

Zeitschrift: SPELL : Swiss papers in English language and literature
Herausgeber: Swiss Association of University Teachers of English
Band: 31 (2015)

Artikel: Shakespeare's rhythmic education
Autor: Stagg, Robert
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-583896>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 07.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Shakespeare's Rhythmic Education

Robert Stagg

Shakespeare's education was thorough goingly rhythmic: it was busy with competing or complementary rhythms, many of which were found in Lily's *Grammar* and all of which were complemented by a series of highly rhythmic pedagogical methods. Previous accounts of Shakespeare's education have tended to focus on pedagogical and rhetorical structures rather than the rhythms that animated them, and in so doing they risk characterising Shakespeare's adult writing as static and rigid.

Shakespeare's education was a cacophony masquerading as a harmony: while much has been written about the structures of discipline and repetition in Elizabethan schools, there has been little focus on the aural variety that enlivened those structures (a variety that often emerged in pedagogical practice even though it could be obscured in or by pedagogical theory). Yet Shakespeare's education was busy with competing or complementary rhythms. Sixteenth century grammar school pupils were taught various rhythms – from prosodic rhythms to speech rhythms to the internal rhythms of Latin – in ways that brought these many kinds of rhythm into contact with each other. Sometimes the structures of Elizabethan teaching were themselves rather rhythmic. We should remember, then, that behind the pedagogical skeleton of rote learning and birching was a pupil's heart – Shakespeare's heart – beating, erratically, to different pulses.

Previous accounts of Shakespeare's education have focused on the structures and theories of Elizabethan pedagogy more than the rhythms animating them. Emrys Jones proposed that Shakespeare's "dialogue me-

Drama and Pedagogy in Medieval and Early Modern England. SPELL: Swiss Papers in English Language and Literature 31. Ed. Elisabeth Dutton and James McBain. Tübingen: Narr, 2015. 173-183.

thod" (Jones 13), the deployment of *in utramque partem* arguments, came directly from his grammar schooling (or perhaps from lost years as a country schoolmaster). This "principle of rhetorical dialectic" was "clearly the product of academic rhetorical training in the writing of *controversiae*" (14), exercises at school whereby pupils wrote personified speeches or detached arguments in favour of such and such a logical position. If true, Jones's argument would make the *Henry VI* plays – stiff with *in utramque partem* arguments and *controversiae* frames – one of Shakespeare's finest achievements. Yet Jones backs away from this implication, calling such early plays "a schoolmaster's attempt" (264), "less sensuously ingratiating" (29), better viewed "in retrospect as an immature *King Lear*" (265). He writes of *1 Henry 6* that it is "almost a copy-book product of this rhetorical method" [the *controversiae*] in "the devising of situations which could be broken down into a structure of division and opposition and then treated with the utmost emotional force of which the writer was capable" (14). As the sentence progresses, so it unravels: it is the "utmost emotional force" of Shakespeare which matters more (to Jones at least) than the "structure of division and opposition" which bookends it. Yet the "utmost emotional force of which the writer was capable" is left mysterious and unexplained – what, we might wonder, is it? Did it also arise through Shakespeare's education, and how?

Something similar happens to Lynn Enterline in her study of *Shakespeare's Schoolroom*, although she comes closer to identifying what Jones's "utmost emotional force" might be. She begins, like Jones, by focusing on three rhetorical figures or structures she considers essential to Shakespeare's development as a writer: *in utramque partem*, *prosopopeia* and *ekphrasis* (21). Again, Enterline finds that these figures become less important than what enlivens them: "the art of impersonation and description" is to be "judged by 'liveliness'" (ibid). She cites pupils' commonplace books in which the rhythmic delivery of rhetorical figures becomes as, or more, important than the figures themselves (38; Folger MS. L.e. 1189). By the end of the book she tellingly praises Shakespeare's "ear" twice in two pages, first as "particularly canny" then as "fine-tuned" (123-4). And in her final pages, she introduces an interlude written by John Redford for performance in a school (151-2). Titled *Wit and Science* it features "a scene of pedagogical instruction" that "turns the beating of poetic meter into a literal beating" (151) – finally Enterline yields to the opaque force that has been behind all the arguments in her book up to this point, "a *rhythmic* enunciation" (152) [my emphasis].

