

“The Dramatic Caesura in Action”

The Shakespearean actor confronting the issue of the caesura discovers that there is little expert consensus on what it is and what should be done with it. Is it a punctuated pause (*OED*) or a momentary poise (Cicely Berry)? Is it a logical sense break (Edmund Spenser) or a psychological indicator (Patsy Rodenburg)? Is it a breathing point (Sir Philip Sidney) or a seamless transition (Sir Peter Hall)? Part of the confusion perhaps lies in the fact that there is a fundamental difference between a poetic caesura designed to be read and a dramatic caesura destined to be heard. Shakespeare's prosody, I suggest, contains both, and his meter locates which is which. While touring *Twelfth Night* around America in 1999 I had something of an epiphany. Fully converted to the faith that Shakespeare's text supplies all the advice his players need, I began to perceive a pattern in which the caesura is dramatized – given aural space – primarily within lines that contain a feminine ending (either an unstressed eleventh or a midline “epic” caesura). For the past ten years I have explored the implications of this metrical union both on stage and in the classroom. It seems to work, but why? When some fellow actors heard that I was attending this year's Blackfriars Conference, they challenged me to put practice into theory.

I begin with a proviso: to understand how a feminine ending operates on a device – the caesura -- that generally precedes it we must accept that, however brief, Shakespeare's actors enjoyed a degree of rehearsal and that, as Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Sterne recently argued in relation to cue scripts, these actors' private study was extraordinarily attuned to textual suggestion. Much has been written about the phonemic effect of an unstressed eleventh's dying fall, about how it's poignancy or incompleteness conjures a haunted interiority in the moment of its utterance. Less considered is the effect of the feminine ending on the line that precedes it, on

the very words that, after all, open up the space for this rogue syllable. Cicely Berry's description of how an unstressed ending makes a line "more pliant" and gives it the "quality of working through a thought" implies the *post hoc* metrical dissidence of the unstressed eleventh. The extra syllable, in George T Wright's words, "ruffles the current, modifies the pattern" of the line.

When scanning their texts, actors should pay particular attention to every feminine ending, for such lines contain a complex thought or a profound emotion that challenges the meter, the poetic order of things. In a single clause line, how the actor expresses this agitation is entirely negotiable. But when such lines contain a punctuated caesura, then common sense prevails upon that sense break to acquire a hairline fracture: a murmur invades the heartbeat, and the dramatic caesura is born of its own anxiety. That's the theory. Using enacted passages, I shall now demonstrate how in practice the dramatic caesura disciplines the actor, controls audience focus, and, on occasion, determines stage direction.

Hopefully, this first piece defuses anxiety among those Benedicks concerned with maintaining the "even road of a blank verse". The dramatic caesura is not a license to print pauses. (It is not, in point of fact, a pause at all, but rather a hiatus, at most a 'halt,' as Hamlet might have it.) In effect, the striking scarcity of the dramatic caesura militates against repeatedly interrupting the current in even the most alternating of passages. Take Angelo's self-lacerating soliloquy at the end of 2.2 of *Measure for Measure*. For the purposes of demonstration, I have asked the actor to speak the first four lines employing a rehearsal exercise designed to embody the shifting thought process. He will shift the direction of his pacing at each punctuation:

What's this? // What's this? // Is this her fault or mine? //  
 The tempter or the tempted, who sins most? //  
 Ha! //  
 Not she: // nor doth she tempt; // but it is I ...

This exercise underscores the emotional and dialectical switches within Angelo's exquisitely tortured mind, but it also highlights the danger that such synaptic heat risks dissolving the verse entirely. Eight clauses in four lines, three clauses in the first line alone, but only one pause – that remarkable silence taken after -- or before -- the monosyllabic “Ha!” The regularity of the other lines demands sanctity, eschews interruption:

What's this? What's this? Is this her fault or mine? //  
 The tempter or the tempted, who sins most? //  
Ha! //  
 Not she: nor doth she tempt; but it is I ...

The speech continues in the same vein: nine questions; twenty two separate clauses in as many lines, seven of them end stopped; a further nine with feminine endings - yet only three combine with internal sense endings to create the dramatic caesura. The effect is exhilarating for the audience and enormously demanding of the actor. Here's a section:

Having waste ground enough,  
 Shall we desire to raze the sanctuary  
 And pitch our evils there? O, fie, fie, fie!  
 What dost thou, or what art thou, Angelo?  
 Dost thou desire her foully for those things  
 That make her good? O, let her brother live!  
 Thieves for their robbery have authority  
 When judges steal themselves. // What, do I love her,  
 That I desire to hear her speak again,  
 And feast upon her eyes? // What is't I dream on?

