiment with putting both these qualities into dramaturgical effect.

I found my material in a podcast episode telling the true story of Rajneeshpuram: a utopian religious community established in the 1980s around the teachings of the Indian guru Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh ("184—Rajneeshpuram"). Rajneeshpuram brought together a group of primarily highly-educated Westerners with an interest in Eastern mysticism as a model for remaking society: as Frances Fitzgerald puts it in her account in *Cities on a Hill*, which I consulted while redrafting the script, "guru or no guru, the ranch was a year-round summer camp for young urban professionals" (275). The site they occupied was in blue-collar rural Oregon and was viewed with suspicion and mistrust by many residents of the neighbouring town of Antelope, which the Rajneesh community eventually annexed. A local professor told Fitzgerald that he "thought Antelope 'a Greek tragedy' in the sense that the outcome was inevitable given the character of both groups" (326), and to me the dramatic potential was readily apparent.

The story appealed to me in part because it was self-contained and *sui generis* enough to allow for an investigation into the very basics of what it might mean to live in community with others, and what the use of verse might reveal about that social paradigm. The Rajneeshpuram community eventually collapsed under a variety of internal and external pressures, including financial mismanagement, immigration fraud, the consolidation of power in the hands of a secretive leader who tapped the phones of the city's residents and literally tranquilised those expressing dissent, and, most prosaically of all, a wilful disregard for county planning and zoning laws. It also, due in

part to a paradoxically controlling focus on openness and spontaneity, became increasingly dependent on formal rules. The overall effect was that “the flowing, liquid, egalitarian community had to erect high walls around itself lest its members took to loving others and simply flowing away [...]. In their attempt to suppress their differences they developed a kind of totalitarianism” (Fitzgerald 408). In the later stages of the commune’s existence, in 1985, Fitzgerald explains how walls and rules had come to predominate:

[t]here were security guards all over the place, and the restrictions on visitors were like those of a federal prison. From the entrance of the ranch to the reception center, there were five guard posts, each staffed by two Rajneeshee in uniform. At the reception center there were more uniformed guards with guard dogs to search all comers. Visitors were now asked to sign three separate regulations forms before being given an identification bracelet [...]. All of this created a sense of constriction and threat—a feeling mightily strengthened by the fact that the guards and ranch managers could not, or would not, explain the reasons for the particular barriers and roadblocks. (354)

As the process of my writing and revisions went on, two core elements of the material—the fracturing of society into implacably opposed interest groups and the protectionist rhetoric of walls and barriers—suggested to me that a project updating the Rajneesapuram story to the present day might be a helpful prism for political developments in contemporary America. The presidential candidacy of Donald Trump supplied the “push factor” lacking in my first draft about a modern utopian commune: a shift in the political climate capable of driving a disparate group of people away from their ordinary lives to form a new community based on an, at best, nebulous ideology.

With each revision, including most notably that for a run of staged readings at the Shakespeare Institute in February 2017, the play therefore became more and more directly a comment on first the campaign, then the Presidency of Donald Trump. The community at the heart of the play, called “Amnesty” in my first few drafts, eventually morphed

into "Sanctuary" as "sanctuary cities," such as New York and Los Angeles, set themselves up as centres of authority in opposition to the nativist immigration policies of the national government (cf. Zurcher). That conflict made this subject matter an effective testing ground to explore ideas of form, community, and tension between different kinds of networks and "bounded enclosures," and for the verse medium to take on political weight and power (Levine 25).

Before I had discovered Levine's work, however, Fitzgerald's account of Rajneeshpuram introduced me in the redrafting phase to the writings of the anthropologist Victor Turner. Various schools of thought had already seemed to offer me useful analogues for the structuring opposition between norm and variation, and between the individual and society, which shared-metre dramatic verse reified, from Freud's *id* and *superego* to Greenblatt's subversion and containment (38). New to me, however, was Turner's model of structure and anti-structure. Briefly sketched, Turner's terms provided an intriguing framework in which to consider the relationship of constraining pattern and variation: "social structure, while it inhibits full social satisfaction, gives a measure of finiteness and security," whereas the liminal state Turner called *communitas* and associated with anti-structural forces—sometimes individualistic, sometimes communal—"may be for many the acme of insecurity, the breakthrough of chaos into cosmos, of disorder into order" (*From Ritual* 46).