Enterline finally recognises the particular salience of rhythm in Elizabethan education, in her example the rhythmically repetitive thudding of a birch. Let us take another instance. In sixteenth century grammar schools teachers tested their students in a back-and-forth interrogation called “opposing” (and although some of this was probably rote, William Kempe of Plymouth thought highly enough of “opposing” to call it Socratic [218]). Does the structure of “opposing” matter? In a way, yes, since Lynn Enterline rightly draws parallels between the pedagogical practice of “opposing” and the kinds of dramatic activity that were flourishing in sixteenth century schoolrooms and that would later flourish on sixteenth century stages. But Enterline does not recognise that the rhythm of “opposing” in practice is crucial to our understanding of its structure, of the thing itself. At what pace and pitch and in what tone did “opposing” take place? Only once we address these things can we appreciate what “opposing” really was – whether it was theatrical, dramatic or performative (or all or none of those things).

Without knowing about the rhythmic content of rhetorical and pedagogical structures, especially when they were put into practice, we risk offering flat descriptions of what Shakespeare wrote later in life. Colin Burrow, for example, has discussed Hamlet's famous question – “To be or not to be” – as an instance of the rhetorical *quaestio*, a trope found in William Lily's grammar school textbook (*Grammar* 17; see below). He attends to the structure of Hamlet's question without thinking about how that structure is rhythmically governed. How, for instance, are we to read the word “that” near the centre of Hamlet's verse line? Is it an emphatic spondaic clincher (“*that* is the question”) or a stumbling unstressed stutter as Hamlet moves from question to statement with all the awkwardness such a movement might entail? Nor does Burrow consider how the rhetorical structure of Hamlet's line is in itself meaningful, or contributive to meaning: if Hamlet has framed the question of (his) existence as a schoolboy trope, should we see this speech/soliloquy as facility not profundity or as facility with profundity?

The essential book of Shakespeare's childhood, which Burrow draws upon for his criticism, was packed with the rhythmic variety and attention that later studies of it have lacked. After royal assent in 1540, Lily's *Grammar* was used in every grammar school in England including the King Edward VI Grammar School in Stratford-upon-Avon. The *Grammar* was accepted as quickly as it was authorised (the only surviving note of dissent is a rather ginger remark to Elizabeth I by Richard Mulcaster, the headmaster of Merchant Taylors School, in which he advocates a “refining” of the *Grammar* [vij]). At Shakespeare's school the first head-

master (William Smart, appointed 1554) was issued a contract specifying that schoolboys must be “ready to enter into the accidence [another name for Lily’s textbook] and principles of grammar” (Pearson 10).

Lily’s *Grammar* devotes fifteen quarto pages to a discussion of prosody and rhythm. It might have seemed a little prescriptive in its definitions of grammatical and prosodical properties: “A Syllable is the pronouncing of one letter or more, with one breath,” a verb “betokeneth doing” and “An Adverb is a part of speech joined to the Verbs, to declare their signification” (n.p.). The prosody of Lily’s *Grammar* has tended to be read as rigidly quantitative; indeed its section on prosody is itself in Latin. But in wider rhythmic terms the *Grammar* displayed leniency and plurality. It introduced its charges to a wide range of Latin metres, from dactylic hexameters to iambic trimeters. It contained sections on the rhythms of the Latin language and, implicitly (see later), on the rhythmic relationships between different parts of speech. Even the terminology given above has some scope – a syllable, for example, can consist of “one letter *or* more” and a “breath” can be a capacious thing, encompassing a sudden noisy exhalation or a prolonged inaudible expulsion. Pupils were given room for rhythmic manoeuvre, sometimes a manoeuvre away from quantitative standards – especially if, like Shakespeare, they applied their own imaginative reach and stretch to the learning furnished by the *Grammar*.

Schools taught the *Grammar* in ways that flexed Lily’s text, imbuing it with more rhythmic variety than it originally contained. When Henry authorised the *Grammar* in his *sententia edicti*, he made clear that his decree was “not to be understood as prescribing that whatever you will find written [in the *Grammar*] is, in the same order it is written and without delay, to be forced upon the delicate and fastidious intellects and tastes of boys continuously and without any discretion” (Gwosdek 8). Schoolmasters could “omit” parts of Lily’s *Grammar* as long as they “do not privately or in public follow or teach any grammar other than this one” (ibid). The *Grammar* was “in the hands of each one” of the grammar school masters “according to the capacity of your listeners” (ibid). Schoolmasters could draw out the rhythms already immanent in the *Grammar* and they could present or substitute their own. They could, for example, encourage their pupils to combine two discrete verse structures found in the *Grammar* or they could add a type of verse line not included by Lily. Some might have taught English rhythms too, including the poetry of Francis Quarles and George Sandys’s verse translation of Ovid (Watson 300).

