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## **EARLIEST SHAKESPEARE: BOMBAST AND AUTHENTICITY**

### **Abstract**

The essay explores bombast as one of the defining features of Shakespeare's style of writing in the earliest, pre-1594 phase of his career as a dramatist. The qualifier 'earliest' is an operative term which refers to the part of Shakespeare's canon that has not been explored in recent criticism. Bombast is considered as both a logical and rhetorical instrument of knowing. At the cognitive dimension of text, improbability, which is the key feature of bombast, plays an important role in 'earliest' Shakespeare because it captures competing currents of thought that fill dramatic plots, as they were described in the Elizabethan practices of playwriting, and moves the action forward. 'Earliest' Shakespeare is both under the spell of Christopher Marlowe's bombastic blankverse, but he also looks beyond Marlowe, turning bombast into a tool of opening up new possibilities for drama performed within the specific context of London's burgeoning theatre scene in the 1590s.

**Key words:** bombast, improbability, drama, literary influence, Shakespeare, Thomas Kyd, Christopher Marlowe

### **1. 'Earliest': exploring the term**

As scholars around the world celebrate the 450th year of Shakespeare's birth in Stratford-upon-Avon, we may want to turn to the beginning of

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his career as a writer. Recently, Shakespeare's 'late' period has attracted much critical attention, and for a long time Shakespeare's 'mature' plays have been the staple of critical analysis. Yet, Shakespeare's earliest works seem to have dropped out of critical focus in recent years. In this essay, 'earliest' is understood to be an operative term that helps isolate that body of Shakespeare's writing before "the dividing line of 1594" (Van Es 2013: 79). In 1594, he went from being essentially a freelance writer to a sharer in the theatre company the Lord Chamberlain's Men and, from that point forward, he wrote plays for only one theatre company. Although this move took place at the beginning of his career, the practical reason, however, for choosing this year as the cut off point is that it has a justified place in Shakespearean historiography, because it also helps us acknowledge the astonishing working energy and speed with which Shakespeare wrote during his first few years in London. According to the chronology of writing established by the editors of the Complete Oxford Shakespeare, before 1594, Shakespeare wrote ten plays, two highly popular narrative poems, and possibly penned some sonnets. This impressive output comprises one third of the entire body of Shakespeare's canon of work. The various literary forms within the earliest portion of the canon makes 'earliest' texts the most diverse body of work within Shakespeare's canon as well as the most complex segment of his oeuvre to study. Because of the complexities and problems of the chronology and authorship of early plays, any study of Shakespeare's personal style is mired with difficulties. So isolating one aspect of that style, bombast in this case, is a way of acknowledging, not so much Shakespeare's stylistic specificity but addressing his adherence and re-imagination of a mode of writing that in the early 1590s was both pervasive and critically challenged. The study of early Shakespeare, Ernst Honigmann writes in his analysis of his analysis of bombast, should involve "an examination of the various kinds of high style; of the blending of one style with another; and of the effects of inflation on the audience," concluding rightly that "the really difficult questions" (Honigmann 1980: 162) come from the study of Shakespeare's early style. Bombast was a signature style of 'earliest' Shakespeare that permeated every genre that he used to convey the force, the restlessness, and above all the sense of writing in the spirit of Elizabethan aesthetics.

Since the 1980 publication of Ernst Honigmann's important book on Shakespeare's early years, scholarship has advanced our knowledge of his chronology and collaboration, issues central to the historiography of the

earliest part of Shakespeare's opus. Yet the lack of critical interest in 'earliest' plays suggests that scholars still find it safer to stay away from that body of work often thought to be the one deeply rooted in the technicalities of rhetoric and wedded to a close imitation of Shakespeare's contemporaries, especially those already established as writers and playwrights. As mentioned, the question of collaboration adds to the difficulty of making arguments about Shakespeare's early writing as a self-contained segment of Shakespeare's writing career. This is the case, for instance, with some of the earliest works like the tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, considered by the editors of the Oxford Complete Works of Shakespeare to have been authored by Shakespeare but containing additional passages written by George Peele, or the comedy *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, dated, by the same editors, between 1589 and 1591. Yet, critical caution should not lead to avoidance when it comes to exploring other works from the pre-1594 phase of writing, or even from studying those parts of collaborative plays that can be identified as possibly written by Shakespeare. Moreover, to study Shakespeare's 'earliest' writing as a way of anticipating his later writing should not overshadow attempts to explore the earliest works as texts with their own autonomous style and imaginative worlds. I intend to argue that the style of Shakespeare's earliest plays and his rhetorical strategy of bombast in particular, reveals not so much the beginnings of the aesthetic dimension of Shakespeare's writing that expands in later writing, but a feature distinctive of earliest Shakespeare searching for his authentic creative voice at the time when other powerful dramatic voices compete for the place in the growing theatre world of 1590s London. Bombast is not an isolated aspect of Shakespeare's early style, but a mode of writing transformed into other expressive resources in later work. Bombast is also a design of language, to which the modern ear is not accustomed, as the moderns are conditioned to think of bombast in pejorative terms. To the Elizabethans, bombast would have appeared as something quite different from what it sounds to our ears.