These terms did not, however, in practice, map as neatly onto the individual/community binary as I might have hoped. Shared-metre verse drama seemed to me at times to exemplify some of the aspects of *communitas*, wherein characters are "levelled" in their form of expression and brought, at least, linguistically, into a neutral relation: was this what might be going on in the social blending represented in the settlement I was then calling Amnesty? On the other hand, the need for the Amnesty residents to live in harmony seemed more relevant to Turner's use of "structure," within which marks of extreme, "antistructural" individuality are potentially disruptive (*From Ritual* 113).

In its challenge to structure, *communitas* “transgresses or dissolves the norms that govern structured and institutionalized relationships” (*Ritual Process* 128) and “raises basic problems for social structural man, invites him to speculation or criticism” (*From Ritual* 47). This made it look somewhat like the challenges to the existing order of things, the sketching of alternative models, that Ryan finds in Shakespeare: Turner even cites as an example the utopian rhetoric of Gonzalo’s commonwealth in *The Tempest*. But *communitas*, of course, by definition, is the manifestation of communal rather than individual feeling. Characters in plays who consistently flout the expectations of metrical structure, sometimes in the process ruffling and shaking the framework of their societies, do so as individuals, not as representatives of an alternative pattern.

As such, Turner’s *communitas* could not map neatly onto “the breakthrough of chaos into cosmos” (*From Ritual* 46) represented by metrical deviation within Wright’s world of “cosmic order” (262). The implicit separation necessary to maintaining structure meant that this term could not wholly be the domain of metrical regularity, either. Different forms of structural barrier in dramatic verse take on different meaning: end-stopping would tend to increase a sense of ordered proportion, whereas mid-line caesurae might be more likely to indicate an agitated individual isolating himself from others.

Turner’s terminology for discussing communities was therefore a complicated and somewhat awkward model to explore dramaturgically. These theories nonetheless significantly informed the process of research and development (or trial and error) leading to my second draft of the script. So too did the significant challenge to Turner’s model offered by Renato Rosaldo. Taking issue with the idea of culture and society as “control mechanisms” which “have the [potentially repressive] function of regulating human behaviour” (97), Rosaldo’s challenge further stressed for me the importance of affirming that there is no necessary drive towards institutional healing, reintegration, or repression in verse drama.

Throughout the traditional five-act structure of *Amnesty*, I experimented with making the Turnerian ideas of structure and anti-structure which Fitzgerald applied to Rajneeshpuram register as significant in my exploitation of the resources of verse.³ My intention, broadly speaking, was for the early speeches of the commune's residents—as they aimed to reject social norms in forming a new “seamless and structureless whole” (*Ritual Process* 135)—to convey some of the anti-structural dynamics of free flow. In this draft of the script, I prioritised keeping the residents' dialogue relatively light on full stops and mid-line disruptions, favouring instead a high use of commas and run-on lines, as in this public address from the commune's de facto leader, then called Meera:

Thank you. Thank you for joining us today,
 on this great day of public celebration:
 this referendum signals to the world
 not only that our town is here to stay,
 but that our rights to congregate together
 have taken root and are unshakeable,
 despite the forces who'd prize us apart.
 This is a mandate for a better system:
 you've seen the goody bags? Go on, spark up—
 the use of cannabis for recreation
 is legal in this state and we are proud
 to show it can promote—forgive me—growth.
 You'll find a book of mycoprotein recipes
 and lifetime passes for the karmabus.
 Also, a brochure with our city plan:
 green spaces, native wildlife in reach,
 three thousand acres and an aquifer... (41)

In contrast, I explored the idea that a heavy emphasis on prosodic disruption, highlighting division rather than flow, might correspond to Turner's account of structure as a separating force. I therefore planned for Meera's political opponent, county planning official Tony Morelli, to speak in a less fluent way, using end-stopped lines and a high number of mid-line stops, starts and substitutions. An antagonistic figure arriving from outside, I wondered if the metrical disruption

brought with him could effectively mirror political disturbance having an impact on a community.

