

“Words, words, words”: Hamlet and the rhetoric of the cuckoo

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Consensus among rhetoricians on the function of the figure *epizeuxis* is rather [Hamlet 1 *offstage*: “so-so!”] - mixed. Easily conflated with more obviously meaningful figures of repetition – such as *diacope*, where a repeated term is broken up by one or two intervening words, as in King Claudius’ [Hamlet 3, *emerging*] “your father lost a father”; or his ensuing *antanaclasis* by which the repeated word acquires a different meaning, [Hamlet 3] “that father lost, lost his” – *epizeuxis*, which derives from the Greek *epi*, “upon,” and *zeugnūnai*, “to yoke,” identifies what Richard Lanham terms the “fastening together” of identical words or phrases with no others in between and with no obvious alteration of sense. [Hamlet 2, *emerging*: “Buzz, buzz.”] To early modern rhetorician Robert Peacham, this verbal echo served “to expresse the vehemence of any affection, whether it be of joy, sorrow, love, hatred, admiration or any such like.” [Hamlet 1, *emerging*: “O, wonderful, wonderful.”] Yet his contemporary, George Puttenham, considered the trope “not figurative but fantastical.” “Englishing” the Greek term as “the underlay or Cuckoo-Spell,” after the songbird’s “one manner of note, [that it] for haste stammers out two or three [times], the one immediately after another, as [Hamlet 1] *cuck, cuck, cuckoo*,” Puttenham dismisses *epizeuxis* as a figure that neither “beautifieth nor enforceth the sense [...] and is therefore a very foolish impertinence of speech.” [Hamlet 2: “Treason, treason!”] The various early modern definitions of “impertinence” – as in incongruous, irrational, inappropriate [Hamlets 1-3, *interrupting*: “Words, words, words”] absurd, insolent, rude – draw us inexorably towards that most impertinent of stage figures, Hamlet the Dane, Shakespeare’s chief cuckoo. In this talk, I explore the operation of *epizeuxis* in a play that marks the emergence of what Frank Kermode calls the “language of turbulent thinking,” an anti-rhetorical rhetoric for which, claims David Amelang, Shakespeare “had practically no precedents.” My particular concern is

how a figure of speech so acutely sensitive to its prosodic environment might impact the performer's investigation of Hamlet's interior landscape in prose and verse passages that articulate quite different kinds of inner turmoil: the "antic" versus the manic.

Before exploring some effects and implications of this double discourse, I should back up my characterization of Hamlet as a rhetorical cuckoo with some numbers [*Hamlets 2 & 3*: "...numbers, numbers"]. The presence on stage of three distinct Hamlets reminds us of the presence in print of *Hamlet's* divergent texts: the quartos of 1603 and 04, and the 1623 Folio. Quantifying a figure so easily excisable, or replicable, in performance – the seemingly-memorial Q1 loses fully 60% of the Folio's figures, while adding a few rum examples of its own – [*Hamlet 1*: "Poison in jest. *Miming drinking*. Poison *in-jest*"] – is as perilous a task as interpreting the statistics [*Hamlets 2 & 3*: "Lies, damned lies..."]. Nevertheless, the striking frequency of *epizeuxis* points to Hamlet as the play's dominant Cuculus.

In a role constituting roughly 40% of any of the texts, Hamlet averages 65% of the instances of *epizeuxis*. That ratio rises to 75% when we take the first three acts as a separate sequence, after which, following his second encounter with the Ghost, an increasingly resolute Hamlet discards the figure, only to have it picked up by other characters in crisis: [*Hamlet 3*: "Gertrude, Gertrude"; *Hamlet 2*: "Drowned, drowned"; *Hamlet 1*: "The king – the king's to blame"]. Throughout the progress of what Anne Barton calls his "psychological torment," then, Hamlet wields *epizeuxis* less like a poetic device than an offensive weapon, slicing ironically here – [*Hamlet 2*]: "No, no, they do but jest"; brutally cudgeling there – [*Hamlet 3*] "Ha! Ha! Are you honest?"; always at the point of turning the rhetorical blade upon himself: [*Hamlet 1*]: "Fie, on't, O fie, fie!" As Hamlet unloads with both barrels, the cuckoo is refigured as a bird of prey: [*Hamlet 2*]: "Hillo, ho ho, boy, come, bird, come." The question is whether the princely falconer has control of his lure and how often he ends up shooting at himself.