Used as a qualifier of style, 'earliest' brings to mind opportunities not yet seized, craft not yet mastered, the first steps. It can also mean 'too early,' before something has fully come into being. 'Earliest' can also refer to the least significant and often neglected body of work. It is a qualifying term of uncertain meaning and temporal limits. When does 'earliest' Shakespeare become 'early' Shakespeare, or 'mature' Shakespeare? These questions imply that Shakespeare develops his artistic style in a linear

manner. The works themselves, however, defy such categorization because the hierarchy of texts does not come out of their writing organically but is artificially established by modern critics. ‘Earliest’ tends to be neglected on teleological grounds, precisely because it is undeveloped, undistinguished, inauthentic, and because its temporal boundaries—when does ‘earliest’ begin and when it stops—are all too clear. The year 1594 helps a critic come up with a sample of work that is easier to address in a limited space of critical writing, but the year serves the contingencies of literary criticism more than what one might call, if somewhat unfashionably, the evolution of a writer’s personal style and aesthetics in general. ‘Earliest’ provides us with an opportunity to uncover the limitations of critical forgetting. Shakespeare of the early 1590s wrote within the “decorative continuum” of Elizabethan England that was “magnificent by design and saw magnificence as the sum of all virtues,” a culture whose spirit was “overblown” (Mowl 1993: 14-14). This cultural and aesthetic milieu determined Shakespeare’s love of, and skill with which he used bombast early in his writing career. In ‘earliest’ Shakespeare bombast is the place where he expands the capacity of language to shape meaning and reinforce that meaning through verbal sound.

To begin with bombast as the starting point for an analysis of ‘earliest’ Shakespeare makes sense because it was targeted as the main object of critique in the first surviving published review of Shakespeare’s ‘earliest’ writing. It is also the dominant feature of “grand style (and its counterfeit)” in early modern writing, as suggested by a recent critic (Adamson 2007: 46). In an age when the English language expanded its semantic potential, when rhetoricians recommended amplification and ornamentation as the proper strategy for narrative composition and its padding with exempla for turning orations into stories (as the rhetorician Richard Rainolde maintains [1563: A4<sup>v</sup>]), and when repetition was not considered a deficiency but a virtue of style, bombast became both a compositional principle and a stylistic strategy of producing meaning. To sound modern in the early 1590s meant to write in one’s own grand style, one’s personal bombast.

## **2. Bombast: the practice of writing**

The “trivial lying pamphlet,” as Thomas Nashe called *Greene’s Groats-worthof Wit* in *Pierce Pennilesse* in 1592, gives us the first record of the

effect Shakespeare's earliest writing had on his contemporaries; it also provides an opportunity to explore bombast as a rhetorical dimension and chronologically determined property of Shakespeare's earliest style (Nashe 1985: 50). Although critics like Samuel Schoenbaum have debated whether writing or acting is targeted in this piece of malicious writing (Schoenbaum 1970: 51) and whether the pamphlet was even authored by the dying Robert Greene, which is the question raised by a recent biographer of Shakespeare (Duncan-Jones 2001: 48), early Shakespeare has continued to be linked with bombast in subsequent interpretations of this pamphlet. The familiar words referring to a "Shake-scene" as an "upstart crow", that "supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of" his contemporaries (Schoenbaum 1970: 50), have shaped the idea of bombast as a negative quality of writing in criticism for years to come. Yet it is not bombast style itself, but Shakespeare's ability to employ it as well as, if not better than, other "live-wire young writers" (Nicholl 2013: 3) of the early 1590s, that irks the author of the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet. This incendiary pamphlet, which caused quite a bit of turmoil when it came out, calls our attention to the fact that, for the Elizabethans, unlike for us, bombast did not imply faulty style, an error of language. The author does not attack "Shake-scene" for using bombast in the first place. Second, the pamphlet invites us to put Shakespeare's bombast in relation to that of his contemporaries, and encourages comparative analysis with other playwrights.<sup>1</sup> If anything, this pamphlet tells us that 'earliest' Shakespeare stood out among his contemporaries because of his virtuoso handling of bombast.

For an early view of bombast, not as a derisory quality of poetry but a sign of poetic finesse, let us turn to John Dryden. In his 1679 essay "The Grounds of Criticism in Tragedy" he says that bombast is commonly the delight of that audience which loves poetry but understands it not: and as commonly has been the practice of those writers who, not being able to infuse a natural passion into the mind, have made it their business to ply the ears, and to stun their judges by the noise. But Shakespeare does not often thus." (Dryden 195: 143). Drawing on the example of an exchange between Brutus and Cassius from Shakespeare's Roman tragedy *Julius Caesar*, Dryden shows that Shakespeare adjusts words to subject

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<sup>1</sup> Schoenbaum's suggestion that it is acting, not writing, that the words in the pamphlet refer to, seems plausible. But since we do not have any substantial evidence of the specific modalities of Shakespeare's acting ability, I will treat the reference in this pamphlet to be about writing, because that is what the language seems to be suggesting at this point.

matter and language to passions, aiming for psychological motivation to correspond with linguistic form. In Dryden's estimation Shakespeare's bombast sounds authentic and not cliché. Dryden's reference attends to what one might call the sound of bombast, that is, bombast that is soft and meaningfully employed, not a thundering accumulation of words. Dryden was the first critic among poets to write about Shakespeare's use of bombast as a positive feature of style. There were earlier versions of assessing the sound of exaggeration by language. In his 1589 treatise on poetry, *The Arte of English Poesy*, George Puttenham refers to hyperbole as "Loud Liar" (Puttenham 2007: 276). Puttenham uses the adjective "loud" to mean rhetorically vivid (as we might say that someone's clothing is too bright—loud colours) as opposed to too noisy. Dryden asserts that some writers cannot get bombast right, and that some audiences do not understand it, but that Shakespeare mastered the art of bombast and made it meaningful to his audiences. Much of Shakespeare's earliest dramatic and lyric poetry, I would argue, is about trying to get the right measure of, and balance between, the lexical form and sound of bombast, making bombast a vehicle for thought. Rather than view it as a fault, which would be a modern-day understanding of bombast, we need to understand bombast in its historical complexity. Bombast tests the boundaries between rhetorical and cognitive models of reading because it is both a rhetorical device and a sound to be cognized. As the examples that follow show, Shakespeare experiments with the modalities of style and structure within the linguistic frame of bombast. If some of Shakespeare's texts appear more bombastic than others, it is because the text is doing work instead of defaulting to the teleological assumption that 'earliest' Shakespeare is learning his craft. In employing bombast in all of its complexity, Shakespeare turns against his critics, like the author of the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet, and wields the same weapon they used to attack his earliest achievement. The expansive and explosive word 'bombast' gave writers and their critics sufficient material to reach for it liberally and creatively.