Already, however, this revealed the difficulty in using Turner as an analogue. Now the communitarian Amnesty residents, in seeming to represent unruffled order, read as a sort of *parallel* structure, whereas Tony felt like the malevolent individualistic force causing problems for this version of society:

TONY. Sorry to butt in. Headed to the ranch?

Me too. Spa, I should say. You need a ride?

ANITA. That would be great, actually; are you joining?

TONY. No, not exactly. More—checking things out.

I'd say "Throw all your stuff in back," but, well...

You haven't got much stuff, so—don't I know you?

LEILA. I don't think so.

ANITA. We're not from round here, really.

TONY. Sure? There's just something...It'll come to me.

I'm Tony, by the way. Tony Morelli.

ANITA. What brings you here?

TONY. Work. County Planning Team. (10-11)

As the play continues and the community, under internal and external pressure, begins to take on more of the aspects of an external "structure"—armed police, roadblocks, etc.—I experimented with making the increasingly-dictatorial Meera's lines begin to resemble Tony's. They became more end-stopped, with a higher proportion of mid-line interruptions and blockages. The idea was for Tony's somewhat authoritarian perspective to inform the kind of verse he spoke, and for that to influence Meera's own prosody, just as Othello's verse has been observed to "become infected by [the] poison" in Iago's speaking style (Palfrey 188). Here, for instance, is Meera dressing down the community's architect, Jerome, towards the end of Act Three:

Go home, Jerome. Back to your drawing board.

We told them we'd revamp the library,

build new headquarters for the Fire Service,

replant the parks. What more is there to give?

Patty can see. The Mayor can't? Fuck the Mayor:
bigots, sore losers, they can't look beyond
their baseball caps. We're doing them a favour.
If someone gets their little fingers bruised,
so be it. You don't have to understand:
this isn't art, now. This is politics. (48)

There was an internal logic to having Meera's lines become "aggressively asymmetrical" (a term Russ McDonald uses with regard to Jonson's verse, 109) as her style of leadership became more authoritarian. But Tony, the character to whom she was directly opposed in the narrative, could not himself in practice always employ a "poetic style marked by shifts in direction, emotional flashes, surprising turns, short stops" (McDonald 115-16), even as his role was to challenge the equilibrium of the Amnesty community by insisting they conform to external requirements. Tony had to deliver a lot of big rhetorical speeches, including a closing monologue to the audience. It therefore felt natural in practice to allow his language to flow more freely, to be more expansive with fewer shifts and stoppages, even though this would mean abandoning some of the Turnerian parallels with which I started.

Indeed, the more I considered my work in *Amnesty*, the further I felt from a neat equation between, on the one hand, individuality and resistance, and, on the other, order and social structure. Any verse system based on the theoretical oppositions I found in Turner and Fitzgerald started to melt away in the face of the demands of dramaturgical practice. When the time came to revise the play for its staged reading at the Shakespeare Institute, along with changing the title to *Sanctuary* to reflect its new political focus, I also found myself setting aside the vague and unwieldy framework drawn from my reading of Turner in favour of a greater practical attention to what each scene and onstage moment required.

In practice this meant—as in *Free for All*—prioritising a Shakespearean sense of equilibrium and balance between the arguments made by the two opposing sides. Accordingly, at moments where it was neces-

sary for him to carry the audience with him, I allowed Tony's rhetoric to become significantly more fluent, with more frequent enjambment:

DENISE. They've got some really interesting ideas—
why can't they try them here?

TONY. Ideas? Right.
Those airy things, those giddy clouds of nothing,
that sit on human lives like bucking broncos,
ready to tumble at one sudden lurch.
You want a blank slate? Then build on the moon.
Real people live here, and they're not lab-rats,
waiting for some benevolent gloved hand:
you think the Nettle Ridge guys will be grateful
to see a living Twitter mob descend,
turn quiet country into San Francisco
while virtue signalling they understand
the struggles of the rural working class?
These people, fundamentally, don't care
about them, they don't understand their lives:
who clears up if their little project fails?
They won't engage. It's summer camp to them.
They've got ideas, sure. But they won't work,
and we'll be left with sewage, trash and rubble. (33)

I also, in the interest of the "balance" McDonald finds in Shakespeare's plotting as well as his metrics, set about reshaping Meera into *Mona*—a more defined character whose investment in the Sanctuary project, in its new political iteration, was at least initially born out of progressive activism. The sense of Shakespearean equilibrium was therefore at least partly enhanced by presenting surveillance and the suppression of dissent emerging within a leftist community, against the wider backdrop of Trump's right-wing policy agenda.