Over and again, one thought leads into another within the sanctified structure of the line, each new clause gestated in the expiration of the former. Such acuity does more than achieve smoothness; it replicates the very process by which thought prefigures speech. The Shakespearean actor must think not only *on* the line but *beyond* it, future thought fashioning present speech. Within this irresistible cognitive flow, then, the sudden intrusion of the dramatic caesura momentarily arrests the heartbeat: the hiatus before “What, do I love her?” sabotages the judge's ethical reasoning; the brief yet graphic silence preceding “What is't I dream on?” should make an audience blush.

If the presence or otherwise of the dramatic caesura tells the actor when, and more often, when not to break the rhythm, the same protocol applied to dialogue raises the compelling question: who takes the break? Those familiar with John Barton's *Playing Shakespeare* will recall the detailed rehearsal of 2.4 of *Twelfth Night*, in which Viola/Cesario, played by Judy Dench, very nearly betrays herself to Richard Pascoe's Duke Orsino. Here's a short section:

DUKE ORSINO  
 [...] How dost thou like this tune?  
 VIOLA  
 It gives a very echo to the seat  
 Where Love is throned.  
 DUKE ORSINO  
 Thou dost speak masterly:  
 My life upon't, young though thou art, thine eye  
 Hath stay'd upon some favour that it loves.  
 Hath it not, boy?  
 VIOLA  
 A little, by your favour.  
 DUKE ORSINO  
 What kind of woman is't?  
 VIOLA  
 Of your complexion.  
 DUKE ORSINO  
 She is not worth thee, then.

On the recording, we hear much discussion of pauses being earned around a particular short line, yet at one point Dench confesses the urge to interrupt one of the shared lines, specifically before "Of your complexion." Barton politely, but quite firmly, denies her request, yet Dench's highly developed instincts always warrant attention. Both sets of shared lines culminate in end-stopped feminine endings. Both therefore contain a potential dramatic caesura at either the medial or final position; the issue becomes who should take it? Let's rehearse some options. In the first exchange Viola's hesitation in the medial position captures her sense of entrapment:

DUKE ORSINO  
 ...thine eye  
 Hath stay'd upon some favour that it loves.  
 Hath it not, boy?  
 VIOLA  
 // A little, by your favour.  
 DUKE ORSINO:  
 What kind of woman is't?

If, alternatively, we give the break to Orsino by letting the unstressed eleventh trail beyond the end stop, we get a very different focus:

DUKE ORSINO  
   ...thine eye  
         Hath stay'd upon some favour that it loves.  
         Hath it not, boy?  
 VIOLA  
   A little, by your favour. //  
 DUKE ORSINO:  
         What kind of woman is't?

Surprised by the lack of immediate response, the audience will pack that hesitation with the implication that Orsino might be feeling a little jealous. In effect, the dramatic caesura within shared lines defines, to borrow terminology from another medium, who gets the close up.

It can also designate who gets the laugh. Were Dench to have her “pause,” the second shared line physicalizes her visceral attraction:

DUKE ORSINO  
         What kind of woman is't?  
 VIOLA  
   // Of your complexion.  
 DUKE ORSINO  
         She is not worth thee then.

But put the hiatus at the end of the line, and perhaps throw in some facial hair, and the effect is entirely reversed:

DUKE ORSINO  
         What kind of woman is't?  
 VIOLA  
   Of your complexion. //  
 DUKE ORSINO  
         She is not worth thee then. [*Rubbing his beard*]

Dare we suggest Shakespeare builds “comic pauses” into his dialogue? I’d like to think so. What is certain is that judicious use of the dramatic caesura affords meter the quality of a stage direction for the actor and a zoom lens for the audience.

I don't claim that my protocol is ironclad; what rhetorical rule ever is? While dramatic caesuras generally benefit from a metrical break, regular lines also occasionally demand a rupture, especially when they contain an action. Take this famously intimate yet metrically regular moment that, following my protocol, ought to be played like this:

JULIET

Then have my lips the sin that they have took.

ROMEO

Sin from thy lips? O trespass sweetly urged!

Give me my sin again.

JULIET

You kiss by th' book. [*Mumbled as she is kissed*]

It's an interesting choice, though one that should probably stay in the rehearsal room. Of course, I would argue that these exceptions simply prove a rule that, if attempted, can reap surprising results. Here's a moment discovered by my undergraduate students at UT Austin, in which the regular shared line accommodates the implicit action:

BRUTUS

Hold then my sword, and turn away thy face,  
While I do run upon it. Wilt thou, Strato?

STRATO

Give me your hand first. Fare you well, my lord.

BRUTUS

Farewell, good Strato.

[*Runs on his sword as he completes the line*]

Caesar, now be still.

I kill'd not thee with half so good a will. [*He dies*]

In a play in which rhetorical choice becomes a matter of life and death, Brutus's gamble on prose to persuade the mob proves fatal. This staging of his suicide suggests that his return to the rule of metrical law, even at the moment of his passing, resets his moral compass and affords him the honor of dying on a rhyming couplet. The rest – at the end of the line -- is silence.