The etymology of bombast is a stuffing made out of cotton wool that gave garments (and presumably their wearers) an inflated impression. 'Bombast' is both conceptually and acoustically close to *bombarda*, the Italian for "a gun, or any kind of bombard" and to *bombardare*, meaning "to batter, to shoote, to beate", which is how John Florio glosses these words in his 1598 Italian-English dictionary (Florio 2013: 99). For the author of the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet, bombast became the lexical gun with which to shoot down the new grand style practiced by Shakespeare.

One of the reasons that historiographers of early modern drama have differed on what the pamphlet's author may have meant shows that we are not certain whether early modern ways of assessing style are accessible to us today in all their critical nuances. On the matters of style, if we take Puttenham as a guide, then it is the "tenor of speaking and writing, extending to the whole tale or process of the poem or history [narrative], and not properly to any piece or member of a tale." As he simply puts it, style is "of words, speeches, or sentences" (Puttenham 2007: 233). For the Elizabethans, style covered a large spectrum of writing modalities, from the smallest unit of a word, to a sound, to the largest organization of those units into a meaningful story like narrative. More generally, any smallest and any largest unit of a composition constituted one notion of style in the Elizabethan period to comprise what we now call formalism.

While the Elizabethan idea of style remained oriented toward close reading, modern examinations of style also take into account external factors that leave an imprint on literary style. In contemporary critical writing poetic style comprises the study of "the smallest measurable units of poetry" as well as more abstract notions of style like "historical, religious, economic, political" (Nolan 2010: 396). And these are, Nolan argues, "contradictory aspects" (Nolan 2010: 396) of style. They are contradictory because external and internal aspects of style are considered to work together towards a general notion of style in a specific period. What these aspects of style also contradict is how the Elizabethans conceived of style, because what for us are more abstract features of style for the Elizabethans would be an altogether different level of experiencing and expressing the world, history, religion, and politics through aesthetics. This approach reflects the extent to which material and ideological orientation of some influential and prevailing modern critical practices and methodologies marginalize formalist criticism. So the critical point, then, is to what extent we can distinguish a writer's personal style from a mode of cultural expression that reflects habits and practices of representation in Elizabethan culture as a whole. Shakespeare's earliest style is not only a product of his comprehensive reading and his attentiveness to the requirements of acting on the stage, but also a certain immanent quality that bears his imprint and that distinguishes his writing, and bombast in particular, from his contemporaries.

Shakespeare's bombast crosses the boundary that separates the personal from the cultural. One of the features of Shakespeare's stylistic



expression lies precisely in the blurring of such a boundary which matters more to our extremely individualistic culture than to the Elizabethan age where the sense of collective belonging (especially with respect to religious sects) was more pronounced.

Writing about Shakespeare's style, therefore, is not without methodological difficulties largely because analytical tools that we use to study language and style are neither consolidated nor consistently employed by critics, and those tools may not fully be adequate either. Some might even say that writing about style hides within itself a particular ideological stance manifested in avoidance of politics and history, which produce literature in the first place. For the art historian Ernst Gombrich, the preferred approach to the study of style in Renaissance visual arts is through sociology and psychology (Gombrich 1959: 17). Yet Gombrich's critical method demonstrated in much of his writing about art history is the best example of treating styles as cultural and historical manifestations. Gombrich's approach to style is based on an exploration of what he calls "materialist incarnations" that make "styles [...] instances" of cultural traditions (Gombrich 1977: 17). Following up on Gombrich, one could, then, argue that bombast is an instance of the cultural tradition of writing in late Elizabethan aesthetics.

Historians of the English language have studied style mostly through words and grammar; literary scholars have assessed it primarily through rhetoric and meter. But there has been a change in the ways literary critics analyze style. Interdisciplinary approaches to Elizabethan styles have recently produced compelling arguments about the styles of Shakespeare's writing, especially his late plays. For example, Russ McDonald has analyzed the style of Elizabethan artistic and materialist world, such as garden design and architecture, providing a new model for literary critics how to expand the ways of interpreting literary style (McDonald 2013: 486-504). The study of Shakespeare's bombast brings together verbal, linguistic, metrical, visual, and cultural properties that underpin his creative imagination. Yet bombast also, and inevitably, because it is associated with volume, invites comparison with music.

In the essay "Racine's Classical Piano," first published in 1927 and expanded in 1931, Leo Spitzer borrows the term *piano* from music to explore the morphology of Racine's tragic language. In this sense, *piano* is the effect of softening sound, and Spitzer uses it to describe Racine's style as that of "distinguishing restraint, of self enclosure" (Spitzer 1983:



4), by exploring a range of linguistic strategies (he calls them “attenuating devices” [11]), including figures and tropes, which cumulatively produce the effect of “something muted, distanced and icy [...] of the stylistic expressions of modesty and restraint” (103), where Racine hides the ardour in his writing. Setting the larger concern of Spitzer’s essay aside, a concern with the untranslatability of the linguistic effects of Racine’s dramatic poetry, to focus on his metaphorical use of a musical effect, *piano*, to capture the nature of that stylistic elusiveness, I want to suggest that unlike Spitzer’s Racine, ‘earliest’ Shakespeare is the writer of linguistic *forte*. If *piano* is the term that best describes Racine’s stylistic elusiveness, then ‘earliest’ Shakespeare’s bombastic style can be called *forte*, alluding to the acoustic presence that Shakespeare’s works asserted for themselves on stage. *Forte* is both a figure for bombast and a quality of sound; it is the capacity of language to give force to ideas. Shakespeare’s bombast reveals the force of linguistic experimentation. It is also evidence of Shakespeare’s fast-developing skill in turning the growing opportunities of the expanding semantic potential of English language into both the subject of his drama and the vehicle for thought. ‘Earliest’ bombast is both a linguistic music and a meaning-generating device.