Hamlet is by no means the earliest of Shakespeare's cuckoos: *Romeo and Juliet's*, Lord Capulet and the Nurse, Shylock in *Merchant*, and 2 *Henry IV's* Justice Shallow all exhibit what Russ McDonald calls this "brilliant trick of characterization." But he is arguably the first character to employ *epizeuxis* both consciously and unconsciously, as a disturbing *tic* of characterization. Having developed a more "intimate way of speaking" in *Merchant*, notes Giles Block, Shakespeare's breakthrough in *Hamlet* was to "dissect the very act of talking: How speech can unconsciously reveal things; how speech can consciously attempt to conceal things." *Hamlet* stages this double discourse in the Prince's efforts to uncover plots under the guise of mental incoherence, while betraying signs of paranoia and mania as those discoveries edge him towards acknowledging his mother's sins.

The antic Hamlet, emerging in self-consciously performative prose scenes featuring his university playmates and the tragedians of the city, hews closely to early modern conceptions of the melancholy figure: whether the frantic lover described by Dr. Timothy Bright, as "of countenance demisse, and hanging downe, blushing and bashfull, of pace slow," or Richard Burton's "hard student," who, in Burton's translation of Roman satirist Persius, conjures a strikingly Hamletic figure:

[*Hamlet 3*] When by themselves, they gnaw their murmuring,
 And furious silence, as 'twere balancing
 Each word upon their outstretched lip, and [t]hen
 They meditate the dreams of sick old men,
 As [*Hamlet 2*] 'Out of *nothing, nothing* can be brought;
 [*Hamlet 1*] And that which is can ne'er be turned to nought.'

This interplay of furious silence and muttering – [*Hamlet 2*] "Let me see, let me see" – followed by bursts of *epizeuxis* – [*Hamlet 3*] "Come, come, deal justly with me" – and gnomic versifying – [*Hamlet 1*] "For O! For O! The hobby-horse is forgot!" – characterizes the antic Hamlet in predominantly prose passages that, freed from the metrical contract of verse, encourage the actor to render repetitive clauses as individuated speech acts that draw attention to their own performativity: [*Hamlet 2*] "Except my LIFE, EXCEPT my life, except MY life." Disengaging language from what Roland

Barthes calls its “saturable and constraining con-text,” the prosaic Hamlet might fracture the figural fastening entirely, creating fissures from which subversive meaning seeps. “What do you read, my lord?” asked Miriam Burrows’ Ophelia in a memorable ASC production of 2011, to which John Harrell’s Hamlet, putting the “imp” in impertinence by puncturing the punctuation, darkly replied [*Hamlet 3*]: “Word. Sword. Swords.” Stressing the slippery semantics rather than cadence, the antic Hamlet, T.S. Eliot’s “buffoon,” performs a studied early modern conception of madness that renders *epizeuxis* an erratic figure suited more to cloud cuckoo-land than the metronomic rhythm of the cuckoo bird, or, indeed, its attendant clock.