I hoped the plot arc might, with Mona's character more distinct in her aims from the opening, feel something like *Richard II* in reverse, as an initially sympathetic character comes to govern in ways which are increasingly capricious and cruel. Mona now started off with a somewhat sharp-elbowed idealism, as in these lines reassuring Patty, an elected official from the neighbouring town of Nettle Ridge who is concerned about the influx of a new demographic:

For instance, those well-educated folks
 you mention are spearheading these revivals,⁴
 but in their wake will come skilled manual jobs,
 the kind this county hasn't seen for decades,
 the kind with healthcare plans and training programs.
 I don't mean to presume about your vote,
 but this county has been through some hard times—
 we think we can respond to those concerns. (19)

By the end of the narrative, however, she displayed the spitting fury of a cornered animal, when local law enforcement refused to let claim her status as a political protestor as a factor mitigating the crimes in which she had been involved:

MONA. I'll talk, Kim. It won't help you. But I'll talk.
 The problem with you is, you have no vision.
 None of you do. And no imagination.
 Did we cut corners? Yes. Did we cut limits?
 Of course. You've heard the phrase 'disruptive talent'?
 Yeah, I'm disruptive. I overturned tables,
 I rocked the boat, I cut the power lines.
 I am an earthquake underneath this country,
 and your response? To put me in a cage.
 My people understand—yours never will—
 that what you've done is taken hope, change, progress,
 and beaten it so hard it can't stand up.
 KIM. What we've done is arrested you for failing
 to follow the same laws that others do.
 MONA. It's known as revolutionary justice:
 you chose a moral side, and you deserve it.
 Why should our lives be bound by men like you? (79)

These revisions shored up both character and narrative arcs, and helped in part to develop my practice by ensuring my play in verse was inherently dramatic rather than in verse for its own sake. Accounts by both T. S. Eliot ("Poetry and Drama") and Peter Oswald indicate the particularly steep learning curve involved in working out how to write verse that is also dramatically effective: Oswald's experience in contemporary theatre is that "there was nowhere to be trained to work for the Globe or anywhere else like it" (Fallow 94).

The lack of widespread training in the skills necessary to develop theatre in verse means that practical experiment is essential but, paradoxically, rarely possible: "Verse plays are put together in a different way and they require a leap of faith. My first drafts are always terrible. It is about collaborating and seeing what works and doesn't work during the rehearsal period. Verse plays require patience" (Gardner).

In my own collaborative experiments, I found myself increasingly unable to answer the frequent question about what the resource of prose meant in my stage worlds in a way that felt to me wholly justifiable. In *Sanctuary*, I had still considered that prose might contribute something valuable to the dramaturgy: for instance, the Nettle Ridge council member Patty signalled some of her difference from the more privileged Sanctuary residents by initially speaking prose, and was subsequently coerced into a somewhat stilted verse as Mona talked her into joining their community.

Jack, an older male character who gave little thought to the space he took up in the world, also spoke a prose which had a sprawling quality—like Falstaff's, which Fernie defines as expressing a baseline "condition of superabundant liberty" that rejects the constraints of "duty, industry, self-control" (2). Jack's prose confirmed his Falstaffian role as exhibiting "the scandalous"—and, ultimately, destructive—"freedom of a mature person who lives his (or her) own life entirely beyond respectability" (4). When he used this prose style with neighbours he did not know well—as below with cake shop owner Anita, who stays in verse to maintain distance and rebuff his unwanted intimacy—I hoped it might appear as a kind of linguistic manspreading⁵:

JACK. When I saw Leila the other day she promised you'd be able to rustle up something in no time, so—

ANITA. What day was this? She's had the flu all week.