### **3. Shakespeare’s dramatic *forte*: bombast and authenticity**

In a sense, Shakespeare’s bombast comprises both style and the linguistic place of improbability, understood here as an aberration and departure from different kinds of literary conventions, including intelligible syntax, plain, and moderate style. It is both a rhetorical realization of an idea and a cognitive practice. Bombast is a logical as well as rhetorical instrument of knowing, that underpins representation. At the cognitive dimension of text, improbability plays an important role in ‘earliest’ Shakespeare because it captures competing ontological currents of thought that fill dramatic plots and actions. Bombast is often composed of “conceptual tropes”, or figures of thought, like hyperbole, irony, allegory, synecdoche (Lausberg 1998: 328) and of figures of syntax, like repetition, all of which are added, almost like verbal jewels, to the fine fabric of textual background. Shakespeare exploited this possibility of language to dilate, grow, expand, and bulge with ornament and verbal bravura to a level in which language, performance, and the actor’s art together shaped a new reality, a new

“playworld” (Palfrey 2014:1), in his stage plays. In his ‘earliest’ works, Shakespeare capitalized on bombast’s multidimensional form and *forte* (its meaning-creating volume) to set his work apart from the often one-dimensional sonic force of much of the bombast of his contemporaries.

To understand how Shakespeare’s bombast differed from that of his contemporaries we should turn to Christopher Marlowe, whose use of bombast framed in iambic pentameter blankverse, a style that led Harry Levin to call him an “overreacher” (Levin 1965), shows how qualitatively different his bombast is from Shakespeare’s. If Shakespeare competed with, and was influenced by the already popular Marlowe, bombast became the obvious sign of that competition, given Marlowe’s predilection for expressive exaggeration. Marlowe’s bombast impresses more as an image than as a thought, Shakespeare’s is ornament *as* thought. The effect of Marlowe’s bombast is in the linguistic form as such, of Shakespeare’s in its multidimensional meanings. There is a sense that each bombastic passage in Marlowe’s overreaching plays is a self-contained stylistic vignette. Here is Tamburlaine courting Zenocrate, from the second part of Tamburlaine the Great:

Zenocrate, lovelier than the love of Jove,  
Brighter than is the silver Rhodope,  
Fairer than whitest snow on Scythian hills,  
Thy person is more worth to Tamburlaine  
Than the possession of the Persian crown,  
Which gracious stars have promised at my birth.  
A hundred Tartars shall attend on thee,  
Mounted on steeds swifter than Pegasus;  
Thy garments shall be made of Median silk,  
Enchased with precious jewels of mine own,  
More rich and valorous than Zenocrate’s;  
With milk-white harts upon an ivory sled  
Thou shalt be drawn amidst the frozen pools  
And scale the icy mountains’ lofty tops,  
Which with thy beauty will be soon resolved;  
My martial prizes, with five hundred men,  
Won on the fifty-headed Volga’s waves,  
Shall all we offer to Zenocrate,  
And then myself to fair Zenocrate. (1.2.87-105)

Words referring to a world beyond England, an otherworld, create in this apostrophe an acoustic and visual effect of estrangement; Zenocrate, the absent character is imagined again and again, but only as an idea. She never directly speaks. The play, already crowded with men, displaces the absent woman, banishing her to the cold zones in Russia and in frozen landscape, creates even more room for men to bond with one another. As the plot progresses her beauty figures as improbable, her image constituted by hyperbolic metaphors. It is as if in the heroic world of Marlowe's grinding soldiers, female beauty is a strange fellow, a remote idea. There is a disjuncture between words and action, since desiring Tamburlaine, who only moves in the world of military men, imagines Zenocrate more as a concept than a body of flesh. The poetic energy of Tamburlaine's bombast, and the dramatist's intelligence to conjure up cold beauty in such a way that it creates an illusion of affect and admiration in this set piece, act as visual-verbal set pieces on stage. In the words of a recent critic, this kind of speech represents rhetorical "comfort food" (Adamson 2007: 46). In terms of its meaning, this example of bombast does not reach beyond verbal embellishment; it almost renders Zenocrate a stage prop. Marlowe varies the same syntactic formula through auditory repetitions, counting on the aural effect of his verbal padding. This formula worked well in plays that are more based on a series of extraordinarily crafted episodes than on a developing plot. In contrast to the ornamental grammar of Marlowe's bombast, Shakespeare's bombast privileges the rhetorical dimension of bombast as a composite of different strategies and instruments of persuasion. His bombast is calculated to animate physical, affective, and cognitive aspects of drama, which are in consonance with the plot and action as developing features of stage plays. In that respect, Marlowe's style is limited, and Shakespeare's is multilayered. In his comparison of Marlowe and Shakespeare, Simon Palfrey has recently argued that "Marlowe's reputation is for nonchalant carelessness, but in truth he is much more possessive of his instruments than Shakespeare" (Palfrey 2014: 74). This idea that Marlowe does not let his expressive instruments in the theatre—language and performance—run away from him, captures clearly the quality of Marlowe's bombast. Marlowe's refined ear for poetry and for stage spectacle better follows his intuition for crafting dramatic verse than structuring dramatic plot; so he puts all of his "charismatic intelligence" (Palfrey 2014: 14) into the formal effect and the ornamentation of his blank verse. While Marlowe puts all of his creative energies in producing

impressive poetic imagery, “Shakespeare allows his materials a quasi-independent appetite, or morphs his mind into their potential for such” (Palfrey 2014: 14). “Morphs” is the key word here because it suggests the extent to which Shakespeare uses rhetorical dimension of language for multiple purposes. Shakespeare treats bombast as complex language itself, as malleable verbal matter, and weaves it around and through both actions and characters, to enrich other forms of expression. He wrote his bombast against the background of the culture and practice of bombastic expression in late Elizabethan aesthetics, which included public theatre as well. Marlowe was not alone in treating bombast as merely ornate style. Shakespeare would have been surrounded by other playwrights who handled bombast in the way Marlowe did.