This pedagogical variety is reflected in the statutes of many grammar schools, especially those founded after 1540 (the year in which Henry VIII gave royal assent to the *Grammar*). Lots of schools made “versification” – a deliberately imprecise term – part of their *raison d'être*, as if under the influence of Lily's rhythmic *Grammar*. There are clauses advocating or requiring “versification” or “versifying” in the statutes of East Retford (1552), Sandwich (1580), Durham (1593), Heath (1600) and Charterhouse (1627) schools (Watson 473-4). Lily's *Grammar* was stocked with metres and verses that could be learned by heart, a process that the schoolmaster Charles Hoole trusted would “imprint a lively pattern of hexameters and pentameters” in the minds of his students (157). Shakespeare would have left school with Lily's metres in mind, and in his mind – patterns of rhythm that could be deployed or diverted from in his adult writing.

By placing a variety of prosodic rhythms close together in the *Grammar*, Lily allowed his readers to see how those rhythms might interact or combine. And all poetic forms or metres themselves combine a mixture of rhythms – as in Coleridge's characterisation of the elegiac couplet “In the hexameter rises the fountain's silvery column, / In the pentameter aye falling in melody back,” or in the way an iambic pentameter contains variations like foot inversions and hypermetricities that are subverting while maintaining its fundamental shape.

Schoolmasters encouraged their pupils to combine metres and rhythms. In one prosody exercise, a schoolmaster would change some of the words in a piece of verse to take it out of correct quantitative metre (and sometimes, albeit often inevitably, putting it into another kind of metre). The first schoolboy to “return” the verse to its “true” quantities would win applause (Hoole 160). In *The Taming of the Shrew*, a disguised Lucentio “teaches” Bianca in a broken quantitative metre interspersed with hasty unmetrical English prose. When Bianca replies to Lucentio, she does so in a way that restores the quantitative metre so that “tis now in tune” and “construe[d]” in accordance with Lily (3.1.44, 3.1.40). We find Bianca behaving like a good grammar school boy. We also find what a mischievous young man (Lucentio; or perhaps a schoolboy Shakespeare) could see in one of Lily's metres, as well as what Bianca more orthodoxly sees. In sixteenth century grammar schools, students were everywhere in a “readiness of making” (*Grammar*, “To The Reader”), composing verses to learn the rules and by extension to imagine prosodic life outside those rules. By experiencing the tensions within prosodic rules, or between different kinds of verse line, or between prosody and everyday speech, or between classical prosody and

English verse, Shakespeare may have hit upon something rhythmically rich, strange, and new.

The *Grammar* also provides, intentionally or otherwise, a consideration of (Latin) prose rhythm. In *Much Ado About Nothing* Claudio is thundering about his forthcoming marriage to Hero. Benedick tries to assuage his anger:

CLAUDIO: O, what men dare do! What men may do! What men daily do,
not knowing what they do!

BENEDICK: How now! Interjections? Why, then, some be of laughing, as,
oh, ha, he! (4.1.17-20)

Benedick's reply can be understood without recourse to the *Grammar*: if Claudio is going to make a fuss and interfere with the wedding then he should do so by laughing not shouting. Turning to Lily, the *Grammar* tells us "An interjection is a part of speech which betokeneth a sudden passion of mind under an imperfect voice" (7). In the light of this definition, Shakespeare prompts us to see Claudio's remarks as both "sudden" (like those of a Leontes?) and "passion[ate]" (like those of a Christ? – an ironic comparison of Benedick's?). Shakespeare wants us to attend to the rhythms of Benedick's "Interjections." Read through Lily, "[O]h, ha, he!" is a blend of three different interjections. Primarily Benedick suggests that Claudio should laugh – in the *Grammar*, "Hah, ha, he" (ibid). But there are also notes of "Scorning" ("Hui") and "Sorrow" ("Heu, hei") audible in Benedick's proposed "Interjections", notes that we can only hear in a good actor's viscously textured performance or via Lily's *Grammar*. The rhythm of Benedick's laughter is deepened and broadened by rhythms present in the *Grammar*, specifically the rhythmic quality of Lily's catalogue of interjections. We hear Benedick scorning Claudio and sorrowing with him; we hear Claudio hurt and hurtful. Shakespeare uses the rhythmic potential of Lily's *Grammar* to actuate the speech rhythms of his plays.

As in *Much Ado* the *Grammar* frequently puts English and Latin into a relationship, often one of suggestive rhythmical juxtaposition. One of the ways in which such juxtaposition becomes suggestive is in the pedagogical structure of "double-translation" (Ascham 268). In this exercise pupils were given lines from a classical text, typically Ovid or Virgil. They would then translate the classical text into English. Once this was done the classical text was taken away and the pupil would have to translate (and/or remember) the classical text back into its original Latin. Elizabeth I's tutor Roger Ascham liked the exercise because it made the young mind "very attentive, and busily occupied in turning

and tossing itself many ways" (287). Ascham implies that teachers should value the torsions of the pupil's mind as well as the accuracy of the pupil's translation, and that double-translation fostered rhythmical multiplicity (turning and tossing).