JACK. Oh, must have been the weekend then, head like a Swiss cheese these days, even without de herb, probably best keep off it, you know me! Is she in, do you know?

ANITA. I see. She's laid up. Like I said, the flu.

I don't know when you would have spoken to her.

What did you want? A cake with Liz's name?

JACK. Oh well, it doesn't need to be anything special, just whatever cake you've got at this point, we'll muddle through, thought that counts and all.

ANITA. Not something special? Sixty, did you say? (34-35)

When Jack was later given a position of public responsibility as an officer in the Amnesty police, I shifted his language into verse accordingly. Here, the power it exerted, based on his new-found public authority—as in the following extract, where he confronts a police officer from the neighbouring town Amnesty has just taken over—seemed to me entirely different from the power of his unsolicited volubility in prose:

I'm not impersonating, mate—I've been signed up.
Proposed, approved, and ratified. Boom boom.
Efficient, eh? Your local bureaucrats
should take a tip from us. That's how we do such things
these days in Amnesty—Amnesty *Ridge*.

Nonetheless, over the many conferences and Q & A sessions at which I discussed my dramaturgical choices, including the 2017 meeting of the *Connotations Society* in Mülheim, Germany, there always seemed to be an angle from which prose could be felt to be pessimistically reinforcing hierarchies of exclusion more convincingly than making a strong dramatic point about the persistence of those hierarchies or demonstrating some kind of forceful resistance to their stranglehold on social capital. For all that I wrote about verse in terms of social cohesion, showing tensions being raised and/or worked out within a defined group, the persistence of prose continued to create an “out-group,” the presence of which I would then struggle to intellectually and creatively account for, even as it reflected real-world social dynamics relating to access and power.

In *Sanctuary*, prose and verse were involved in a continuous dance around ideas of power, control, borders and boundaries, authority and resistance, and the conflicting demands of individuals and communities. Neither resource continuously meant one thing and one

thing only—and even considering verse alone, metrical fluency could not be counterposed with disruption in any stable sense that was not thrown into question by further reading and creative experiment. The presence of prose, however, as T. S. Eliot predicted, still seemed inevitably to “distract [the audience’s] attention from the play itself to the medium of its expression” (134). In 1912, before Eliot had even publicly considered the issue of the rhythm of poetic drama, William Archer cautioned playwrights against using “some nondescript rhythm which is one long series of jolts and pitfalls to the sensitive ear [...] to escape from the monotony of blank verse”:

If you cannot save your blank verse from monotony without breaking it on the wheel, that merely means that you cannot write blank verse, and had better let it alone. Again, in spite of Elizabethan precedent, there is nothing more irritating on the modern stage than a play which keeps on changing from verse to prose and back again. It gives the verse passages an air of pompous self-consciousness. We seem to hear the author saying, as he shifts his gear, ‘Look you now! I am going to be eloquent and impressive!’ (396-97)

Alongside these aesthetic arguments, I had to consider the political dimension. I have made the critical argument throughout this paper that one of the most significant currents in the historical development of verse drama, through writers like George Lillo, Joanna Baillie, and even, in his own way, T. S. Eliot, has been an extension of the social canvas on which verse drama operates in the face of an alternative tendency to constrict it. I felt therefore that my best course in my next play might be to follow suit: to distribute the resources of articulacy and eloquence equally among all characters, in accordance with hypothesis (6), and allow each character to make their case in equal terms.

Allowing Ebb and Flow

In the third and final script I am discussing here, I took these cautionary conclusions into full account. In *The Vetting of Kit Shaughnessy*, as a consequence, the “meaning” of verse during the writing process

was less overburdened, less explicitly theorised; I was more concerned with the moment-by-moment dramatic effects of regularity and variation than with the kind of external logic I applied to *Free for All* and *Sanctuary*. I did not assign any specific associations with regularity, order and subversion to particular characters, and I also eschewed the use of prose entirely, aiming instead, as Eliot recommended, "at a form of verse in which everything can be said that has to be said" (134). This final play took place on a smaller scale, with only four characters, but nonetheless addressed wider issues of politics and society which resonated beyond these interpersonal conflicts.