Marlowe conceives of bombast as ornamental in a similar way in which Robert Greene uses blankverse in his popular play *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, written probably in 1589, shortly after Tamburlaine (written in 1587/8), and performed successfully at the Rose Theatre. In *Friar Bacon*, a play popular on the public stage in London at time when earliest Shakespeare was busy acting and writing plays, Shakespeare may have heard the actor playing King Henry III deliver the following speech:

Great men of Europe, monarchs of the west,  
Ring'd with the walls of old Oceanus,  
Whose lofty surge is like the battlements  
That compass'd high-built Babel in the towers,  
Welcome, my lords, welcome, brave western kings,  
To England's shore, whose promontory cleaves  
Shows Albion is another little world. (Greene, Scene 4, 1-7)

The vocabulary of this speech highlights physical geography that consists of walls, battlements, towers, cliffs, a shore, and a promontory. This exterior world delineates thought much like Tamburlaine's thundering recitations of the countries and territories that he conquers in his thirst to extend his domain from the East to the West. Yet this bombast does not anticipate Shakespeare's grand style. In Shakespeare's hand, bombast is a way of shaping knowledge about women. In Shakespeare's bombast, we follow the movement of the mind in the first place, only then we are impressed by the sound of language. It is as if Shakespeare had the speaking part and the speaking body of the actor in mind when he wrote some of his

bombast. He is careful not to deafen the actor's vocal performance by the volume of verbal sound. In *3 Henry 6*, York is speaking of Queen Margaret on stage:

'Tis beauty that doth oft make women **proud**—  
But, God he knows, thy share thereof small;  
'Tis virtue that doth make them most **admired**—  
The country doth make thee wondered at;  
'Tis government that makes them seem **divine**—  
The want thereof makes thee abominable.  
Thou art as opposite to every good  
As the antipodes are unto us,  
Or as the south to the septentrion.  
O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide! (1.4.129-138)

Spread evenly across several lines (129, 131, 133), repetition creates balance and harmony. Between each repeated line, Shakespeare gives the actor a pause to introduce another thought directly related to the external context that shapes the world. God and country are just as crucial points in developing this argument as is woman and her power because they are all one universe. Interestingly, it is striking that the author of the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet picks up the last line of this speech, in a possible reference to Shakespeare, "beautified with our feathers" and acting bombastically with his "Tiger's heart wrapt in a player's hide" (Schoenbaum 1970: 50). The connection between this line and cultural history might not have escaped contemporary audience. Writing against the historical background of Queen Elizabeth I's rule, the last line of York's speech can be read as exposing a male aristocrat's anxiety of being subservient to a powerful woman, and could very well be a reference to Elizabeth herself. At the semantic and formal levels, the words and ideas from one line grow out of those in the previous to create an organic cascade of sound. The stylistic and ontological shock of bombast at the end calls for a re-valuation of York's intent, for a radically different way of thinking about woman's role in a heroic play, and outside it, in heroic discourse, with which patriotic Elizabethan age was enamoured. This bombastic line, then, is more than an insult directed at Queen Margaret; it resonates with a view of Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabethan tragedy is particularly attentive to the treatment of ambition and its consequences, and that theme establishes the larger

frame for York's speech, whose last line is a logical, if not exaggerated, articulation of denouement towards which the speech is build up. It is this kind of linguistic crescendo that creates the effect of *forte* in Shakespeare's bombastic writing; volume is increased at the point where meaning is expanded to cover more than one set of issues, more than one world.

Structured around repetition ('Tis beauty; 'Tis virtue ;'Tis government) the bombast of this speech dampen some of Marlowe's overreaching rhetoric. But this flattening, this repetition executed as a linear sequence of the same lexical formula, reflects, as Russ McDonald has argued writing about rhetorical repetitions in *Romeo and Juliet*, "the Elizabethan fondness for pattern" (McDonald 2009: 2) that produces balance and harmony, which were Elizabethan stylistic ideals. Elizabethan music, gardens, and the "well-defined but unadventurous timbering" (Mowl 2001: 44) of the facades of town houses, as well as those of country mansions (like Hardwick Hall) and castles (like Kenilworth), are all evidence of the love of balance achieved through parallelism and the repetition of structural forms. If we want to gain knowledge of where Shakespeare's bombast came from, we should not only turn to literature but also to the material culture of the physical environment in which he lived and the visual world which surrounded him. While we prefer variety and difference, the Elizabethans preferred sameness and the balance of equal parts. What for us, then, is monotony, for them would have been harmony. We avoid monotony, they sought harmony stemming from repetition. The corresponding rhythm of forms that create balance through the repetition of like formal patterns has its textual equivalent in Shakespeare's use of rhetorical strategies that create just such an effect.

In Shakespeare, the broken *conduplicatio*, which Richard Lanham defines as "repetition of a word or words in succeeding clauses" (Lanham 1991: 190), moves towards building a thought that culminates in a bombastic climax in the last line of the speech. "Beauty [...] proud ," "country [...] admired", "government [...] divine": these are important collocations in lines shaped around *conduplicatio*. Those lines make conceptual pairs based on collocations concerning government and country, two entities that mattered to Shakespeare's audience. In other words, beauty supplies the scaffolding of a larger frame of the historical basis of human condition. At the levels of logic and rhetoric, that is, at the level of form, the conceptual coherence achieved in the examples of bombast from York's speech indicates careful following of the precepts for building

a point around various examples recommended in textbooks of rhetoric. But the effect of this bombast is an individual achievement. This bombast does not produce disbelief, as does Marlowe's bombastic blankverse, but calls attention to the subject of this speech, the pragmatics of earthly rule. Marlowe's words and sounds flow out as if propelled by one giant bluster. Shakespeare braids the styles the Elizabethans liked: lexical exaggeration alternates with rhetorical parallelism.