In striking contrast, Hamlet’s metrically-stressed *epizeuxes* impose a compulsive rhythm, the outward tic of an inner turmoil, in emotionally-fraught exchanges with his mother, with Ophelia, and especially with his dead father. The Ghost’s tendency to express Peacham’s “double sigh of the heart” [*Hamlet 3*: “List, list, O list”] is so often echoed by the son [*Hamlet 2*: “Rest, rest, perturbed spirit”], that repetitiveness seems to run in the family (though not as far as the politic Claudius). Indeed, Hamlet’s cuckooing is so characteristic that Gertrude assigns *epizeuxis* [*Hamlet 3*: “Whips out his rapier, cries ‘A rat! A rat!’”] where none exists: [*Hamlet 2, shrugging*] “How now, a rat.” Not so much genetic as parasitic, *epizeuxis* spreads like an infectious disease. Despite his love of *ploce*, Polonius deploys the “foolish figure,” as he calls it, only rarely, whereas Ophelia (and to a lesser degree, Laertes) absorbs this verbal habit in, or just after, exchanges with the Prince [*Hamlet 2*: “You are naught. You are naught.”]. But if Hamlet is the carrier, the source of the infection is clearly his father. [*Hamlet 3*] “O horrible, O horrible, most horrible,” wails the Ghost, before bidding farewell to his son: [*Hamlet 3*] “Adieu, adieu, adieu, remember me.” The father’s insistent rhythm is echoed by his son as a trait for trifectas: [*Hamlet 1, rocking*] “O, villain, villain, smiling damned villain!” Rather than breaking up the figure, this kind of rhythmic *palilogia* – “palilalia” being the medical term for a

verbal tic – recapitulates Puttenham’s definition of that “one manner of note [...] without any intermission,” less as an expression of rhetorical impertinence, perhaps, than of emotional trauma.

Although Burton reminds the reader that Jupiter turned starving scholars into “chattering grasshoppers,” nothing in the early modern writing on melancholy quite captures this notion of insistent repetition as the expression of traumatic memory. (We might recall French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche’s far more recent assertion that, “it always takes two traumas to make a trauma.”) And yet the Hamlets manic repetitiveness expresses something of that “intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible,” that Eliot imagines lying just beyond Shakespeare’s comprehension. In our psychoanalytic age, the desire to chart Hamlet’s undiscovered interiority – to *know* Hamlet – places a particular burden on a rhythmical figure with the potential to voice the inarticulate. Celebrated text coach Patsy Rodenberg, underscoring the modern actor’s pursuit of active specificity at all costs, argues that no two “coos” are ever equal: “the words must be owned and expressed differently even though they are the same.” And yet. And yet. An approach that works powerfully in prose raises fundamental questions about the autonomous operation of the rhetorical figure, especially when the metrical pulse is interrupted [*Hamlet 2*: “O, that this too ... too solid flesh”], or subverted: [*Hamlet 3*: O, that this too TOO solid flesh would melt.” As written, Hamlet’s [*Hamlet 1*:] “O that this *too* too solid flesh” is a trochaic *epizeuxis* that functions not as a correction or amplification, but as an echo, a neologism emanating from the depths of Hamlet’s undiscovered interiority. It does not ask to be understood; it simply needs to be heard. Hamlet’s enduring fascination is that everyone wants to understand him, and one perhaps deserves to more than most. [*Hamlet 2*] “How does your honour for this many a day?” asks Ophelia, to which the Folio Hamlet replies: [*Hamlet 3*] “I humbly thank you, well, well, well.” Such a triple sigh of the *heartbeat* tells us – and all it needs tell us – is that he is not “well” at all.

A “transitional play in the development of the language of turbulent thinking,” in Amelang’s assessment, *Hamlet*’s use of *epizeuxis* does not reach for the semantically destabilizing effects that mark Othello’s obsessive compulsiveness or Lear’s frenzied repetitions -- [*Hamlet 2, overlapping*] “Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill” – when speech, in Barton’s words, “hovers on the edge of meaninglessness, the place where words dissolve into pure noise.” But nor are we in Bottom’s dream, where Pyramus’ death [*Hamlet 1, overlapping*: “Die... die...*etc.*”] is a fabulously drawn out theatrical display of style over substance. *Epizeuxis* functions at the core of *Hamlet* because, as an indicator of acted madness and madness in action, it holds together that which is fractured or fracturing; and it captures the Prince’s undiscovered interiority precisely because, in McDonald’s terms, it is “rhetoric [...] which conceals itself.” Among the heavy-weight tropes long admired in *Hamlet* by critics, from George T. Wright’s work on *hendiadys* to J.P. Houston’s on *parenthesis* and *hyperbaton*, *epizeuxis* is the cuckoo nesting, inconspicuously yet insistently, amid the rhetorical sparrows.

[*Hamlets 1-3*]: “Cuck-cuck-cuck-oo!”