The script tested the possibility of verse drama to work as a kind of chamber piece, orchestrating four voices, while availing itself of some of the resources of more recent dramaturgy, namely overlapping lines indicated with a "/" as well as the traditional "split" metrical lines. It still explored social tensions, and those between individuals, through the distribution of metrical and variant lines, but on a more shifting, fluid, *ad hoc* basis, treating verse as an inherently flexible vehicle for the constant process of negotiation between ideas, states, and relationships between social groups and individuals.

The situation this play explored was personal and political: Kit Shaughnessy, an RP-speaking, Russell Group-educated candidate for a government intelligence position, is being vetted for the role by Geoff McCullough. A former policeman from Birkenhead, Geoff is a character from a working-class background who exercises a degree of institutional power, and the bulk of the play is a series of vetting interviews between him and Annabel Fensome, a friend of Kit's who is being pressed to reveal potentially compromising personal information about him to assess his suitability to serve the country.

GEOFF. We're curious about Kit's sex life, Annie.

ANNIE. That's quite an opener.

GEOFF. I'm sorry. Sit.

We find it helps to ask that question early.

ANNIE. Um, shouldn't you be asking him, not me?

GEOFF. Do you know anything about it?

ANNIE.

No. Not really.

GEOFF. Can you elaborate on that? (1)

From these personal discussions, which turn on the question of to what degree we can really know another person, wider issues arise. What kind of country is Kit being enlisted in the service of, and how much can its constituent members even agree on what it is? Furthermore, by this point in my development as a verse dramatist, my theoretical conception of these issues was directly feeding into my practical writerly choices in a way that felt newly fluent and, despite its artifice, creatively “natural.”

To my mind, this increased fluency of approach allowed for a similarly flexible dramaturgy. Characters from a range of social backgrounds were given the opportunity to grandstand, to embark on long, metrically fluent rhetorical speeches outlining their beliefs, holding the stage and leaving the other person silent: these sections of my writing corresponded to those moments noted by the *Free for All* survey respondents where longer verse sections heightened awareness of and focus on language, wherein words took on greater weight and significance, and the metre served as a springboard for more stylised language use. In this extract, for instance, despite her subordinate position in terms of the dynamics of the interview, Annie demonstrates the ability to steal momentum away from Geoff with a stretch of fluent verse:

GEOFF. I get the feeling you don't really know him.

ANNIE. Perhaps I don't, the way *you'd* like me to.GEOFF. Me? I am an irrelevance. The country,
that's what this is about.

ANNIE.

And what is that?

Will the pound crash (again) because Kit's dad
had shares in arms which, by the way, *we* sold?Will the North Sea run dry because Kit's dad
once went to a boat party in Tobruk?This is a man I never met. The country
you're selling me—panicky, paranoid,
a hedgehog curling up into a ball—

is not the one I know, and I don't want to.
 And that's what he'd be serving? Did you vote?
 GEOFF. Of course I did. I'm sixty-six years old.
 ANNIE. How did you vote?
 GEOFF. This isn't about me.

In the wake of the referendum result for Britain to leave the European Union, the questions Annie's speech addresses seemed particularly pressing, and touched on my wider concerns about social cohesion and fracture. As such, rather than having her provocations about Geoff's image of Britain unfold with total iambic fluency, I used her metrically disrupted, and thus livelier lines ("panicky, paranoid, / A hedgehog curling up into a ball") as essentially a call for a lost harmony rather than an assault on one that already exists. The logical link between order and disruption I attempted to borrow from Turner had become much more situationally dependent rather than an overarching set of rules of systems.

One final instance exemplifies this new flexibility of usage. Later in these, Geoff goes on the attack with a long speech of his own, putting his interlocutor on the back foot. His interruption in the extract below—"because you didn't care"—demonstrates the ability of the "stolen line" to recapture or reinforce power within a conversation. Annie's final response, however—a firm putdown which relies on an epistemic pulling of rank—falls in perfect pentameter, and the elegance of her deployment of the resource of verse at its most basic level, holding the line and the stage, allows her to once again "re-balance" the conversation:

GEOFF. I'd love not to need anything like this,
 this fret, this agitation, these alerts,
 these teams of geeks, these four cold submarines.
 You know what I'd prefer? A folding chair,
 a six-pack in the park in Birkenhead,
 a radio, a nice ripe Granny Smith,
 my grandkids playing catch—d'you think of them?
 ANNIE. I didn't ask...
 GEOFF. Because you didn't care.