Yet bombast also provides a conceptual way of imagining history, history conceived not as a repository of *exempla* involving the work of Fortune and divine justice. As an outcome of man's agency outside the reach of Fortune and divine justice, history brings its own turmoil; so bombast becomes the vehicle that captures a new reality, as an audience would have witnessed in *2 Henry VI*. Here is Suffolk:

My tongue should stumble in mine earnest words;  
My eyes should sparkle like the beaten flint;  
My hair be fixed on end, as one distraught;  
Ay, every joint should seem to curse and ban.  
And, even now, my burdened heart would break  
Should I not curse them . . .  
Their sweetest shade a grove of cypress trees!  
Their chiefest prospect murd'ring basilisks!  
Their softest touch as smart as lizards' stings!  
Their music frightful as the serpent 's hiss,  
And boding screech-owls make the consort full!  
All the foul terrors in dark-seated hell—(3.2.320-325 ; 326-332)

The curse depends on repetition for its power and the repetition of possessive pronouns in the initial positions (“My/Mine” and “Their”) may sound syntactically tedious to us, but for the Elizabethans repetition which produced harmony was a source of delight. “Distraught”, a key word in this speech, conditions “passionate exclamations” which are the affective state identified by the literary theoretician William Scott as one of the situations requiring the writer to “force violently” (Scott 2013: 67) poetic language to enhance the power of utterance, in his recently discovered work, *The Art of Poesy* (c1599).<sup>2</sup> Here Scott's model is Quintilian. But Shakespeare's

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<sup>2</sup> Scott was a contemporary of Sir Philip Sidney, whose treatise *An Apologie for Poetrie* (1595) inspired Scott's treatise.



tunes his bombast to the processes of thinking ideas in the language as a living force of theatre. Heaping up adjectives becomes a way of displaying to Elizabethan theatre goers the richness of language to produce both ornament and meaning; to capture high emotions with swelling terms.

Some detectable linguistic traces in this speech reveal an astonishing sensitivity to work simultaneously with lexical nuances and ontological categories, suggesting in turn that bombast was a carefully thought-through strategy of writing, not a rhetorical stream of consciousness. Style that reflects a concentration of Latinate influence, in collocating Latinate nouns with Saxon adjective words (nouns + adjectives) and with adjectives appearing in the Latinate position following the noun, as in “chiefest prospect,” “music frightful”, “four terrors”, are linguistic signs of bombast as a cultural category as well. Shakespeare echoes the period’s instructions for grand style by using “great words” (Wilson 2009: 45); that is, Latin lexicon, as the rhetorician Thomas Wilson advises in his popular treatise, *The Art of Rhetoric* (Wilson 2009: 45). If style which collocates Latinate with Latinate words, as Sylvia Adamson suggests (Adamson 1999: 571), tends to appear in parodies and not in the grand style, then mixing words of Latin and Saxon origins in Suffolk’s speech shows Shakespeare’s artistic skill in adjusting vehement style to a linguistically attentive and not just ambitious soldier in a historical situation. Much of the tension between political and military players as rivals in Shakespeare’s early history plays like *2 Henry VI* depends on achieving balance between possibility and improbability of heroic agency.

Improbability implied by bombast makes us think about what history, man’s ambition for rule, and heroic agency mean after history is no longer a series of exempla and when Fortune’s doing is replaced by human agency. Shakespeare’s dramatic parts (or characters) are good listeners on stage who aptly commentators on language and the speech of others. To Queen Margaret and to the audience of Shakespeare’s theatre, Suffolk’s vehement language sounds “like an overcharged gun” that can “recoil / And turn the force of them upon thyself.” (3.2.333) Shakespeare’s text issues a warning about the limits of bombast to capture history in full. The self-conscious reference to bombast signals Shakespeare’s awareness of the limits and potential of this rhetorical device for representation. Bombast suited well historical narratives the Elizabethan liked, and thus fitted the mode of speaking of characters that delivered such narratives.

The best way to see what Shakespeare does with his bombast is to compare his drama to that of Thomas Kyd, who introduced bombast to the public stage of London theatres at the close of the sixteenth century. In Kyd's play *The Spanish Tragedy* Shakespeare might have seen how to employ bombast for narrative purpose. Here is Don Andrea:

I saw more sights than thousand tongues can tell,  
Or pens can write, or mortal hearts can think.  
Three ways there were: that one on the right-hand side  
Was ready way unto the foresaid fields  
Where lovers lived and bloody martialists,  
But neither sort contained within his bounds.  
The left hand-path, declining fearfully,  
Was ready downfall to the deepest hell,  
Where bloody Furies shake their whips of steel,  
And poor Ixion turns an endless wheel;  
Where usurers are cloaked with melting gold,  
And wantons are embraced with ugly snakes,  
And murderers groan with never-killing wounds,  
And perjured wights scalded in a boiling lead  
And full foul sins with torments overwhelmed. (1.1. 55-71)

The force of Kyd's writing depends on bombast as a narrative principle that also generates stylistic excess, with the ghost of Don Andrea, delivering this fantastical account that runs over eighty three lines of an imagined topography of Hell, that dreaded land that lies on the other side of death. The figure of language called *anaphora*, which Lanham defines as "repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive clauses or verses" (Lanham 1991: 11), furnishes bombast in this speech. Anaphora leads to the acoustic climax at the end of a long block of blank verse, just before bombast gives the listener a reprieve when the wondering ghost of Don Andrea reaches "the fair Elysian green" (1.1.74). Shakespeare could have learned a lot from Kyd's example, especially how to vary the modalities of bombast language to push the narrative forward. But he could have also learned how to avoid the excess of anaphora turn into a bombastic tedium. That *The Spanish Tragedy* was performed regularly for fifty years, from about 1592, soon after it was written, until the closure of the theatres in 1642, suggests that an abundance of bombast was not an obstacle to

the play's popularity. Marlowe's and Kyd's bombast left an imprint on the language of drama, and Shakespeare worked both alongside and against that tradition of dramatic rhetoric.