In *Arcadia*, Tom Stoppard makes light of the double-translation exercise (in all the available senses of the phrase "makes light": that he jokes about it, and brings light to it, and finds it enlightening). Thomasina Coverly is hopelessly translating lines from Plutarch into very clunky English before her tutor reveals Shakespeare's superior rendering of those same lines (35-6). Here is (some of) Shakespeare's version of Enobarbus's famous hymn to Cleopatra:

ENOBARBUS: I will tell you.
 The barge she sat in, like a burnish'd throne
 Burned on the water: the poop was beaten gold;
 Purple the sails, and so perfumed that
 The winds were lovesick with them. The oars were silver,
 Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
 The water which they beat to follow faster,
 As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
 It beggar'd all description. She did lie
 In her pavilion – cloth-of-gold, of tissue –
 O'erpicturing that Venus where we see
 The fancy outwork nature (2.2.197-208)

Shakespeare's lines come via Thomas North's prose translation of Plutarch. In North, the description of Cleopatra's ship is much more straightforward: "the poop whereof was gold, the sails of purple, and the oars of silver" (Wilders 139). Compare Shakespeare's whimsically mannerist "the poop was beaten gold; / Purple the sails, and so perfumed that / The winds were lovesick with them. The oars were silver". One of the most obvious changes made by Shakespeare is his syntactic and prosodic – therefore rhythmical – reversal of North's "the sails of purple" (iambic rhythm) into Enobarbus's "Purple the sails" (trochaic rhythm). Shakespeare takes a prose phrase with a smooth iambic rhythm, one which could therefore be said to "fit" well at the start of a verse line, and flips it into a new metre. It is a metre that catches the ear very slightly by surprise through that initial reversed foot at its opening. In this one tiny change to the syllabic energy of the line, we see Shakespeare reading North's prose rhythms in the way that he might have read a school text for double-translation or versifying. He hears the es-

sential flow and jar of the prose sentence and either replicates or manipulates it in his verse-version.

Sometimes Shakespeare competes with the source he versifies. North's laborious phrase introducing Cleopatra ("And now for the person of her self") is clipped short ("For her own person") so that Shakespeare can introduce a mocking edge as he moves to the end of and over the verse line: "For her own person / It beggared all description." That "description" is principally North's prose description, now seen as bathetic (and visually bathetic, since we drop from one verse line down to another). Shakespeare's "beggared" is funny and telling: he has beggared North's description by stealing it, and by stripping it, in both acts bestowing his own rhythmic and prosodic wealth upon the original prose.

Shakespeare's ability to compress existing rhythms is also something he learned at school. Many schoolmasters gave their students poems of seven or eight verses and told them to reduce the poems to four or five verses while preserving their metre (Watson 295). This schoolboy exercise in compression helps to explain the extraordinary tightness of Shakespeare's verse and language; the way one word can unfurl or be coaxed or tortured into multiple meanings and applications, especially when combined with a sometimes coiled, coagulated syntax and metre. Consider how editors have tended to paraphrase *Hamlet's* "dram of evil" crux by first paying tribute to its fundamental effectiveness (as in Arden 3, "the general meaning is clear") and second by expanding two and a half verse lines into many more sentences, even paragraphs, of circumlocutory prose gloss. Shakespeare can pack rhythms tight or let them loose, and those tight and loose rhythms can play alongside or in-between each other – as they did in Lily's *Grammar* and its teaching.

When dramatising scenes of education, Shakespeare foregrounds rhythmic matters at least as much as he does structural or tropological ones (we have already seen him doing so in the tutoring scene from *The Taming of the Shrew*). In Act 4 Scene 1 of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* we find a young boy named Will being taught by a Welsh schoolmaster named Sir Hugh Evans. (At the Stratford grammar school, a young boy named Will Shakespeare was probably taught by a Welsh schoolmaster named Thomas Jenkins). Act 4 Scene 1 has the mishearing (by Mistress Quickly) or mispronunciation (by Will) of the Latin "pulcher" as "polecats" (24-5). Here Shakespeare might be alluding to a remark made by Lily in his section on "Prosodia." Lily opens that section by defining "Prosodia" as "the last part of Grammar" that "teacheth the right pronunciation of words, or the tuning of syllables in words, as they are pro-