That's OK. I don't care about you either.
 Except that I am you, and you are me.
 That's what this letterhead is meant to mean:
 it marks what we've consented to. It says
 our interests are the same under this crest,
 under this crown. Under this stupid horse.

ANNIE. I think that's meant to be a unicorn. (11-12)

In her reference to the coat of arms of the British royal family, used in official governmental settings, she might be understood either to be recalling Geoff to a sense of their connectedness, but the dynamics of the scene and the affordances of verse, as discussed throughout, here imply a moment of one-upmanship. This is distinct from Geoff, her antagonist's, use of a similar metric structure: "Except that I am you, and you are me." This line is a direct enact of George Wright's description of how a shared baseline rhythm might pull two people back to their obligations to each other despite themselves. The ebb-and-flow of power throughout this scene takes place within—is enabled and contained by—this shared rhythm. These extracts, and indeed, the play as a whole ask, but do not answer, the questions of how we should relate to each other, as individuals and as citizens. As such, they demonstrate practically some of the concerns I have been arguing are hard-coded into verse drama as a whole.

Conclusion

My practice-led research across the three scripts I developed over the past four years attempts to challenge the curious doublethink whereby verse drama is treated in contemporary culture with a mixture of exceptionalism, if by Shakespeare or a few other "classic" writers, and outright contempt, if not. Not only does this situation restrict the possibilities of expression available to creative artists, it further adds to what Emma Smith describes as "the impossible ethical gravity with which we have charged these texts [Shakespeare's] and, in particular, this author." Treating verse drama as a form irrevocably tainted by its Shakespearean associations does very little to reduce the outsized

cultural weight accorded to Shakespeare; writing our own verse plays, by contrast, is not an act of homage but an active demonstration that this form has not been perfected and time-locked; it can, instead, continue to produce effects in the present day which are not only available through the revival of classic texts.

What Ben Lerner aptly terms “the hatred of poetry” in contemporary society is at least partly due to its status as a form apart from mainstream cultural expressions. How different might the cultural position of poetry be if it was heard as a mode of dialogue in modern-day political theatre; in TV sitcoms; in Netflix serials? How might our society look if once again, as George Wright commented of early modern England, “[r]hyme and meter belonged to the class of rhetorical devices [people] expected to meet in public places” (95), and what about our times might be discovered in the experiment? I conclude by offering these questions not as rhetorical speculation but as provocations for experimental practice on the part of writers, directors and commissioners.

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NOTES

¹Indeed, the latter case might be experienced as the former: Peter Holbrook notes that “[V]illains want freedom too, and from his own perspective a tyrant will be merely exercising his own liberty” (26).

²This wordplay finds an echo in a recent critical comment on Shakespeare: as Ewan Fernie observes, Shakespeare’s plays demonstrate an awareness of “how readily freedom degenerates into a violent free for all: a ‘universal wolf’ that will devour everything, including itself (*Troilus and Cressida* 1.3.121),” though modern readers are nonetheless unlikely to favour “Ulysses’s recommendation that we should shut it out with an unassailable hierarchy” (73).

³Here I thank Martin Wiggins for reminding me that this is a “tradition” established and adopted by subsequent editors of Shakespeare’s texts and other early modern plays, rather than a common factor of early modern theatre practice before the second decade of the seventeenth century. Anachronistic though it therefore is, the division into five acts nonetheless seemed to me a particularly and helpfully un-modern way of going about things.

⁴Mona is referring to a rewilding scheme, meant to build up both the local ecosystem and the town's economy.

⁵Defined by *Oxford Living Dictionaries* as "the practice whereby a man, especially one travelling on public transport, adopts a sitting position with his legs wide apart, in such a way as to encroach on an adjacent seat or seats."

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