The authentic quality of bombast of 'earliest' Shakespeare lies in eliminating the disconnection between language and the agency performed by characters on stage. In Shakespeare's early tragedy *Titus Andronicus*, the language that Tamora uses to describe the dangerous landscape (the hell on earth) where she finds herself with her the two "lascivious" (2.3.110) Goth sons, Chiron and Demetrius, resembles a thick and dark English forest (lines 93-7) rather than a distant and foreign place. Here is Tamora:

A barren detested vale you see it is;  
The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,  
Overcome with moss and baleful mistletoe.  
Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds  
Unless the nightly owl or fatal raven,  
And when they showed me this abhorred pit  
They told me here at dead time of the night  
A thousand fiends, a thousand hissing snakes,  
Ten thousand swelling toads, as many urchins  
Would make such fearful and confused cries  
As any mortal body hearing it  
Should straight fall mad or else die suddenly. (2.3.93-104)

Linguistic vehemence intensifies an imagined answer to the question that possessed the period in which Shakespeare lived: what Hell is like. Both visual and textual presentations of Hell in the early modern period often associate Hell with exaggeration, Hell with excess, and Hell with improbability. Shakespeare's version of making Hell legible if not fully comprehensible is to present it as an eerie anti pastoral landscape crowned with hyperbole (A thousand/Ten thousand), arranged as "gradual intensification" (Lausberg 1998: 410). Lausberg links hyperbole to extremity and implausibility (1998: 263), and, like Claudia Claridge, for whom hyperbole is "not only an evaluation device" but "first and foremost a quantity and thus an intensity device" (2011: 87), Lausberg treats hyperbole as a trope that creates volume rather than generate meaning. In his modern rendering, hyperbole is more a Marlovian than a Shakespearean trope, revealing a certain limitation of linguistic formalist criticism when tropes are analyzed outside an aesthetic

context, which gives meaning to their use. Claridge, working on a corpus of hyperbole coming largely from Shakespeare's works, makes a valuable comment regarding the quality of hyperbolic use: "Perhaps the hyperbole was somewhat more restrained, less blatant in the past" (Claridge 2001: 183). At this point a historian of literature and a historian of the English language join hands in claiming that while Shakespeare continues to employ even the simplest form of hyperbole, the hyperbole of number (hyperbole whose lexical base is in the use of number, like 'thousand'), the immediate linguistic milieu is not linguistic exaggeration.

Returning to Tamora's words, we encounter epithets that enable vivid language ("a barren detested vale", "baleful mistletoe", "fatal raven", "abhorred pit"). To argue that 'earliest' Shakespeare is too rhetorical and that his poetry is too much rooted in clichés and techniques, as generations of critics have done, is to overlook the choice of stylistic tools which he used to create nuances of linguistic opportunities. Tamora's speech is rhetorical, and stylistically rich, and the bombast that lies at the heart of it features more as an ornament than a thinking tool. The audience is carried along by the poetical particularities of epithets and nouns that see into the nature of contemporary imagination that tries to comprehend Hell with clarity and sharpness. These two hyperboles extend the meaning of Hell by intensifying its intent to conjure it up on earth, which suits Tamora's character. The snakes and toads, which appear within the frame of this hyperbole of number, are the animals associated with hell (remember Hieronymus Bosch's painted fantasies of Hell); as such, they correspond to Tamora's animalistic, hellish, and destructive character. In this careful balancing of hyperbole with other aspects of ornate style lies the authenticity of Shakespeare's bombast adjusted to character and dramatic situation.

The English vocabulary in this speech, that corresponds to the imaginable and potentially familiar landscape is far removed from the flight of Tamburlaine's fancy about distant geography and Don Andrea's verbal rendering of Hell. In an age when "the new delight in spectacle" (Gurr 1992: 226) determined both performance and play writing in early modern England, delight in speaking in language that itself is a spectacle of word choices, combinations, the modalities of sound and semantics, as well as syntax, represent a way of becoming attuned to bombast's rhythm and action on the stage. *Titus* is a good example of a play in which the combination of bombast and action create spectacle. Part of the richness and gothic appeal of *Titus* comes from the way Shakespeare knitted together

different strategies of crafting bombast through vocabulary, hyperbole, and rhetorical figures of syntax. Shakespeare's turn to bombast signals experimentation with multiple possibilities of exaggeration as a mode of writing, not as one might say, an error of expression. That, too, is a sign of stylistic authenticity in an age of linguistic excess. Shakespeare's *forte* created by resounding bombast marks him off from his contemporaries who energized his own writing, but against whom he developed his own personal style that clearly surprised them, as the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet suggests.