nounced" (n.p.). The phrase is ambiguous and its meaning depends, appropriately enough, on prosodic stress. Does "as they are pronounced" refer to the "right" pronunciation of words and syllables or their actual everyday pronunciation ("as they *are* pronounced")? Shakespeare exploits the double meaning to comic effect in Act 4 Scene 1 of *Merry Wives*, exposing the gap between "the right pronunciation of words" and the way "they *are* pronounced," stressing Lily's phrase until it snaps in two. So even if Shakespeare's dramatised schoolrooms at first seem like an echo chamber full of "an inhuman parroting of sound" (Wallace 78), of inert structures and minimal variation from those structures, Shakespeare shows how an intelligent schoolboy can run rhythmic rings around his schoolmaster.

But even the liveliness of the schoolroom's competing rhythms does not mean that Shakespeare relished every day at school. Many of the schoolboys he dramatises are bored and indignant, "whining" and "creeping like snail / Unwillingly to school" (*As You Like It* 2.7.145-7). By contrast, most scholars want Shakespeare – like them – to have enjoyed or employed his education. For example, Lynn Enterline (who describes herself as a "lifelong student" on her Vanderbilt University webpage) lists Shakespeare's keen schoolboys on page 9 without mentioning any of his more resentful schoolboys until one example in a bracket on page 15. Yet even those resentful pupils are written about in terms of rhythm. The "whine" of the schoolboy in *As You Like It* calls attention to the rhythmic resources of the voice and the way a single word or syllable can be dragged out by its speaker, rather as musicians do through melisma; and the creep of the schoolboy plays upon the double meaning of the word "foot" (as something anatomical and prosodical).

It is the rhythmic effects of Shakespeare's education that seem to have lingered in his mind, constituting his "career-long fascination [with] contemporary pedagogy" (Enterline 9). The rhythms Shakespeare learned from Lily's *Grammar* appear again and again in his adult writing, as do the rhythms of double-translation and versification exercises. Shakespeare versions the *Grammar* as rhythmically raucous, full of "Interjections" and intersecting verse lines. In some ways it was. For the young Shakespeare it opened up new verse and prose rhythms; and if it didn't open up those rhythms Shakespeare found ways to find them, prising open existing rhythms in order to prize them the more. Shakespeare's schoolroom was a place of rhythmic density and delight: of verse lines jostling against each other, of rhythmically charged call-and-response between teacher and pupil, of poetry written and chanted, of

pulses vibrating against patterns, of systems directing and divagating syllables, and all of this giving rhythmic rise to a Shakespearean style that would eventually fly.

References

- Ascham, Roger. *The Schoolmaster* (1571) in *The English Works of Roger Ascham*, ed. James Bennett. London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1761.
- Burrow, Colin. "Shakespeare and humanistic culture" in *Shakespeare and the Classics*, ed. Charles Martindale and A. B. Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Enterline, Lynn. *Shakespeare's Schoolroom: Rhetoric, Discipline, Emotion*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012.
- Gwosdek, Hedwig, ed. *Lily's Grammar of Latin in English*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Hoole, Charles. *A New Discovery of the Old Art of Teaching Schoole* (1660) and *The Masters Method, Or The Exercising of Scholars in Grammars, Authors, and Exercises; Greek, Latine, and Hebrew* (1659). Menston: Scolar Press [facsimile], 1973.
- Johnson, Samuel. "Preface to Shakespeare" (1765) in *Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. R. W. Desai. London: Sangam Books, 1997.
- Jones, Emrys. *The Origins of Shakespeare*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.
- Kempe, William. *The Education of Children in Learning* (1588) in *Four Tudor Books on Education*, ed. Robert Pepper. Gainesville, Florida: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1966.
- Lily, William. *A shorte introduction of grammar* (1567), ed. Vincent J. Flynn. New York: Scholar's Facsimiles and Reprints, 1945.
- Mulcaster, Richard. *Positions* (1581), ed. Robert Herbert Quick. London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1888.
- Pearson, Richard. *King Edward VI School Stratford-upon-Avon: Shakespeare's School – History and Alumni*. Kings Lynn: Biddles Ltd, 2008.
- Shakespeare, William. *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. John Wilders. London: Arden, 1995.
- . *Hamlet*, ed. Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor. London: Arden, 2006.
- . *The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005.
- Stoppard, Tom. *Arcadia*. London: Faber and Faber, 1993.
- Wallace, Andrew. *Virgil's Schoolboys: The Poetics of Pedagogy in Renaissance England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Watson, Foster. *The English Grammar Schools to 1660: their Curriculum and Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1908.