That Shakespeare was mindful of the rhetorical and performing dimensions of bombast is evident not only in the way he matches it with action but how he makes dramatic parts self-conscious of their use of it. That is most often the case in his early and late comedies. Shakespeare's earliest comedies are most often concerned with troubling and mocking traditions of love, and with the opportunities and limitations of courtship and the rhetoric of courtship. They probe deep into the puzzling and fuzzy psychology of lovers, exploring love and desire as powerful and engulfing charges that transform his imagined men and women in ways that are frighteningly appealing in the end. Within an aetiology of amorous excess, the recourse to bombast makes sense; its formal and rhetorical excess make it an ideal medium for writing about the power, exaggeration, and improbability of love as acted and articulated on stage. Reading his early comedies of love, one is almost lead to think that Shakespeare knew there were only a few things one could say about love, and once they were said, the rest could be only exaggeration and improbability, necessary though they may be to sustain the illusion of love's enduring effect. In that spirit the Queen of Navarre's commentary on Biron's love-letter writing is revealing of bombast invoked as a term as a critique of the style previously written out as emotion:

We have received your letters full of love,  
Your favours the ambassadors of love,  
And in all maiden council rated them  
At courtship, pleasant jest, and courtesy,  
As bombast and as lining to the time. (5.2.669-773)

It is hard to disagree with the Queen that bombast was the verbal lining of writing about love in the 1590s. From lining used in Biron's speech in

the sense of bombast as cotton wool, to the extended meaning of bombast as a figure for writing, Shakespeare shows how flexible and meaning-generating potential the two words—bombast and lining—offer when used in the same line. That is, after all, what made

bombast the obvious subject of humour and of depicting silly lovers—and what makes comedy sound like comedy. Biron says:

A lover's eyes will gaze an eagle blind.  
A lover's ear will hear the lowest sound  
When the suspicious head of theft is stopped.  
Love's feeling is more soft and sensible  
Than are the tender horns of cockled snails.  
Love's tongue proves dainty Bacchus gross in taste. (4.3. 310-315)

These lines parody both Petrarchism and Euphuism. The speech also exemplifies self-conscious writing of that parody. These two stylistic media show that lover's imagination cannot be liberated from clichés, which makes love such a tragicomic subject in comedies at the time when drama reached the heights of rhetorical fashioning.

'Earliest' Shakespeare continues to experiment with and search for a poetic medium that will hold the various features of 1590s aesthetics together within literary and dramatic expression. He realizes his bombast in dramatically and rhetorically sensitive moves towards turning the period's favoured (and therefore often attacked) mode of writing into an instrument of thought. In his book *Distant Reading*, Franco Moretti suggests that style provides critics with a model for studying how "human beings make sense of situations" (Moretti 2013: 229). The idea that Shakespeare's characters, his stylized humans, draw attention to the role bombast played in turning psychology into words, emotions into syntax, illusions into images, and history into inner torment, represents a new way of thinking about how a derided feature of style in fact should be treated as one of the key instruments of Shakespeare's authentic style-making, a signature of his personal style in the 1590s through which he conveyed the idea of his characters making sense of dramatic situations created to make them alive on stage.

If the author of the *Greene's Groats* pamphlet reacted against Shakespeare's use of bombast because the device was more suitable for those who were academically educated, unlike a budding author without

university education, such as Shakespeare, still a novice on the London artistic scene, he said something important both about bombast and about Shakespeare. On the one hand, the implication in that pamphlet may be that bombast was treated as a complex rhetorical device, so much so that only the educated were fit to write it and understand its uses. And Shakespeare was one of them, since the caliber of Elizabethan grammar-school education in rhetoric, imitation, translation and composition exercises, was high enough to have furnished him with the creative and cognitive resources for such an understanding and artistic skill. On the other hand, the author of the pamphlet may also be suggesting that a crafty use of bombast was the key to successful play writing in cut-throat competition for the presence and visibility on the public stage in early 1590s London already filled with plays written by playwrights who used bombast liberally. 'Earliest' Shakespeare gives ample evidence for arguments in favour of these two possible explanations. Bombast shows that 'earliest' Shakespeare wrote within the Elizabethan rhetorical and stylistic traditions in which repetition and exaggeration, which alternate and battle with mean and plain style became one of the ways for managing the sound of drama and audiences' affects. Through bombast Shakespeare simultaneously created and reduced the distance between his audience and the world and how to create other worlds that extended both the plots of his plays and the use of language of his characters. Shakespeare's bombast became a sign of authenticity and a writing strategy which he will return to in the plays written and performed after 1594, like *Othello*, *Julius Caesar*, *Coriolanus*, and *Anthony and Cleopatra*. In these plays he will use bombast sparingly yet with more sophistication, but with no less *forte* than in his 'earliest' dramas.



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## НАЈРАНИЈИ ШЕКСПИР: БОМБАСТИЧНОСТ И АУТЕНТИЧНОСТ

### Сажетак

У раду се испитује Шекспирова употреба бомбастичног стила као језичког и драмског израза који је Шекспиру послужио да почне да развија лични стил у окружењу у којем је писао под јаким утицајем својих савременика, који су се користили бомбастичним стилем као помодним стилем. Атрибутом “најранији” се, прво, описује период Шекспировог стваралаштва од доласка у Лондон до 1594. године када постаје деоничар у позоришној дружини Лорда Коморника (*The Chamberlain’s Men*) и, практично, професионални драмски писац (у односу на слободног писца пре тога); друго, овим атрибутом се исто тако отвара поље истраживања феноменологије појмова “рани” и “најранији” када се користе у опису развоја личног стила неког писца. Неколико примера из Шекспирових најранијих драма се анализирају у односу на књижевне утицаје, посебно Кристофера Марлоа, и закључује се да је Шекспиров бомбастичан стил, не толико израз још неуглађене употребе реторичких стратегија у писању колико начин да се популаран бомбастичан стил употреби као стилско оружје против оних који су га користили често и обилато, али на начин на који се бомбастичан украс, или везује за смисао, или се, додатно, користи као изражајно средство преко којег ширење семантичког обиља које се догађа крајем 16. века постаје израз нове књижевне естетике у последњој деценији 1590-их.

**Кључне речи:** бомбастичан стил, немогућност, драма, књижевни утицај, Шекспир, Томас Кид, Кристофер Марло